Going for the Gusto: Competing for the First Time at Age 65

Jessica Brooke Kirby and Mary Ann Kluge

Older adults are often viewed by society more for what they cannot do than for what they are capable of achieving. This intrinsic case study examined the formation of a women’s 65+ volleyball team at a university for the purpose of better understanding what it was like for older women to learn a new sport and what meaning participating in competitive sport had for those who had not previously been considered athletic. Qualitative methods explored each participant’s experiences through a focus group, individual interviews, observational notes, and written reflections. Resulting team member themes included going for the gusto, belonging to a team, and support from the university. This program is a potential model to engage nonathletic older adults in sport, while forging a new and positive aging framework for aging athletes.

Keywords: older women, Masters athletes, intergenerational, positive aging

We are the Stars, yeah just hear us shout.
We may be old but don’t count us out.
We all know we’ll continue to grow
Till the Stars are the best of show. Go Stars!
—Lyrics by Stars team captain, Lisa

To the tune of the University of Notre Dame’s well-known fight song, the Stars’ voices echo through the gym, signaling the end to another practice session. Women wearing team shirts, black exercise tights, knee pads, and volleyball shoes with red laces walk off the court and begin to pack their gear into their red duffel bags. A fairly common sight in a university gym, except these 10 women are not collegiate players—they are all over the age of 65 and just started to learn to play volleyball.

As a student who helped start the Stars volleyball program, I (first author) was invited by my professor (second author) to “check out” some older women playing volleyball. “Work with older people? Why? I’d certainly rather work with children—they are much more fun and interesting!” Not intending to work with older adults at all, I was instead lured by the chance to continue playing volleyball, a sport I loved but had not played since high school. Looking back, I would never...
have predicted getting hooked after the first practice—not only on the Stars but also on working with older adults as a career choice.

With the population of older adults on the rise, research has expanded in the area of older adults and physical activity. Within this body of knowledge, topics often addressed include society’s continuous search for eternal youth, the need for older adults to maintain quality of life and independence, and policy makers wishing to reduce costs of health care for chronic disease through prevention strategies (Dionigi, 2006a; Dionigi & Lyons, 2010; Dionigi & O’Flynn, 2007; Grant & Kluge, 2012; Tulle, 2008a). While the benefits of physical activity for older adults have been documented and endorsed by several governing bodies (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2010; Nelson et al., 2007) and older adults themselves (Grant, 2008; Kluge, 2002; O’Brien Cousins, 2000), there remains a great deal to be learned about the experiences older adults have with physical activity—how and why certain individuals find being physically active beneficial to their overall well-being and why others are not physically active, even avoiding physical activity at all costs (Dionigi, 2006b; Grant & Kluge, 2007; Hollmann, Struder, Tagarakis, & King, 2007; Kluge, 2002; Rikli, 2005; Tulle, 2008a).

Some research has been done with Masters athletes—those who deviate from the typical profile of aging and decline and continue training and competing in sports throughout the lifespan (Baker, Horton, & Weir, 2010). However, Baker et al. suggest that as few as “one in ten individuals is motivated to be involved in sport” in their later years (p. 1). More needs to be known about the antecedents and consequences of sports participation for older adults, especially about newcomers to sport, women in particular.

**Literature Review**

There are several barriers to physical activity for older adults. Old age is still thought of by many as a time to rest and conserve energy. Some suggest that they are busy enough to be healthy without partaking in structured exercise programs (Crombie et al., 2004; Grant, 2008). Others feel confused by the numerous sources of advice on how to stay active and healthy (Grant, 2008). Some rhetoric purports that physical activity speeds up the aging process (Dionigi & O’Flynn, 2007) or puts the physical body at risk (O’Brien Cousins, 2000). Ageist stereotyping affects what is expected of older people and what older people expect of themselves (Dionigi & Horton, 2012). Gender shapes lived experience, intersects with age, and can result in older women, in particular, thinking they are too old and too unfit to become physically active or try something new later in life (Mock, Shaw, Hummel, & Bakker, 2012; O’Brien Cousins & Vertinsky, 1995; Shaw, 1994; Theberge, 1997; Vertinsky, 1995).

Social support has been shown to be a strong determinant in helping older adults overcome the notion that they are fragile and potentially incapable of experiencing the many benefits of physical activity (Chogahara, O’Brien Cousins, & Wankel, 1998; O’Brien Cousins, 1995; Young & Medic, 2011). While environmental barriers such as access to facilities can affect physical activity levels (Anshel, 2007), Jancey et al. (2008) found that the “individual and the social environment outweigh the influence of the physical environment” (p. 252). Several researchers have claimed that social connections can enhance the likelihood that older adults will participate in physical activity, while insufficient social support can be a barrier to activity.
Kirby and Kluge (Chogahara et al., 1998; Dionigi & Lyons, 2010; Heuser, 2005). For example, Heuser studied the careers of women lawn bowlers and found that social support and a sense of community created by career lawn bowlers had a “powerful effect on [the] women” (p. 58). Even when they physically retired from playing, they were “unwilling to give it up” completely; they continued instead to nurture the social ties they had created throughout the years (Heuser, 2005, p. 58). Hodge, Allen, and Smellie (2008) found a sense of belonging in sports to be vital, as well. The Masters athletes they studied (in six sports) indicated that social affiliation was a part of their “goal profile.” Young and Medic recognized, as Heuser did, however, that social influences were not always positive. Their findings on the social influences on Masters swimmers indicated that those with a broad social network might need to reduce the social pressures from that network to perform better.

