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Negotiations of the Ageing Process: Older Adults’ Stories of Sports Participation

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to examine the talk of older athletes, with particular focus on how the context of sport helps them negotiate the ageing process. It draws on personal stories provided by 44 World Masters Games competitors (23 women; 21 men; aged 56 – 90 years; $M=72$). Four themes emerged: “There’s no such thing as old” (a story of avoiding old age); “Keep moving” (a story of fighting the ageing process); “Fun, fitness, friendship... [and] competing” (a story of redefining self and ‘old age’) and; “Making the most of your life... with the capabilities that you still have” (a story of adaptation and acceptance). Together, the four themes show how through sports participation older individuals can simultaneously resist, redefine and accept the ageing process. These stories of a ‘sporting later life’ allow for alternative meanings to the dominant ‘declining body’ narrative of ageing. Therefore, these narratives present the possibility for personal, pedagogical and social transformation.

Keywords: Competitive sport; Identity management; Older people; Qualitative research.
Negotiations of the Ageing Process: Older Adults’ Stories of Sports Participation

Sport in later life – A contradiction?

The majority of research on the experience of sports participation and its relationship to the body focus on young people. This is not surprising given ‘…sport’s emphasis upon the young, fit, performing body…’ (Partington, Partington, Fishwick & Allin, 2005, p. 86). Also, the majority of sports participants in western cultures are children or young adults because participation in sport typically decreases with age (Baker, Fraser-Thomas, Dionigi & Horton, 2009). In the past, sport was considered important for the development of young people; however, the potential for sports participation to hold meaning across the lifespan has been realised. The emergence of Masters (Seniors or Veteran’s) sport in the late 1960s has provided space for older bodies to perform in competitive physical activities, such as running, tennis, swimming, cycling, hockey and basketball (Weir, Baker & Horton, 2010). At the Masters level, age (not ability) is the qualifier for participation and individual events are conducted in five year age bands (e.g., 35-39 or 85-89 years) while teams sports are typically organised in ten year age groups. In 2009, approximately 28,000 athletes representing 95 countries gathered in Sydney to partake in 28 different sports at the World Masters Games. The number of participants in this event has increased almost four-fold since the inaugural World Masters event in 1985 in Toronto, Canada (Weir et al., 2010). Despite the growth in the number of mature-aged athletes, there is very little qualitative, sociological research examining the experiences of older athletes or the ways in which they negotiate the ageing process in this context (Dionigi, 2006).

According to Blaikie (1999) and Wearing (1995), older bodies are commonly associated with decline, loss, dependency on others, illness and incompetence. The dominant discourse on ageing in western cultures is negative and based on the ‘decline’ model. That is,
ageing and being ‘older’ are primarily presented in the literature and media from a biomedical perspective with an emphasis on the ‘declining body’. This medicalisation of ageing emphasises the ‘problems of ageing’ and has been criticised for reducing older people to a set of physiological processes (Blaikie, 1999). This perspective tends to ignore the varied ‘lived experiences’ of older people. The majority of knowledge about older people and ageing is based on denigrating stereotypes or unchallenged myths that are widespread and well entrenched in western societies (McGuire, Boyd & Tedrick, 2009; Ory, Hoffman, Hawkins, Sanner, Mockenhaupt, 2003). Although discourses of positive ageing which celebrate later life as a period for enjoyment, leisure, activity, challenge, growth and exploration have emerged in the past 30-40 years (Dupuis, 2002; Featherstone & Hepworth, 1995); negative stereotypes of ageing are embedded in our culture. As McGuire and Klein (2005, p. 444) claimed, “older people often are associated with disability, dementia, inactivity, and dependency, rather than with vitality, competency, activity, and productivity.”

Sport, on the other hand, celebrates and values physical and mental strength, endurance, performance enhancement and competition (Coakley, 2007). Therefore, given the dominant decline discourse on ageing, sports participation in later life seems to be a major contradiction. It is likely that growing older presents a unique challenge to those in the domain of sport. In particular, managing an ageing identity is highly significant for individuals who assign value to their able, fit, functioning body. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to examine the talk of older World Masters Games athletes, with particular focus on how the context of sport helps them negotiate the ageing process. What are the ways in which older athletes make sense of the ageing process? How do they remain or become athletes in the face of an ageing body? What does it mean to be older and highly physically active in competitive sports? How can older athletes’ stories of ageing help educate others
Emerging stories of sport and ageing

The few qualitative studies that have explored the above questions demonstrate how older athlete stories can access real bodies, real lives and real experiences that interweave broader cultural discourses commonly associated with sport and ageing (e.g., Dionigi, 2008; Grant, 2001; Phoenix & Sparkes, 2009; Tulle, 2007). Qualitative research is sensitive to the complexity of ageing, sport, the body and society (Grant & Kluge, 2007; Phoenix & Grant, 2009). In particular, by focusing on the stories people are told and the stories older people tell about themselves and their bodies we come to understand how people affect their own experiences and make sense of their actions (Phoenix & Sparkes). Personal stories about sport and ageing are socially shaped and embodied. In this sense, storytelling is linked to identity because it “is one way in which our identity may be accomplished or performed” (Phoenix & Sparkes, p. 220). The collective research on this topic presents complex and contradictory themes of: resistance to the ageing process, redefining ageing, and acceptance of the ageing process. These themes provide a useful backdrop and framework for our paper, as highlighted below through a review of three key recent studies which focus specifically on storytelling and identity management in the context of sport.

