Competitive Sport and Aging: The Need for Qualitative Sociological Research

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The number of older athletes is growing with the aging of populations across the developed world. This article reviews studies from a variety of disciplines that focus specifically on the motives and experiences of older adults competing in physically demanding sports at events such as masters and veterans competitions in Australia or the Senior Olympics in North America. It is shown that the majority of research into this phenomenon has taken a quantitative approach or failed to consider older athletes’ experiences in the context of broader sociocultural discourses. Therefore, using the author’s research into the experiences of older Australian masters athletes as a catalyst, the need for and strength of sociological qualitative research in this area is discussed. The use of qualitative methods, such as in-depth interviews and observations, and interpretive analysis provided alternative ways of making sense of older adults and their relationship with competitive sport to what is typically found in the sport and aging literature.

Key Words: older adults, competitive athletes, sociology

The phenomenon of older adults competing in physically demanding sports (i.e., objectively strenuous, competitive sporting activities such as track and field athletics, marathon running, triathlons, swimming, cycling, basketball, baseball, ice hockey, field hockey, soccer, and the like) is growing in many Western countries (Dionigi, in press a, in press b). These sports are differentiated from more passive sports such as lawn bowls that are stereotypically associated with older adults. In the literature, older athletes are commonly referred to as masters or veterans athletes and Senior Olympians. The rising trend of older athletes and the dominant discourses that surround this phenomenon raise many questions, such as, why do older adults compete in sport, how do their motives and experiences interact with dominant understandings of aging and mainstream sport in the West, and what are the multiple meanings older athletes attach to their experiences when they talk about and compete in sport?

To begin to address these questions, this article reviews research from the fields of sport sociology, sports science, exercise psychology, and leisure studies that have specifically explored the motives and experiences of older athletes. Although the results from these studies provided insight into why older adults compete in sport,
they have not revealed anything about how their multiple meanings interacted with the contradictory discourses of both sport and aging. For instance, mainstream physically demanding sport is framed in terms of discourses associated with competition, youthfulness, aggressiveness, and elitism (McKay, Hughson, Lawrence, & Rowe, 2000; Rowe, McKay, & Lawrence, 1997), whereas sport for older adults, such as masters games, is supposedly about “friendship, fun, and fitness” (Burns, 1992; Adair & Vamplew, 1997). These “age-appropriate” viewpoints raise questions about how older adults negotiate these opposing discourses when they talk about and actually experience competitive sport. In addition, there are conflicting discourses of aging in the West. On one hand, negative and medicalized understandings of aging as primarily a period of ill health, disability, and dependency were dominant for most of the twentieth century (Blakie, 1999; Wearing, 1995), which leads to questions about older athletes resisting these negative stereotypes. On the other hand, a counterdiscourse of positive or healthy aging has emerged since the 1970s to challenge the negative view and promote independence and active living in later life (Dupuis, 2002; Fontane, 1996). This trend raises questions about the extent to which older athletes are using this emerging health-promotion discourse to justify what is extremely intense physical and competitive behavior.

Despite the complexities and contradictions that partly frame the phenomenon of older adults competing in sport, there is a scarcity of sociological and qualitative research into the competitive sport experiences of older adults, particularly in the context of the aforementioned discourses. Sport, physical activity, and aging research, in general, is primarily written from a sports-science or exercise-psychology perspective in which the sociocultural context is rarely considered and where quantitative methods derived from the natural sciences dominate (Markula, Grant, & Denison, 2001; O’Brien Cousins & Horne, 1999; Stathi, Fox, & McKenna, 2002). For example, O’Brien Cousins and Horne studied over 1,500 articles (from 1990 to 1994) related to the outcomes of structured physical activity and sport for people over the age of 50 (with particular emphasis on those over age 70) and found that the vast majority of the literature was quantitative and within the positivist paradigm. In 2001, the Journal of Aging and Physical Activity published a special issue titled “The Promise of Qualitative Research” (Grant & O’Brien Cousins, 2001). In the opening article of this edition, Grant and O’Brien Cousins deliberately accentuated this “imbalance in the body of knowledge about research on aging and physical activity” (p. 238). Moreover, research in the field of gerontology or aging research “has been long dominated by the medical model and the positivist research methodology” (Jaffe & Miller, 1994, p. 63). The use of qualitative methodologies in sport-related research, a field where meaning, movement, the self, and experience are inextricably linked, offers valuable insights that will add to objective scientific knowledge of sports involvement (Bain, 1995; Kerry & Armour, 2000; Whitson, 1976).