Despite these conundrums and potential barriers, participation by older adults in physical activity and sport has been increasing over the past few decades (Baker et al., 2010; Cardenas, Henderson, & Wilson, 2009; Dionigi, 2006b; Dionigi & O’Flynn, 2007; Pfister, 2012; Tulle, 2008b). Irrespective of the label (Masters, seniors, Veterans) or the eligibility requirements (30+ years, 50+ years), increased participation can be noted by entries in regional, national, and international events that have continued to grow in number (Cardenas et al., 2009; Pfister, 2012). One profound reason for this increase appears to be the emergence of the health-promotion movement, which has begun to shift health professionals’ and the public’s attitudes on aging (Öberg & Tornstam, 2001). Competitions are offered in numerous sporting activities, often upwards of 28 different sports. Some engage in physically demanding events such as track and field, tennis, marathons, and ice hockey; others participate in leisure activities such as shuffleboard, bridge, and lawn bowling (Cardenas et al., 2009; Dionigi & O’Flynn, 2007). The creation and growth of organizations that sponsor competitive events for older adults has enabled older adults to challenge social stereotypes and remain in the world of competitive sports or join a world once thought exclusive to the elite, young, and fit (Cardenas et al., 2009; Dionigi, 2006b; Dionigi & O’Flynn, 2007; Tulle, 2008b).

Older adults’ motivations and preferences regarding engagement in physical activity and sport are beginning to be explored (Cardenas et al., 2009; Dionigi, 2006a; Grant, 2008; Kluge, 2002; Rikli, 2005). Grant conducted in-depth interviews to better understand the meaning older adults attach to physical activity. Findings from that study and others indicate that many older adults state the desire to avoid functional decline as their main reason for staying active (Dionigi, 2006a, 2006b; Grant, 2008). One’s assessment of oneself, or identity, also appears to affect motivation to be active. One participant in Grant’s study indicated, “Doing nothing gives us oldies a bad name” (p. 822). Kluge, Grant, Friend, and Click (2010) also explored what it was like to become a senior athlete later in life. That research analyzed one woman’s personal narrative and represented the findings from the study through film. Other video representations of older athletes have provided insight into the experiences of older adults in competitive sport (Haney, 2004; Kluge & Glick, 2007; Ochwat & Rufo, 2010).

While many older adults are motivated to be physically active for functional benefits and are even being encouraged to do so by health care professionals, what draws older adults to participate in sports competition is still not well understood (Dionigi, 2006a, 2006b; Dionigi & O’Flynn, 2007; Grant & Kluge, 2007; Tulle,
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2008b; Whaley & Ebbeck, 2002). Most often the marketing of sporting events for older adults encourages fun and friendship over performance and competition (Cardenas et al., 2009; Dionigi, 2006b; Dionigi & O’Flynn, 2007). Dionigi and O’Flynn found, however, that winning is important to many Masters Games participants. In fact, older athletes may indeed have characteristics similar to their younger counterparts and may strive for similar goals. The athletes studied were highly disciplined and dedicated to training, pushing their bodies to the limit and tracking performances over time. Hodge et al.’s (2008) study of Masters athletes found that many were identified as “high-task” and predominantly intrinsically motivated, while others expressed moderate levels of extrinsic motivation, as well. These athletes also sought “social validation” (recognition and status) for their involvement in sport (p. 173).

When examining the motivations for older adults competing in sport, one finds relatively little reported about the actual and perceived benefits of physical activity for older women (Heuser, 2005; Tulle, 2008a). In particular, what is it like to start to play sports later in life? Pfister (2012) and Dionigi and O’Flynn (2007) speculate that there is more than the “fit and fun” moniker often adopted by Senior Games (in the United States) and Masters Games (internationally). In fact, Pfister contends that “gender and age are not qualities but performances” (p. 371). Pfister’s Sport and Aging Project explored the way in which 12 women 55 and older negotiated the various aging and physicality discourses. Most of the athletes in her study had been athletic all their lives; five of them were elite athletes. Findings suggested that while sport was “a pleasure” for the women, for several it was also “a tool” for antiaging (p. 376). Pfister’s view of age and gender as social constructions is shared by Dionigi (2006a) and Tulle (2008a). Those theorists, as well as Grant and Kluge (2012), indicate that “healthism and ageism” influence, and possibly even govern, older adults’ lived experience, setting a moral imperative to be “fit and functioning” (Pfister, 2012, p. 373).

Concern over whether the quest for youth and fitness through competitive outlets is beneficial or detrimental to the psyche of older athletes is being debated (Dionigi, 2006a; Pfister, 2012; Theberge, 1997). Much of the research encompassing older adults and athletic identity focuses on how older adults identify within an aging framework (Tulle, 2008b). Öberg and Tornstam (2001) suggest that modern societies have replaced ideals of “eternal life” with the “consumer culture’s images of eternal youth” (p. 16). Some argue that if competitive older adults reject their own aging experience, they are doing themselves a disservice by struggling to hang onto a youthful and young persona (Dionigi, 2002). Stevenson’s (2002) study of Masters swimmers revealed them as identifying to a high degree with their sport (being a swimmer) but in some cases no longer identifying as competitive in that sport.