In 2005 and 2007, two significant pieces of work on the storied experiences of sport and ageing were published in *Sport, Education and Society*. In 2005, Partington et al. used a narrative perspective to explore mid-life stories, experiences and meanings of sports and physical activity participation. Partington et al. presented three idealised narrative types to which mid-life sports participants from the United Kingdom (13 men and 13 women, aged 33-55 years) linked their personal stories. These included: ‘age is a state of mind’, a master narrative of resistance to the ageing process; ‘life begins at forty’, a counter-narrative about
redefining the ageing process and recapturing one’s youth; and ‘growing old gracefully’, an antithesis narrative of accepting the ageing process. A ‘compromise story’ was also identified in a small number of participants (i.e., a male badminton player, a female former football player and a male canoeist), showing how some of them simultaneously drew on elements of the resistance story and the acceptance narrative.

In 2007, Phoenix and Sparkes drew on the work of Partington et al. to demonstrate how young athletes’ perceptions of self-ageing are influenced by the stories that mid-life athletes project. Phoenix and Sparkes showed how young male and female team sport athletes (M=20 years) from England drew upon narrative maps of ageing portrayed by older team members when making sense of their own ageing and possible future selves. Three possible selves associated with mid-life emerged from the young athletes’ stories representing the different ways in which they could negotiate a decline in physical ability and performance in a sporting context. These were: ‘almost past it’, the preferred self in mid-life which depicted a self who remained skilful, fit, knowledgeable and valued by the sport team; ‘hanging on’, the feared self which represented an unfulfilled ageing athlete who continues to compete, despite a decline in ability and sports performance, and who is a hindrance to (and pitied by) the team; and ‘stepping aside’, the reluctant self in mid-life which portrayed a self who chooses to stop playing sport or begin Veterans’ or Masters sport because of a ‘sense of duty’ to make way for younger athletes. In other words, this latter self represented a degree of acceptance of ageing similar to the ‘growing old gracefully’ narrative presented by Partington et al.

Furthermore, Phoenix and Sparkes (2007) found that the ‘almost past it’ self reflected parts of Partington et al.’s (2005) ‘age is a state of mind’ story which was common across men and women involved in all participant groups (including badminton, running and outdoor activities). Phoenix and Sparkes suggested that this similarity represented a point of
convergence that allowed for “a sense of coherence for athletes across the life course” (p. 8). This finding across both studies also showed that the theme of resistance to ageing and the desire to maintain sports performance via training and determination appears common among athletes, regardless of age, gender or the type of sport or activity (individual or team involvement). The ‘hanging on’ story from Phoenix and Sparkes’ study, however, described how there is a fine line between continuing participation in competitive sport and refusing to give it up. This finding seems to be highly relevant in the context of team sports and high-level competitive sport. This notion of continuing to fight the ageing process may hold a different meaning in the context of Veteran’s or Masters sports where it is accepted that an athlete’s performance will decline with age (Tulle, 2007; 2008). Previous research by Dionigi has begun to pave the way for how stories may change or remain the same as athletes progress from mid-life to later life.

Dionigi (2010) found that Masters sport represented a strategy for managing an ageing identity for a group of male and female older Australian Masters athletes (aged 55-94 years). Two key themes arising from this research were: ‘I’m out here and I can do this’ and ‘use it or lose it’. The first theme described the sense of empowerment participants experienced from retaining a sense of control over their ageing bodies and, hence, the capacity to begin, restart or continue sports participation. The ‘use it or lose it’ theme demonstrated that participants’ believed that by using their mind and body as much as possible they could continue their involvement in sport and delay age-related decline. In other words, they demonstrated an investment in the notion that sport and physical activity are a means to ‘solve the problems of ageing’ (Phoenix & Grant, 2009; Tulle, 2008).

Dionigi’s (2010) findings reflected aspects of the ‘life begins at forty’ and ‘age is a state of mind’ stories told by mid-life athletes in the study by Partington et al. (2005). The notion of rejuvenation and a sense of youthfulness were expressed in subtly different ways by
the athletes in both studies. The narrative of ‘life begins at forty’ presented by Partington et al. focused on returning to a previous sporting lifestyle, while the older athletes in Dionigi’s research were redefining ageing by using their bodies in ways they did not expect, competing against younger athletes and participating in an activity that is generally considered the domain of youth. These differences in the findings could be due to Dionigi’s focus on physically demanding competitive sports (such as triathlon, track and field, cycling, racquet sports, soccer/football, basketball, field hockey) and Partington et al.’s emphasis on individual sports and general physical activity.

