

Competing for Life

Older People and Competitive Sport

Rylee Ann Dionigi, BSocSci (Hons)

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Certification

I hereby certify that the work embodied in this thesis is the result of original research and has not been submitted for a higher degree to any other University or Institution.

(signed) _____

RYLEE DIONIGI

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SYNOPSIS

In Western society competing in physically demanding sport is not considered the domain of older people. For the majority of the twentieth century older people were stereotyped as frail, socially withdrawn and dependent on health and social welfare systems. Competitive athletes on the other hand are commonly viewed as being young, strong, aggressive, physically competent and independent. Although today's older generation are encouraged to be physically active, society does not recognise serious competition or physically intense sports as age-appropriate activities for them. If older people choose to participate in sport they are expected to be doing it to have fun, make friends and keep fit. The growing leisure phenomenon of older athletes who compete to win, achieve a personal best, break world records or push their bodies to the limit presents a challenge to these orthodoxies.

The purpose of this thesis is to explain why competing in physically demanding sport is significant to some older people given the accepted view that it is not their domain. In particular, the thesis explores the multiple ways in which a group of older people negotiate conflicting discourses of both sport and ageing, as well as the contradiction between their identity as an athlete and their ageing bodies, as they talk about and experience competing in physically strenuous individual and team sports. The key themes through which this negotiation process is played out relate to friendship and fun, competition, youthfulness, and the ageing body. It is revealed that the process of competing in sport can be simultaneously empowering and problematic at both the individual and social levels. The thesis draws on insights from post-structural theories of resistance and empowerment, traditional and postmodern understandings of identity management in later life, and life-stage theories to interpret the phenomenon of older people competing in physically demanding sport.

To achieve the above aims, a qualitative study exploring the experiences of a group of Masters athletes aged over 55 years who regularly compete in physically strenuous individual or team sports was undertaken. It was found that despite age-

appropriate norms, competition is significant to many of the participants. Study participants embrace the ideologies and practices of competitive sport and use them to define ageing in terms of youthfulness, physical ability and personal empowerment. Simultaneously however, a denial of, or desperate resistance to, the physical ageing process accompanies this feeling of empowerment. The participants in this study were not only competing in sport, but also ‘competing for life’. It is argued that a multi-faceted and conflicting interplay of resistance and conformity, empowerment and denial, identity and the ageing body is embedded in the phenomenon of older people competing in physically demanding sport. These contradictory findings expose alternative ways of understanding sport, competition, ageing and older people in the West and raise many questions requiring further investigation. The study also points to potential applications of these findings to policy-making and provision of leisure services for older people.