Research with young, elite athletes has examined their attitude toward aging. Phoenix, Faulkner, and Sparkes (2005) and Phoenix and Sparkes (2008) found that most young athletes have a negative outlook on aging and do not look forward to the perceived inevitable decline of their bodies. Some younger athletes have reported that old age will be a time to sit and reflect on what has been accomplished in the life span but not a time when they (as older adults) will possess a purpose or identity in society (Phoenix & Sparkes, 2008). New narratives maps (created by active older adults) have the potential to offer alternative paths in the life course for young, active individuals: paths that do not inevitably lead to a fragile, physically
incompetent future self (Phoenix et al., 2005; Phoenix & Sparkes, 2008; Flora & Faulkner, 2006).

Situating the Study

The aim of this study was to answer the call of researchers suggesting further study regarding older adults’ experiences in competitive sport and the meaning attached to competitive sport for groups that have previously not been considered athletic (Dionigi & O’Flynn, 2007; Flora & Faulkner, 2006; Grant, 2008; Grant & Kluge, 2007; Phoenix et al., 2005). More specifically, the research question asked, “What is the experience of women over 65 years learning to play volleyball for the first time?” This research question has significance because training older women to compete in a team sport without any prior experience appeared underexplored in the field of aging and physical activity. Moreover, it is imperative that we understand more about how women experience sport in later life, as gender influences personal and social barriers in the lives of older women, making it difficult for them to be physically active (Yoshida, Allison, & Osborn, 1988).

Rikli (2005) called for qualitative exploration of the motivations of those who have successfully adopted and sustained an exercise routine over a long period of time. Case-study methodology, in particular, has been encouraged to “provide a richer understanding of” Senior Games participants (Cardenas et al., 2009, p. 150). Understanding of the experience of older adults and competitive sports can best be achieved through qualitative methods, as the experience of older adults aging and competing in sport is complex and ever evolving and cannot be understood by just one measurement or theoretical construct (Grant, 2008; Grant & Kluge, 2007; Phoenix et al., 2005). Qualitative methods situate the study in an interpretative paradigm that allows for in-depth and meaningful description of individual and collective experiences within the natural social and environmental context (Creswell, 2007). After all, “growing old cannot be understood apart from its subjective experience” (Kluge et al., 2010, p. 284).

The theoretical framework we chose to guide this study is that of positive aging. Positive aging is a psychological resource model forwarded by Hill (2011). The positive-aging model features the recruitment of latent potential in later life. It acknowledges late-life loss as inevitable but asserts that resources can be recruited, not so much to mitigate age-related decline but to maximize purpose in life and life satisfaction.

The social ecological model has been widely used in exploring various health behaviors and motivations for continuing or terminating an exercise behavior (Cardenas et al., 2009; Newes-Adeyi, Helitzer, Caulfield, & Bronner, 2000). Ecological theory takes into account how behaviors are influenced by multiple levels of an individual’s environment (McLeroy, Bibeau, Steckler, & Glanz, 1988; Newes-Adeyi et al., 2000) and how these levels combine to create enablers and constraints that either enhance or deter a desired behavior (Cardenas et al., 2009). The themes that emerged from data analysis in this study could be easily understood and presented under the framework of the social ecological model, specifically, the three levels of intrapersonal, interpersonal, and community.
Methods

An intrinsic case study was chosen for this study to allow “the focus [to be] on the case itself because the case presents an unusual or unique situation” that warrants in-depth exploration (Creswell, 2007, p. 74). Using the university to form a sports team for older adults created a unique case in which students, faculty, and community-dwelling older adults worked together, sharing their skills, knowledge, and past experiences. Essential to the selection of a case for study is that the case exists within boundaries clearly defined by the researcher (Creswell, 2007). The boundaries of this case are defined as the team members, students, and faculty supporting the team and the environmental setting of the university. The idea behind the program was for older women, 65 years of age and older, to learn to play volleyball.

The volleyball team (the Stars) originated at a midsized university; it was the idea of a health science professor who had recently trained a friend and retired faculty member for the Senior Games. After a successful experience (and several medals), they brainstormed ways in which they could encourage several other older women who may not have been regularly physically active to engage in Senior Games and learn a new sport in later life. They settled on the sport of volleyball, as it was a team sport with the potential to encourage participation from a greater number of older women.

Initially, three women expressed interest. Gradually, over the course of a year, the group grew to include 10 members. Ages ranged from 65 to 76 years. In most cases, the women had not played volleyball since physical education class 50 years prior, if at all. This was the first time most of these women had been involved with competitive sports and the first time any of the women had been on a team. The exception was one person—a world record holder in Masters track and field; however, she was still a beginner in volleyball. The fact that these women were new to the world of athletics may have in part been due to the fact that they grew up in a generation before Title IX legislation required universities to provide equal athletic opportunities for men and women (Henderson, Bialeschki, Shaw, & Freysinger, 1996), eventually resulting in greater opportunity and prevalence of girls’ sports in primary and secondary educational settings. In previous experiences in physical education class in high school, the women had not been encouraged to sweat or wear athletic apparel. They may have wanted to play, but no one taught them or encouraged them to learn (Kluge et al., 2010).