Like the ‘age is a state of mind’ theme in Partington et al.’s study, the sense of control that the Masters athletes in Dionigi’s (2010) research expressed indicated a belief that the ageing process can be “beaten or at least postponed via physical effort and determination” (Partington et al., p. 91). At the same time, the older athletes in Dionigi’s research talked much more about the ‘realities’ of the ageing process, such as the imminence of physiological decline, disability and/or institutionalisation, than the athletes in the studies by Partington et al. (2005) or Phoenix and Sparkes (2007), most likely due to the younger age of participants in the latter studies. Therefore, while the older athletes in Dionigi’s research did express a sense of control when they spoke of their involvement in sport, there was a common view among them that this control was tenuous and the threat of becoming ‘old’ and losing control over their life was ever present. This tension between acceptance of and resistance to ageing was negotiated in different ways by the older athletes. Due to the uncertainty and inevitability of the aging process, some older athletes described ‘gracefully backing out’ like the ‘growing old gracefully’ narrative presented by Partington et al., and the ‘stepping aside’ self indentified by Phoenix and Sparkes. On the other hand, other older athletes in Dionigi’s research spoke of being as active as possible in the time they had left in attempt to make the
most of their life. In other words, sport was seen as a means to maintaining a lifestyle that they enjoyed.

This brief review of research has highlighted that stories of sport and ageing tend to include the complex and contradictory themes of: resistance to the ageing process, redefining ageing, and acceptance of the ageing process. Our paper aims to continue and extend dialogue on this topic by examining the stories of older World Masters Games athletes.

Method
This study forms part of a larger research project exploring the experiences and practices of athletes aged 56 – 90 years (\(M=72\)) who competed at the 2009 World Masters Games in Sydney, Australia (Dionigi, Horton & Baker, 2010). The data on which this article is based came from semi-structured interviews with 44 older athletes (23 females; 21 males). The participants were theoretically (or purposively) sampled (see Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Patton, 2002) based on age (55 years and over), gender (men and women), sport (a variety of individual and team events) and country (English-speaking, western nations). The participants were from Australia (n=24), Canada (n=9), the United States of America (n=6) and New Zealand (n=5). They were competing in swimming (n=21), athletics/track and field (n=9), squash (n=4), orienteering (n=3), weightlifting (n=3), tennis (n=2), badminton (n=2) or cycling (n=1). Forty-five percent of the sample began competing at the Masters level (when they were over 50 years of age) while 55 percent of the group were comprised of life-long ‘continuers’ of sport or ‘re-starters’ of sport (i.e., those who had returned to sport after raising their children and/or when they retired from employment). They were typically white and middle-class, which reflects the demographic of the majority of participants at Masters events (Dionigi, 2011). Institutional ethics clearance was gained as part of the larger study. Informed consent was gained before any interviews were conducted and pseudonyms have been used in the analyses to conceal the identity of the participants. Participants were each interviewed
once onsite at the event. Each interview averaged 30 minutes in length. An interview guide (Patton, 2002) was developed to provide a framework and invite participants to ‘tell their story’. The themes used in the guide were: outcomes experienced from competing in sport, sporting background, current training methods; strategies for maintaining sports performance, perceptions and understandings of ‘old’ and ‘successful ageing’. Each question aimed to encourage participants to focus on their lived experiences in a sporting context.

All interviews were transcribed verbatim by an online transcription service and read through several times by the authors. Key emerging areas of interest were identified as we became more familiar with the data. Of particular interest to this study was an analysis of how participants’ negotiated the ageing process through their talk about sports participation. By focusing the analysis on how they remained or became an athlete despite an ageing body and what it meant to be older and highly physically active, we were able to determine the ways in which these athletes made sense of the ageing process. The interview data were subjected to narrative content analysis informed by an interpretive paradigm (Smith & Sparkes, 2005). This involved identifying central themes within the participants’ talk about their sporting experiences by sorting the data into narrative segments. We looked for similarities and differences across the interviews and organised the data into thematic categories. We also identified relationships among the categories in attempt to discover the patterns and meanings constructed both within and between the stories told by participants. In this sense, we developed themes and concepts from the stories being told by participants. Content analysis is not only “valuable for examining the thematic similarities and differences between narratives provided by a number of people,” but it also “has the potential to illuminate what kinds of cultural resources the storyteller might have access to” (Smith & Sparkes, p. 230). However, in this type of analysis, there is a tendency for the uniqueness of the individual to become overshadowed by the emergence of common themes (Sparkes,
Results

The analysis revealed four themes that provide insight into the ways older athletes negotiate the ageing process: “There’s no such thing as old” (a story of avoiding old age); “keep moving” (a story of fighting the ageing process); “fun, fitness, friendship... [and] competing” (a story of redefining self and ‘old age’) and; “making the most of your life… with the capabilities that you still have” (a story of adaptation and acceptance). Although each theme is discussed separately, there are relationships across them. The first two themes are connected to an overarching narrative of avoiding and resisting ageing, while the last two themes represent redefining and accepting ageing. Together, the four themes show how older individuals can use sport to fight, celebrate and/or accept the ageing process. In other words, although the participants’ collective stories of sports participation were best represented by these four story types, participants’ personal narratives did not necessarily fit neatly into one type. Rather, individuals were involved in an ongoing management of the ageing process that involved elements of avoidance, resistance, adaptation and/or acceptance in attempt to maintain late-life sports participation.