To garner support for this endeavor (coaches, athletic trainers, officials), the professor (second author) recruited help from the university’s women’s volleyball team (head coach and players) and university health science students. The lead researcher worked with the team as an assistant coach. All team members and support personnel were women except for two male health science students who periodically helped with practice. To foster the growth of a team, individuals who came to practice and indicated an interest in continuing were given a red duffel bag and practice T-shirt, both with the Stars team logo. The bag contained a beginner’s guide on how to safely and effectively begin training, a DVD about volleyball skills and rules of the game, and several tools (a beach ball, a resistance band, etc.) all meant to help the participants hone their skills outside of practice.
Practices were scheduled during down time (8–10 a.m.) at the university campus recreation center in order not to compete with periods of high-volume patron traffic. The Stars were given permission to use the facility, initially at no charge. Each player did, however, pay an hourly parking fee during practices, as well as costs such as tournament registrations, travel, lodging, and uniforms. Training and practices were facilitated by university students, faculty, and staff and were structured so the women learned how to play volleyball safely by engaging in proper warm-ups, joint-readiness exercises, skill-development progressions, and cooldowns. The women initially practiced for one and one-half hours a week, increasing to an average of 5 hr/week to prepare for competition in the 2008 state-level Senior Games. After the completion of data collection for this study, the team went on to compete in the 2009 National Senior Games in Palo Alto, CA. At the state and national levels for Senior Games, volleyball teams compete in 5-year age categories and typically play at least two or three rounds of play before medals are determined. The Stars competed in the 65–69 age category at both levels.

Data Collection

Data were collected from multiple sources including a team focus group, individual interviews, individual written reflections, and participant observation. While the overall organization of the inquiry was that of an intrinsic case study, the nature of the data collection, analysis, and reporting was ethnographic. In ethnography, “the focus is on the context of a culture and a culture-sharing group” (Creswell, 2007, p. 76). The researcher is the tool, embedded in the study with themes about the culture-sharing group’s experience emerging from data analysis (Creswell, 2007). The first author did the majority of the data collection and data management. Immersed in the field for a “prolonged stay” (Creswell, 2007, p. 243), she recorded everyday experiences and events and solicited the perceptions and meaning attached to those experiences.

All 10 team members were invited to participate in the study; 8 consented. The focus group and all individual interviews were video recorded. Video recording is a highly effective way to record group interactions, as the voice and face are recorded and there is no confusion as to who is responding to a question (Loeb, Penrod, & Hupcey, 2006). Video recording also allows for recording of nonverbal expressions, which can be lost in audio recordings. The first author conducted the interviews; the university media-services department filmed both the focus group and individual interviews. The film was transferred to DVD for analysis.

Focus Group. The focus group (54 min) was conducted with a representative group of six team members. Focus groups have been shown to effectively explore personal meanings of health, as well as discover the views of underrepresented populations (Wilkinson, 1998). Focus groups are often used in preliminary or exploratory phases of research to get participants’ attitudes, feelings, beliefs, experiences, and reactions about a topic. Data from focus groups provide multiple perspectives, as well as shared understandings (Vaughn, Shay Schumm, & Sina-gub, 1996). The focus group questions were open-ended and designed to allow the Stars the opportunity to tell their story about becoming a volleyball team and how that experience had influenced their lives. Examples of these questions are, “Why volleyball and why now?” “Why something brand new at this time in your life?”
“After a really discouraging practice, what keeps you coming back each week?”
“What do you think your life would be like today if you never joined the team?”

**Individual Interviews.** Individual interviews were conducted with 8 members of the team to support and verify data initially gathered from the focus group. Open-ended questions focused on further exploring the experience of becoming a volleyball player and on what obstacles and supporting factors stood out for each woman. Individual interview questions were standardized among all participants. Examples of individual interview questions are, “What prompted you to say yes when recruited to the Stars?” “What obstacles do you see for others your age participating in sports or physical activities?” “What do the Stars mean to you?”

**Written Reflections.** Written reflections were submitted by 6 team members. These reflections gave each woman the opportunity to elaborate and reflect on their experience as a Star and to add anything she may not have expressed in the individual interviews and focus group. In the invitation letter, participants were given short prompts on what topics they might include in their story. Each participant was encouraged to hand write or type her reflection according to her own personal preference. Examples of these prompts include, “Tell me your story. What has been your experience as a Star?”

**Participant Observation.** Consistent with the ethnographic tradition, participant observation was used to note the everyday experiences of the Stars and associated personnel at team functions such as practices, competitions, and team dinners. These observations of behaviors and interactions are consistent with Creswell’s (2007) recommendations. Observations were recorded periodically in Researcher 1’s journal; Researcher 2 used videotaped footage to record participant observations, as well. The participant observer perspective afforded valuable insight as the researchers were “immersed in the field for a long stay” (in this case, 1 year) as coaches of the team throughout the duration of the study (Creswell, 2007, p. 243).

The institutional review board of the university approved this study. Participation was voluntary, and each participant signed an informed-consent form to participate, as well as an image waiver for use of any still photos and/or film used during presentation of the study’s findings.