Stories of Avoiding and Resisting Ageing

“There’s No Such Thing as Old”. This theme presents a story of avoidance. It comprises of participant talk about continuing sports participation to the point where they are no longer physically capable or they die. In the later case, participants were competing in sport to avoid old age altogether. Cathy (age 77, a Canadian who began Masters swimming at age 65) believed, “There’s nothing that will stop me except death. I’ll do this until I die.” George (age 70, a New Zealand badminton player who has been competing since the age of 27) explained,
“...when I can’t move that’s when I’ll have to stop...I’d rather die on the court. They can bury me under the court and I can watch them play.” Walter, an 80-year-old Australian who began competitive swimming at 20 years of age, said:

Age is relative. I consider I’m not old at 80. I’m just a little wearing out, but you’re only as old as you think. And your muscles don’t know how old you are so you can push them hard... I intend on swimming till I drop dead.

There was a belief among the participants that the ageing process could be avoided or at least postponed by continued involvement in sport and physical activity. Darren, a 61-year-old Canadian swimmer, who returned to sport at the Masters level in his mid-forties, feels that he has another 40 years to achieve his goals, “I don’t see any barriers. My plan is to make it to at least 100 so that I can set some world records and maybe win the odd gold medal.” The participants expressed a sense of control over the ageing process and a belief that the ageing process could be beaten. This notion was particularly expressed through participant talk about old age as being ‘a state of mind’:

...You’re only as old as you feel... If you think you’re old – I’m still 21. If you think you’re 90 well you’re going to play like 90 aren’t you? Age is only a number as far as I’m concerned. (George, age 70, New Zealand badminton player)

[Old is] a state of mind. It’s how you feel yourself. I know people who are 60 who are very old because they don’t keep up with the local events. They don’t come out of their house...[age is] just a number. (Marilyn, age 60, Australian track and field athlete)

You’re never too old to play, never too old. There’s no such thing as old ... as long as you participate in it and enjoy it, then that’s the beauty of it... (Lucy, age 69, New Zealand badminton player)

Evidently, continued participation in sport, regardless of age, was viewed as the primary means to avoid deep old age or delay the ageing process. It was also a way of maintaining physical and mental competency so one could continue to enjoy the lifestyle they wanted, as further explained in the next theme.
“Keep Moving”. This theme highlights participant stories about fighting the ageing process through continually moving the mind and body in the context of sport and everyday life. By remaining physically active the participants felt that their quality of life was improved.

Victor believed that to age well, one must: “Try to avoid getting decrepit, that is, I try to keep my mind working and my body so that it can do what I want to do” (age 71, Canadian squash player). Similarly, Geoff, a 67-year-old Australian tennis player who was a former elite track and field athlete, said:

I think by participating in sport or exercise or something to some extent, use it or lose it...it makes you more healthy...helps you with your whole life, you know, you’ve got the rest of your life so you’re fitter to do the other things you want to do.

Lucy (age 69, New Zealand badminton player), a representative (elite) netball player in her youth who progressed to Masters badminton at age 33 after sustaining an injury, agreed:

...It just gives you a marvellous feeling that you can still compete at this age level and I think, that’s what we always say as long as the body tells us that we can still participate, yeah I’ll do it...I just like the movement, sort of helps you keep your bones and you know, you don’t stiffen up – and I think if you keep moving I think you age much better.

Judy, age 74, who has competed in athletics since she was age 12, explained:

I like doing what I’m doing in athletics and I’m able to do it. And what I do is reasonable and I enjoy it, and it keeps me healthy, keeps me alert, keeps the old mind ticking over which is pretty important because I go to nursing homes to see my ex mother-in-law and some of the people in there are much younger than me and they’re just sitting there doing nothing, and it’s sad to see all that. It really is.

The stories of resistance offered by these athletes showed the belief that if they did not keep active through sport then they would likely become ‘decrepit’, ‘stiff’ and/or end up in a ‘nursing home’. While the majority of study participants spoke of resilience and determination in the face of an ageing body, they also showed that their desire to resist the ageing process was driven by a concern of its associated ‘negative’ possibilities, such as decline and dependency on others in old age. Therefore, while participants did express a sense of control when they spoke of their involvement in sport, there was a common view (or
fear) among them that they could lose control and become ‘old’ (as they stereotypically understood it) at any moment.

Alternatively (and simultaneously), these stories demonstrate a sense of personal empowerment, competency and resilience, indicating that discourses of decline are not the only way to make sense of ageing. This latter point leads to the next theme which discusses the notion of sport as a means to redefine what it is to be an older person in western society and/or a means to redefining oneself as an athlete in later life.

**Stories of Redefining and Accepting Ageing**

“**Fun, Fitness, Friendship... [and] Competing**”. This theme presents stories of older age as an opportunity for mental, physical and social stimulation, enjoyment and engagement.

Masters sport provided space for older people to make lasting friendships, as well as compete against one another. As Valerie, a 66-year-old weightlifter and swimmer from Australia who has been involved with Masters sport for 10 years, explained:

> I have a great social thing and that’s what we’re about, fun, fitness, friendship. And the friendships you get from competing it’s tremendous on even on a local – just be your local club is good...And the people I see once a year from Germany and Canada, America, you know they’re – we’re all one family. And though we’re competing against each other, there’s still no nastiness. You know you wish everyone luck and you know if they beat you, they beat you sort of thing.

Jack, a 64-year-old Australian who has been swimming competitively since the age of 7, agreed that sport was a way to remain connected with others in later life:

> Just the camaraderie of the Masters where you meet all the different sorts of people, like today you meet everybody from different parts of the world...you can talk about swimming, which is the main subject.

Likewise, Tom, an 81-year-old Australian who has played squash for 60 years, said:

> I enjoy the sport, the activity and also trying to keep in good health and especially in squash you meet very, very nice social people, very enjoyable and making lasting friends through the sport... when you are with a group of guys, you get attached to them, you meet those guys almost every week... and that creates a very good bond there and when you have got a group of people like that, you tend to play year after year to keep on with the same enjoyable group.

The social aspect and friendships formed in the Masters sport context encourages ongoing participation among athletes. At the same time, competition and performance enhancement
were also highly valued by the participants. For example, Walter, an 80-year-old Australian swimmer explained:

I always enjoy a challenge. My wife says I’m a competitive animal. And I enjoy a challenge to better myself either to beat a time, or to break a record, or to do a personal best. And I’m always looking to do that and it’s very encouraging.

Likewise, Donna, age 66, a long-distance runner from Australia said:

I’ve been competing a long time, since about 1982… I’m not one who would run just to keep fit. I like the competition, the idea of bettering myself and beating someone else…

In particular, our study showed how Masters sport provides older people who have never competed in sport with the opportunity to experience success. In this sense, older people were able to redefine themselves as athletes in later life. For late-life beginners, Masters sport provided a context to determine their personal best (PB) or be a champion for the first time.

For instance, Matt said “…because I’ve never really been a good sportsman, certainly never been a good swimmer, I have the opportunity of still doing PB’s right?” (aged 69, Australian swimmer). Marlene, a 66-year-old New Zealand swimmer, took up Masters swimming at age 59 and she is not looking back:

…as a younger person I was never successful. I was never really good at something and when I discovered that at this age group I could win things and get recognition from it, it just really spurred me on … I never, ever considered myself to be a competitive person…but once I had got something it really kicked something awake in me and now I’m out there to win.

Furthermore, several participants said that because they were maintaining their ability, fitness and health through competing in sport they were more independent and socially active outside the context of sport. “It motivates you to get out and socialise and have fun with other adults that enjoy keeping physically fit,” explained Betty, a 64-year-old swimmer from Canada who began Masters sport when she was 48 years old. Bill, who has played tennis since the age of 10, agreed, “[Sport] enhances your life, you know, because it’s, you’ve still got to have a social network, you’ve still got to have an interest in books and all that sort of stuff...a balanced lifestyle as far as I’m concerned” (age 61, Australian). Masters sport was
clearly an avenue to an enhanced quality of life, a sense of identity and fulfilment for these people. In order for lifelong athletes to move from open competition to Masters or Veteran’s sport, however, there had to be a level of acceptance of the ageing process, as elaborated in the final theme.

“Making the Most of your Life… with the Capabilities that you still have”. This theme describes stories of adaptation and acceptance as one ages. For past high level sport performers, Masters sport gave them the opportunity to continue with sport for fun and friendship and accept that they may no longer reach their best. For example:

I think also that an ability to gradually fade away, gradually go down in grades and not worry about it and be able to accept that, because some people are used to being up at the top level and they can’t just suddenly go to social level. It’s sort of all or nothing. Where it needs to be ‘just do it for fun’ now. That’s probably the secret to it I think. (Geoff, tennis, age 67, Australia)

...you are getting older and you lose your speed, you lose your strength as you get older and you just don’t throw as well as you used to, but it’s a matter of adapting your thoughts to, you know, you’re not going to do as well as when you were young. And you...try and do your best as you get older. (Heidi, athletics, age 76, Australian)

Some athletes spoke of changing contexts to maintain sports performance. For instance, Lucy explained that due to injury she moved from playing representative (elite) netball to Masters badminton, “So I haven’t really retired from sport. I’ve just gone from one sport to another and I’ve actually stayed on the badminton team” (age 69, New Zealand). Donna, age 66, an Australian long-distance runner who has competed since the age of 39, explained, “rather than just give [your sport/event] away...find out what you can do about [your condition/body] to make it better and then work with it.”