**Data Analysis**

A thematic analysis was conducted on data from the focus group, individual interviews, and written reflections. Important to the case-study process, the researchers identified and suspended their preexisting biases during the analysis process (Whaley & Ebbeck, 2002). Biases included the researchers’ positive relationship with the players and personal value for physical activity as a means to improve health. Analysis consisted of repeatedly viewing the video footage, reading the written material, and identifying meaning statements. Repeated words and short phrases were first coded and then compiled into significant, overarching themes. After all themes were differentiated and described, the themes were considered as a whole for viewing through applicable theoretical lenses. This process of thematic analysis is common in case-study and ethnographic research (Creswell, 2007; Goodwin, Krohn, & Kuhnle, 2004; Stake, 1994; Whaley & Ebbeck, 2002).
Peer data audit, triangulation, and member checking were used to establish credibility of the data and present an accurate interpretation of the “reality of the phenomenon being studied” (Grant, 2008, p. 821). Two different individuals, each with limited experience with the Stars, conducted the data audit. The auditors watched the focus group and reported to the researcher what significant statements stood out for them. They also identified possible themes they thought emerged from the data. The two auditors interpreted the same themes as the researcher, with no discrepancies or inaccuracies found.

Data from the team focus group, individual interviews, written reflections, and participant observation were triangulated and used to corroborate themes. Triangulation is an analytical approach that is often used when mixing methods of data collection (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007), the purpose being to identify “different but complementary data on the same topic” (p. 62). Themes that emerged from the experiences of the team members were consistent throughout all data sources.

Member checking is the process by which the participants of the study review collected data or data analysis and confirm or challenge the validity of the results (Johnson & Waterfield, 2004). To perform a member check of the accuracy of the data, whether the team members perceived the researcher’s synthesis of the experience as accurate, the researcher wrote a summary of the “essence” of the experience and gave it to the participants for their review (Moustakas, 1994). All participants read this essence summary and unanimously confirmed that the researcher had captured the essence of their experience in an accurate manner.

Findings

Three broad themes emerged from the team member data: going for the gusto, being a member of the team, and support from the university. Several subthemes that identify constraints and enablers also emerged. Quotes are included from the interviews to provide supporting examples and a richer description of the participants’ experiences. Themes, subthemes, enablers, and constraints that emerged are displayed in Table 1. Themes are also identified and labeled here in the Findings section according to three of the five dimensions of the social ecological model: intrapersonal, interpersonal, and community.

Themes

Going for the Gusto (Intrapersonal). Shared among all team members, the Stars described a common willingness to try something new and challenging in later life. “I think learning something new is about being alive, not only in your 70s, but hopefully in my 80 and 90s” (Karen). When individuals of all ages learned about the Stars they often expressed surprise, shock, and/or confusion because the women on the team were doing something that most women their age were afraid of or reluctant to try. During the process of building the team, the Stars heard doubt, disbelief, and fear from peers they tried to recruit. “I asked several women and I had all kinds of excuses from ‘arthritis’ to ‘break my fingernails’ to ‘might get hurt.’ It’s something that isn’t easy for women our age to do, evidently” (Louise). The women also experienced disapproval from a few friends and family who were concerned that playing with the Stars was too large a risk to
take. “Many of my friends think I am crazy, and think I am just letting myself in to get hurt. They think that maybe it’s a little much for people my age” (Beverly). Karen recalled her daughters’ reactions: “They can’t believe it because that wasn’t me, that wasn’t the mom that they grew up with. I was never in any sports, and they don’t know what to think.” Candace added, “[Although] I have three athletic daughters, [I was never athletic, as] I grew up in the generation before Title IX.”

While many of their peers declined, all the women who became members of the Stars team learned new sports skills and training methods at age 65 (and older) because they wanted to “go for the gusto” (Beverly) at this point in their lives. They each committed in one way or another, as Beverly said, “not to hold back, not to be afraid to get hurt, not to be afraid to not be really good at this; just to go for the gusto!”

After the Stars’ first year of successful practice and competition and no volleyball-related injuries, the initial doubt and concern the women received from their friends and family was replaced by support and admiration. Many of the women experienced a role reversal, transitioning from supporting and caring for their families to being supported and cheered on by their children and grandchildren.