Many participants provided stories of how they have adapted to ageing so they could remain involved in sport. For instance:

When I was younger I did do the sprints and the hurdles and the jumps, but now that I’ve gotten older my knees have just about packed it in...so I just do stand and throws now. But you know, I do quite well. (Heidi, age 76, track and field, Australia)
I accept what comes to me but I immediately adjust and continue as well as I can. (Cathy, age 77, swimmer, Canada)

I did a lot of bush walking until my knees went, you see, and then I had to give that away so you look for something else. So I can keep my athletics going. So I find things to do that fit my physical ability... (Rick, a 74-year-old Australian athlete, who has been competing in track and field since the age of 18)

While previous themes have shown that performance enhancement and competition are valued by many older athletes, it appears that there is also an acceptance of ageing in this context. The idea of ‘participation, despite ability’ is also embraced and celebrated by the Masters/Veterans’ community. As Rick (quoted above) elaborated:

Everybody here today’s got an ache and a pain...And they get round it or they modify it in some way or they just live with it and say, “Well, tough.” But they still come along...And you’re not on the outer because you’re not a winner.

In this sense, adaptation to ageing coincides with an acceptance of ageing and allows older people to continue to participate in sport, regardless of the level of performance. Arthur, an 82-year-old Australian cyclist of 60 years, who competed in the track and field and cycling at the current event, explained that what he enjoys most about Masters sport is “the enthusiasm that people have for performing in any way that they can.” In general, the oldest competitors at these events are proud of themselves, and admired by the younger competitors, for taking part. As Mavis, an Australian swimmer, indicated, “I've enjoyed being here, it’s wonderful just being well and able at [age] 82 to be able to do what I'm doing.” Mavis began competitive swimming at the age of 65 years.

The philosophy of making the most of the here and now, given your circumstances, was strong in the older athletes’ stories. As Arthur, the 82-year-old Australian athlete quoted above said, “I’m here today, I make the most of everyday!” Others said:

You’re still living life, you mightn’t be able to live it as fast as you used to be able to but you can still live and enjoy life even though you’re getting older. (Heidi, age 76, track and field, Australia)

Just enjoy your life, you...never know what’s going to happen, but just enjoy the moment. That’s all you can do. (Lucy, age 69, New Zealand badminton player)
Clearly, a prominent narrative of participants in this study was about: “Making the most of your life, doing what you can, with the capabilities that you still have, and surrounding yourself with positive people.” (Betty, age 64, Canadian swimmer)

Discussion

This study examined the talk of older WMG athletes, with particular focus on how they manage the ageing process, as well as extended dialogue on this topic of personal stories and the negotiation of an ageing identity in the context of sport. The four themes identified in older athletes’ stories showed how individuals negotiate the ageing process in different ways. Through sport, participants were seen to avoid, resist, redefine, adapt and/or accept the ageing process. While many athletes’ stories were primarily linked to one story type, several athletes demonstrated a negotiation across the themes. For instance, in the first theme Cathy said that she would continue competitive swimming until her death, which demonstrated a desire to avoid deep old age. Simultaneously she shared an acceptance of ageing by stating in the last theme that she accepts what comes to her and immediately adjusts to her circumstances so she can continue to swim. Other examples of participant negotiations across themes are provided below. The following discussion specifically draws on research that has presented stories about a sporting mid-life (Partington et al., 2005; Phoenix & Sparkes, 2007) and older-age experiences in sport (Dionigi, 2010) to make sense of the current data and generate further discussion on this topic.

The first theme “there’s no such thing as old” reflected aspects of the mid-life narratives of ‘age is a state of mind’ (Partington et al., 2005) and ‘almost past it’ (Phoenix & Sparkes, 2007). This outcome indicates that, in the context of sport, the story of resistance to ageing continues from mid-life to older age. It shows that the desire to maintain (or begin) involvement in sport through training and determination does not diminish in later life. This narrative of resistance was the most common storyline told by Partington et al.’s participants,
the most collective preferred self for young team athletes in Phoenix and Sparkes’ study, and equally the most prominent story in the current study. Therefore, our findings extend and support Phoenix and Sparkes’ argument that these narratives offer “a sense of coherence for athletes across the life course” (p.8). At the same time, maintaining a sense of coherence as a competent, fit, performing body is extremely difficult given the ‘realities’ of the ageing process and age-related declines in performance. Therefore, due to the uncertainty and inevitability of the ageing process, some participants in the current study indicated that they were willing to ‘fight to the death’.