Table 1  Major Themes, Subthemes, Enablers, and Constraints

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<th>Social ecological model</th>
<th>Intrapersonal</th>
<th>Interpersonal</th>
<th>Community</th>
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<td>Major themes</td>
<td>Going for the gusto.</td>
<td>Being a member of the team.</td>
<td>Support of the university.</td>
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<td>Subthemes</td>
<td>Learning a new skill in later life is fun, exciting, and challenging.</td>
<td>Being on a team makes this experience unique and rewarding.</td>
<td>“The university gave credibility to what we were doing.”</td>
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<td>Willing to try what peers are afraid to attempt.</td>
<td>Unconditional support of the team keeps me coming back.</td>
<td>Knowledge of faculty and students allowed us to learn volleyball safely and without injury.</td>
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<td>Role reversal—being cheered on by their children and grandchildren.</td>
<td>Only identifying as an athlete in the context of the team, not individually.</td>
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<td>Enablers</td>
<td>Watching similar-age and -skilled peers be successful.</td>
<td>Social support of all team members.</td>
<td>Free practice facility.</td>
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<td>Consistent positive encouragement from students and coaches.</td>
<td>Opportunity to be role models for peers and students.</td>
<td>Free use of nets and balls.</td>
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<td>Constraints</td>
<td>Fear of injury.</td>
<td>Family and friends questioned the safety and reasoning behind playing volleyball at “our age.”</td>
<td>Volunteer coaches—students and faculty.</td>
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<td>“I am out of shape.”</td>
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<td>Fear of failure or low skill.</td>
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<td>Practice schedules change with each semester.</td>
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After the Stars’ first year of successful practice and competition and no volleyball-related injuries, the initial doubt and concern the women received from their friends and family was replaced by support and admiration. Many of the women experienced a role reversal, transitioning from supporting and caring for their families to being supported and cheered on by their children and grandchildren.
“Now your [grandkids are] planning to come watch you play, where you, for years have gone and watched them play. I feel like they have a little respect for me in that way” (Beverly). As she displayed the medal she received for competing in the state volleyball tournament, another member of the team shared that in all of the years she had raised her kids and grandkids, she had never received a medal for cheering them on, but now, she “got [her] medal” and she was “oh, so pleased.”

**Being a Member of the Team (Interpersonal).** The strongest theme to emerge for the Stars was the experience of being on a team. None of the women “had ever played on a team before,” and this theme dominated discussions as a positive and rewarding new experience. In the beginning, many hesitated to join and said, “I have never been an athlete,” but through the support and bond of the team they were encouraged and determined to continue. The camaraderie of the team created unconditional support and an unwavering loyalty that kept the women coming back each week for more than 2 years. Jennifer said, “I think that all of the members of the team are, at every moment, supportive and you connect with different people at different times.” Candace describes how the social support of the team extended beyond practice sessions, exclaiming, “These ladies are just great—forget volleyball, this is a really nice group of ladies!” Lisa added, “Doing this has opened up a whole new group of people, and we are not really close friends but I think if I had a problem I could call up any one of them and they would help me.”

Beverly and Lisa agreed with a smile, “We are all in it together”—describing a strong loyalty to the team that helped many of them overcome frustrating days and desires to give up and motivated them to improve and continue. “This is something that I have stuck with now for almost 2 years because I had to, because this is the team. If I weren’t on a team, I might have quit by now” (Sarah). In many cases, symbolic representations of the “team,” such as practice T-shirts, the team uniform, and red team duffel bags, reinforced each woman’s commitment and desire to perform and contribute to the team. Beverly emphasized,

> It’s the commitment [to the team], the commitment to do the best you can under all circumstances where this [volleyball] is concerned. That is what brings me back. The minute I got that team shirt [I knew] I’m committed to this!

The influence of the team came through in how the women identified themselves as volleyball players. While many of the women would hesitate to label themselves as athletes, they stand shoulder to shoulder as a team and are happy to shout to anyone who will listen, “You don’t have to be an athlete, you can do this!” Lisa said, volleyball “makes me feel like a real athlete because I am on a team,” while Louise explains, “I don’t think I’d label myself [as an athlete], but I always say [I’m on] a women’s senior volleyball team.” Sarah added, “I don’t feel like I am an athlete” but being a volleyball player has “given me a little notoriety” and was “cool to tell [other] people once in a while.”

**Support From the University (Community).** Support from the university, including faculty, students, and facilities, eliminated many constraints the Stars might otherwise have encountered. This support from the university was a theme described by the women with great appreciation. The Stars felt that practicing at the university made the team more significant and made it easier to recruit others.
“In some way, it kind of gives some credibility to what we are doing” (Louise). “That is one of the selling points when trying to get other people to come is the fact that it is here [at the university] and we have real coaches and these great students” (Sarah).

The Stars felt safe with the knowledge and experience of coaches who were students and faculty of the health sciences department and volunteers from the university’s women’s volleyball team.

We are being taught how to do this safely and how to get our bodies in position to do it effectively but also in a way that preserves our bodies. Learning how to really safely play. [The coaches] are so instrumental, each of you, in what we have been able to do and we are going to be able to do. (Lisa)

A subtheme that became apparent within the support of the university was the enjoyment and encouragement the Stars experienced interacting with the students. The energy and positive reinforcement the students provided was encouraging to the Stars and helped them feel a sense of belonging on campus. “When you walk in the door of the rec center, people behind the counter always give us a big smile. I think [the students] enjoy us as much as we enjoy them at some level” (Karen). “I think the students here are wonderful. It’s fun to be around them, and that keeps us going too” (Sarah). The positive relationships the women formed with the students appeared to validate the women and encourage them to continue.

Having students from the university volunteer their time for over a year to practice with us, to encourage us, to teach us new skills . . . it’s incredible! It is a real sense not only of support but of validation for being an older adult, to have people in their 20s willing to work with us. (Lisa)

The positive and frequent contact between the Stars and the students at practices and social gatherings resulted in each group forming positive perspectives of the other. One Stars member told a student coach during a team dinner, “I feel like you could be one of my daughters. You make me feel like generations really can talk to each other” (Sarah). This was echoed from the students’ perspective by Jana, who said, “I wouldn’t trade this experience for anything. It is like I have 12 adopted grandmas now, all watching out for me!” The relationships developed between all participants of the study were the most powerful enablers for the Stars to both begin and continue engagement with the new sport of volleyball.