Some of our participants provided an extreme story of avoidance that did not emerge in these past studies. Issues of avoidance of old age, however, were raised by older athletes in the ‘use it or lose it’ theme presented by Dionigi (2010). Do attempts to continually resist the ageing body represent a denial of the ageing process and a cultural fear of ill health in old age? Given that physical and mental decline is inevitable for people who live long enough, these stories of resistance and avoidance may be maladaptive to an ageing identity (Baker et al., 2009). For example, using a narrative maps approach, the younger athletes in Phoenix and Sparkes’ study described a feared self of an ageing athlete ‘hanging on’ too long, rather than accepting that it was time to ‘let go’ of their sport. This possible future self represented someone who was not coming to terms with their decline in performance and was often pitied by others. On the other hand, the preferred self of ‘almost past it’ depicted someone who remains competitive, skilful and knowledgeable despite getting older. Phoenix and Sparkes’ findings seem to be extremely relevant in the context of team sports and open competitive sport where high-levels of performance are required for success. Alternatively, the current study showed that in the context of Masters sport ‘hanging on’, regardless of one’s performance level, was valued because it demonstrated resilience and determination in the face of an ageing body.
A common finding among these past studies and the current one was the participant view that continued participation in sport was the primary means to delay the ageing process. Sports participation was also seen as a way of maintaining physical and mental competency so one could continue to enjoy the lifestyle they wanted. In the current study, these findings were demonstrated in the “keep moving” theme, where participants echoed the ‘use it or lose it’ narrative that is common among older Masters athletes (Dionigi, 2010; Grant, 2001). For example, Lucy claimed that one is “never too old to play” sport, which demonstrated a resistance to ageing, while she also admitted that one should enjoy life because “you...never know what’s going to happen” (i.e., an acceptance of age-related decline). On the one hand, these stories of fighting the ageing process depict “a ‘success story’ that offers comfort in the face of advancing years…the idea of retaining control over one’s destiny” (Partington et al. 2005, p. 92). On the other hand, the participants demonstrated an investment into negative stereotypes of ageing when they described ‘other’ older people and the perceived effects of the ageing process. Therefore, they invested in the notion that sport is a means to solve the ‘problems of ageing’ and their stories reflected cultural discourses that value health, ability and independence in later life (Tulle, 2008). In other words, this narrative reflected the value of youthfulness and ability over old age (Partington et al., 2005) and has the potential to reproduce the cultural fear of ill health in old age (Dionigi, 2010). At the same time, the “Fun, fitness, friendship... [and] competing” theme showed that the stories of older athletes could redefine ageing and what it can mean to be an older person in western society.

Given that the negative discourses of ageing tend to position older people as inactive, lonely and withdrawn individuals (Blaikie, 1999; Wearing, 1995), the stories provided by WMG competitors reflected and supported emerging positive ageing discourse which position older people as healthy and active. The stories present a competent, powerful and engaged image of older people that contrasts negative stereotypes of old age. The findings
also showed that being competitive in sport can remain important, regardless of age or performance level. Similar findings about the value of ‘friendly competition’ have emerged from older Australian Masters athletes in research reviewed by Dionigi (2006). Athletes in the current study valued the competitive aspect just as much as the social side of Masters sport, despite when they began competing. The findings also reflected aspects of the ‘life begins at forty’ story told by mid-life athletes in the study by Partington et al., (2005). These mid-life athletes enjoyed the sense of revisiting a previous life period where they travelled around playing sport with their friends. Therefore, Masters sports’ emphasis on formal competition and a sense of camaraderie provides choice and allows for people’s reasons for participating to change over time. In particular, the competitive structure of Masters sport offers a sense of continuity for lifelong athletes and an exciting new experience for late-life beginners to sport, such as winning a medal for the first time.

The final theme “Making the most of your life… with the capabilities that you still have” reflected aspects of the rejuvenation narrative and acceptance narrative presented by Partington et al., (2005), the ‘stepping aside’ self in Phoenix and Sparkes’ (2007) study and the “I’m out here and I can do this” theme in research by Dionigi (2010). The ‘life begins at forty’ story of rejuvenation and the ‘growing old gracefully’ narrative of acceptance (Partington et al.) showed that there are opportunities for participation in sport beyond mid-life, if participants are willing to downgrade from high level open competitions to Masters or Veterans’ sport. In this sense, mid-life athletes were seen as side-stepping or redefining the ageing process “by changing the context of participation” (Partington et al., p. 94). Likewise, many of the athletes in our research, who had continued sports participation from a young age, said that they had changed the type of sport they played, changed the way they played their sport and/or moved from open competitions into Masters events. This finding reflects the reluctant, ‘stepping aside’ self in mid-life who chooses to leave a sport or a certain level
of sport at the ‘appropriate’ time as described in Phoenix and Sparkes’ study. Therefore, “stories of this type acknowledge that the ageing process cannot be halted and as a result of ageing, a change is made” (Partington et al., p. 94).

Lifelong athletes in the current study recognised that if they wanted to continue to compete in sport they had to accept that they would not perform as well as they did in their youth, and refocus on the fun and friendship aspects of Masters sport. For example, Geoff said he participates in sport because he believes in the ‘use it or lose it’ philosophy (to fight the ageing process and maintain health), but he simultaneously accepts the ageing process by recognising that he must “gradually go down in grades and not worry about it.” For some athletes, like Geoff, this decision is possible, but for others, playing at a lower level may not be desirable. While our study did not access former athletes who had dropped out of sport, previous research indicates that some people would prefer to drop out of sport than play socially (Partington et al., 2005; Phoenix & Sparkes, 2007). While this outcome may depend on the type of sport (e.g., elite team sports with a high level of body contact, such as rugby and hockey, versus swimming and athletics), Phoenix and Sparkes raised concern over applauding the ‘bowing out gracefully’ narrative because it has the potential to perpetuate an absence of older people in sport. Our findings support this idea and further highlight the fine line between resisting the body to the point of avoiding (or denying) the realities of the ageing process and accepting the ‘declining body’ discourse to the point of dropping out of sport and physical activity too soon (or not taking it up in later life).