Discussion

The strength of qualitative inquiry lies in the ability of researchers to serve as both the tool for data collection and the interpretive voice to better understand and describe a particular phenomenon. This discussion will include the researchers’ voices and their interpretation of the experiences of the women in this study. As such, it aims to create a picture for the reader that helps describe the culture of the Stars and the benefits of this endeavor.

The Stars mean many things to many people. Do you remember being a kid and looking in a kaleidoscope and getting carried away with wonder for a moment at all the colors, dimensions, and shapes? You could look into the scope for a long
time and still not see every detail. This is the effect experienced by those spending time with the Stars (including the women themselves). They evoke a kaleidoscope of reactions in everyone who has the opportunity to interact with them—surprise at the thought of senior women’s volleyball, shock at seeing them in action, inspiration to become more active at any age, and admiration for all their determination. No matter the age or background of the individual who interacted with the Stars, there was a resounding response—these women are amazing!

Older adults are often viewed by society more for what they cannot do than for what they are capable of achieving, older women, in particular (Vertinsky, 1995). The older women in this study bravely embarked on a journey to learn a new sport in later life. As such, they challenged a number of narrative maps of what older women are “like” in the later years, including what feminine characteristics and attributes are acceptable and expected for women their age. These women described their experience as fun, challenging, and rewarding. While participation in sport and physical activity is gradually growing among older adults, women like the Stars are still a minority among their peers. Being different from their peers, “going for the gusto,” and doing something “new” and “special” seemed to fuel the fire to join the Stars. Being on the team and committed to their teammates appeared to be the glue that kept the women in this study coming back—attending practices consistently and committing to play in Senior Games competitions despite having no previous competitive experience.

The women in this study contradict the norm. Most older women are not regularly physically active, and few engage in competitive sports. The Stars did not set out to “show anyone up” or set impossible standards for their peers; however, although not blatantly articulated, it appeared that these women wanted to fight against the enfeebling social structures that disempower women. They did not want their aging narrative to be one of decline. “Being different” is a theme that emerged from Kluge’s (2002) study of women 65 and older who identified themselves as regularly physically active. Being different appears to have potency for women who want to distinguish themselves from the norm (inactive women). The Stars were able to stand apart as different from their peers as a team, making doubts and criticisms easier to deflect. Pfister (2012) had similar findings. She noted that the women in her study experienced “moments” in sport that transported them beyond age and gender. The recognition for their efforts (receiving medals) and “a little notoriety” from friends appeared to be such moments for the Stars.

While other researchers have found that a strong athletic identity appears to foster adherence (Heuser, 2005; Young & Medic, 2011), as a group, the women in this study did not appear to strongly identify as “athletes” per se. Several researchers have postulated that older adults in competitive sport may not identify as athletes or feel comfortable initially engaging in sports due to the lack of social construct for them to do so (Baker et al., 2010; Whaley & Ebbeck, 2002). The women in this case identified as athletes more easily in the context of the team, which is explained by Phoenix and Sparkes (2008), noting that narratives typically used to describe and define self are “culturally situated” and rely on social constructs to be validated (p. 213). The team was a subculture in which it was acceptable to be an athlete at age 65.

The women shared a passion for life that transcended any fear of injury or fear of failure, which caused many of their peers to decline invitations to participate. Fear
of injury, internalized as a result of society’s view of aging as becoming “fragile older adults,” was noted by Whaley and Ebbeck (2002) and O’Brien Cousins (2000) as a reason older adults refrain from vigorous exercise. An important aspect of this peer role modeling among the players was that as new women came to practice they were able to observe women of similar age and skill level playing volleyball. This made the challenge of learning a new sport no longer seem so insurmountable. The team’s perseverance challenged these “old age” stereotypes, and their level of commitment to sport and physical activity is unprecedented in women of this age demographic (Nelson et al., 2007; O’Brien Cousins, 2000; Rhodes et al., 1999).

The case of the Stars offers a new potential narrative for the older athletic woman, a narrative not dominated by the traditionally younger and more masculine themes.

In their 60s and 70s, the women in this study not only learned how to play a brand new sport at this time in their lives, they also continued playing beyond the first year and had the courage to compete at both the state and national level. This level of adherence to physical activity is uncommon. Typically, engagement in new exercise programs only last 6–12 months at the most (Anshel, 2007; Rhodes et al., 1999). Moreover, the courage these women displayed was contagious. They overcame initial skepticism from family and friends about starting to play volleyball “at their age.” Eventually their stalwart nature and persistence enabled them to become role models for their peers and for younger generations—including their children, grandchildren, and university students.

The perception of older adults as “passive consumers” has been reinforced by the media (Friedman, 1999). The disablement model (Heikkinen, 2006) still dominates the aging discourse. Women still get entangled in body and beauty projects to pass as younger, while slogans like “fit, fun, and forever young” send ambivalent messages that devalue age and aging (Pfister, 2012). Dominant (and pessimistic) views of aging among the younger athletic generation may fuel the struggle an older competitive adult to break the “old person” stereotype and create a normative social construct of being an older athlete. The positive and rewarding relationships between the women in this study were powerful enablers for the women to overcome intrapersonal fears and potential constraints that may have caused individuals to quit the team prematurely. The commitment to be a part of the team and the motivation to not let down their fellow teammates kept many of the women from quitting the team when they experienced a bad week or a plateau in skill development. The relationships that formed between the team members and the students were highly and mutually valued and were a strong determinant of both generations’ finding motivation to increase their physical activity levels and stay engaged in the program.