Finally, the findings in our study support the ‘I’m out here and I can do this’ theme highlighted by Dionigi (2010). This past research and the current study showed that while many older athletes recognise and accept that the ageing process is inevitable, they are determined to adapt to their circumstances and maintain sports participation. Like the participants in Partington et al.,’s (2005) study who told the ‘growing old gracefully’ story,
we found that although our participant’s accepted “that they could do nothing to halt the ageing process, they were determined to retain control over their own participation” (p. 96). Partington et al., called this a ‘compromise story’ because it provided evidence that some athletes simultaneously drew on elements of the resistance story and the acceptance narrative. This ‘compromise story’ was identified in a minority of mid-life athletes in Partington et al’s study, but in our study this story was equally as strong as the resistance story. That is, in our study the majority of older athletes did not provide pure ‘growing old gracefully’ stories which claim that attempts to stop the inevitable process of ageing are pointless. Alternatively, as shown in the final theme, the majority of older athletes spoke of making the most of the time that remained in their life by being as active as possible, similar to the older athletes in research by Dionigi (2010). So, while many participants in our study said that they ‘accept’ old age, they were simultaneously adapting to it and fighting it for as long as they could in order to maintain a sense of identity, as well as continue a lifestyle that they enjoyed. Furthermore, the older athletes in our study were not all continuers of sport; many began competing in later life or after a break from sport in mid-life. Therefore, rather than being considered ‘over the hill’ or ‘too old’ to play sport, these older athletes were “taking the hill by storm” (Grant, 2002, p. 285).

**Concluding thoughts and implications**

The story of resistance to ageing, which appears to be the master narrative in the context of sport for middle aged and older adults, was extended in this study to include an extreme story of avoidance. Furthermore, the ‘acceptance’ storyline held a different meaning for the older participants when compared to stories from mid-life athletes. It this study, acceptance of ageing did not mean that one ‘dropped out’ of sport because they had accepted that the ‘time was right’ or because they had accepted that they were ‘too old’. Alternatively, this narrative included a combination of acceptance, adaptation and resolve. In this sense, the progression
from being a mid-life athlete to a late-life athlete requires recognition and acceptance of performance decline and the physical ageing process, as well as a form of adaptation to these changes, and a determination to continue sports participation. It also requires a context, such as Masters or Veteran’s sport, which caters to and embraces age-related declines in sport performance. Therefore, when comparing our findings to past research it was clear that the sports context (Masters, elite or non-competitive) and the personal history of the athlete (beginner, lifelong athlete or a returner to sport in later life) played key roles in their meanings and stories. It also appears that an ‘adaptation’ to ageing allows one to simultaneously resist and accept the ageing process. This outcome opens up spaces to redefine ageing and educate others about ‘other ways of knowing’ sport and ageing. Therefore, these narratives present the possibility for personal, pedagogical and social transformation.

The stories presented in this study allow alternative meanings to the dominant ‘declining body’ narrative of ageing to emerge. The participants in this study were redefining ageing in terms of physical competency, resilience, social engagement and mental stimulation. They showed that older bodies can be competitive and athletic and that sport is not only the domain of youth. Being older and highly physically active allowed older people to become athletes in later life or maintain their identity as a sportsperson. In other words, they were redefining themselves and providing alternative meanings of what it is to be an older athlete (specially) and an older, western adult more generally. These people emphasised that life’s journey continues with new discoveries and experiences and one’s capacities expand as life’s circumstances change. It is not that these older people fail to perceive and experience disability, stress and illness, but these factors did not define them. Instead, these experiences were negotiated in their stories of sport and ageing. In addition to informing general psychosocial models of ageing, these results have particular relevance for those
working with older adults. It is important that the multiple understandings of ‘athletes’, ‘older people’, ‘ageing’, ‘old’ and ‘sport’ are appreciated by stakeholders in all aspects of gerontology.

Appreciating the delicate balance in sports participation between resisting the body to the point of avoiding (or denying) the realities of the ageing process and accepting the ‘declining body’ discourse to the point of dropping out too soon or not taking sport up in later life is critical. Phoenix and Sparkes (2007) and Partington et al (2005) warned that romanticising the ‘acceptance’ of ageing narrative in mid-life may encourage people to cease sports before it is necessary or before they want to. On the other hand, if older athletes ‘battle on’ too long – due to the dominance of the resistance to ageing narrative in sport – this outcome could also be problematic. Therefore, it is important that those working with older people in a sport and physical activity setting be aware of the continuum of personal meanings associated with participation. Moreover, Partington et al. argued that it is unrealistic to believe that it is possible for everyone to transcend the ageing process. There is a risk that in a society which values independence and health, older people who identify themselves through the use of their body may not cope well in deep old age (Dionigi, 2010).

Given the rise in number of older athletes and the ageing of the ‘baby boom’ generation, it is important that older people be taught strategies to assist their transition from a highly physically active life to another area of interest. The key message from this research is that providing multiple stories of ageing and exposing narratives of difference will allow choice across the lifespan and make possible numerous ways of defining and experiencing ageing.

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