Universities have unique resources to provide environmental and interpersonal support for community-dwelling older adults. The positive-aging framework focuses on recruiting latent potential in later life to maximize individuals’ purpose in life and life satisfaction (Hill, 2011). In this study, the university (community) facilitated the utilization of this latent potential (intrapersonal) through the process of creating a volleyball team (interpersonal). Access to a recreation facility provided by the university minimized environmental constraints that can be encountered when beginning a new physical-activity-based program (Anshel, 2007). Without a free and accessible practice facility and knowledgeable, supportive coaches, it is likely that the program would have never gotten started and the team would
have never grown into a reality. The Stars volleyball program continued successfully after the conclusion of this study and is still a recognized sports club at the campus recreation center. Players now pay the standard sports club fee for each practice but the free use of the facility for the first 2 years was a key enabler for the program to successfully get off the ground. The program has grown to host 25 women including additional Stars players, as well as younger women over the age of 50. These women can be seen playing weekly at the recreation center, and most have competed in Senior Games in their respective age groups at the state level.

Intrinsic components of the university environment are the faculty and students. In this case, the students and faculty who supported the team were knowledgeable in adapting physical activity for older adults and created a safe and encouraging environment, enabling the team to grow and sustain membership. Jancey et al. (2008), who also used university students as leaders (in a community-based walking program for older adults), reported that the relationships the students built with their walking groups, along with the students’ knowledge and encouragement, resulted in high adherence rates. These findings corroborate those of Dionigi and Lyons (2010), who described rewarding intergenerational relationships between university students and older adults (in a strength-training intervention) that positively influenced the nature and value of the experience and increased adherence.

Social support has been shown to be one of the most influential factors in determining if individuals, especially women, will initiate and maintain a physically active lifestyle (Cardenas et al., 2009; Henderson, 1995; Kluge, 2002; O’Brien Cousins, 1996). The case study of this volleyball team provides an example of how creating team-sport opportunities can effectively encourage older women to become and remain physically active. The interpersonal relationships, along with the environmental support from the university, were the keys to the women becoming what Rikli (2005) calls successful exercisers and not quitting early on in the experience (p. 56). Similarly, Heuser (2005) found that “no matter the status as social players or serious players, the opportunity to be involved in a community of women who shared similar interests and who displayed genuine concern for one another” motivated members to create space and time to play and compete (p. 57). The concept of forming teams as a way for older adults to stay active addresses both the physical and social dimensions of physical activity and corroborates previous research on the importance of social affiliation (Heuser, 2005; Hodge et al., 2008). Forming teams may also be a way to provide “strength in numbers” as women challenge old-age stereotypes and social norms.

Great strides have been made in our knowledge of how beneficial physical activity is for older adults (Hollmann et al., 2007). Aging adults do not have to rest and reduce their activity levels as they age. They can train in new sports and see improvements in their fitness levels well into their ninth decade of life (Rikli, 2005; Tulle, 2008a). However, with only one third of older adults reporting participation in regular physical activity, effective programs are needed to encourage older adults to engage in some form of regular physical activity (Cardenas et al., 2009).

Organizations like Senior Games provide a platform for older men and women to triumph in their abilities through the mission “to improve the quality of life for adults age 50+ by providing athletic competition and social opportunities that promote healthy, active lifestyles” (Rocky Mountain Senior Games, 2012). In order for more older adults to become involved in Senior Games and other health-promoting
efforts that encourage physical activity, a multidimensional approach undergirded by the social ecological model is encouraged. In this case example the university (community) provided environmental support, and the relationships (interpersonal) established between the older women, students, and university personnel helped foster confidence and validation (intrapersonal) for the women to be successful and continue with the program for several years. Team sports allow older women to engage in regular physical activity while fostering this strong and powerful sense of community and social validation, improving health beyond just the physical dimension.

Future Research

This study adds to the current body of knowledge about older adults, physical activity, and competitive sport—specifically, older women’s perceptions about being newcomers to sport and competing for the first time in senior or Masters sports. This small case example explored the experiences of just one volleyball team and cannot necessarily be generalized to women outside of the team. However, the findings provide examples of older women who committed to a physical activity program for the entire length of the yearlong study and have remained with the program for several years after the study’s completion. Research should continue to explore the personal meaning attached to the successful long-term maintenance of physical activity programs for older women: those who are already active in sports and those who are interested in trying sports participation for the first time. Further study should examine how team sports foster a sense of community for older women that encourages long-term commitment to sport and physical activity.

There is still much to be learned about the affective and cognitive experience of older adults competing in sports. Society’s attitude toward aging is slowly changing, but future research should examine strength of athletic identity, how older adults view themselves as “older” athletes, and how readily older adults are socially accepted as athletes, both by their peers and by society as a whole. If older adults are able to identify as active older adults and successfully compete in sports, they will serve as role models for generations to come.

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