Some sport sociologists (e.g., Coakley, 2004) and sport historians (e.g., Adair & Vamplew, 1997; Vamplew, Moore, O’Hara, Cashman, & Jobling, 1994) have argued that the major reasons that older adults participate in sport are for health and fitness benefits, social interaction, fun, a sense of accomplishment, pleasure in movement, and the love of the sport. Despite these findings, there has been very little research into the experiences of older athletes from a sociological perspective. Given that before the 1960s competitive sport was not available and was considered
irrelevant to older adults (Adair & Vamplew; Coakley; Vertinsky, 1995), it is perhaps not surprising that the fields of sport sociology in Australia have virtually ignored age or issues pertaining to older adults in competitive sport. Even given Australia’s ingrained sporting culture and the high value placed on sports participation, the critical sociological study of any sport in this country is a somewhat recent phenomenon (Cashman, 1995; Lawrence & Rowe, 1986; McKay et al., 2000; Rowe & Lawrence, 1990; Rowe et al., 1997; Stoddart, 1986). The field tends to be concerned with understanding high-profile, elite, and performance-oriented sports at the macro level, that is, the relationship of sport to politics, ideology, the media, and big business. Consequently, research into alternative forms of sport, such as minority or nonelite sports for women, disabled, gays and lesbians, and older adults, has only emerged over the past 20–25 years. There is also little sociological literature that examines sport as a leisure pursuit in contemporary Australia rather than as a profession (Adair & Vamplew; Cashman; Lawrence & Rowe; Rowe & Lawrence, 1998). For example, edited books about sport and leisure in Australian society and culture, such as those of Rowe and Lawrence (1990, 1998), do not address issues relating to older adults in sport.

Therefore, this article argues that qualitative sociological research is needed to explore more deeply the multiple and contradictory experiences of older athletes in the context of conflicting discourses of sport and aging. In so doing, I draw on findings from my research into the multiple meanings that older adults attached to their participation in competitive sport (Dionigi, 2004a) to highlight the benefits of using qualitative research approaches in this area.

First, however, a review of previous research into the motives and experiences of older athletes is provided to demonstrate the current imbalance in the sport and aging literature, as well as demonstrate gaps in knowledge. The majority of studies discussed are quantitative and written from a psychological perspective; however, some insight has been extracted from reviewing the few existing qualitative studies into older athletes. This discussion serves as a foundation for understanding why older adults compete in sport and highlights areas requiring further investigation. I then show how I used qualitative research to address these areas in need of study and provide alternative understandings of older adults and their relationship with competitive sport.

**The Motives and Experiences of Older Athletes**

There are many personal, behavioral, and situational factors interacting and affecting older adults’ participation in sport and physical activity (see Carron & Leith, 1986; Chogahara, O’Brien Cousins, & Wankel, 1998; Iso-Ahola & St. Clair, 2000; Shephard, 1994). Involvement in sport and exercise is also closely linked to personal values placed on the physical, mental, and social benefits of the activity, as well as perceived barriers such as lack of access or ability, fear of injury, norms and stereotypes, and financial reasons (Boag & Cuskelly, 1996; Cuskelly & Boag, 1996). Older adults compete in sport for a variety of personal reasons. Their motives for involvement in sport are fluid and might change over time or depending on the type of activity or event.
Most studies conducted specifically on masters athletes (who can be as young as 30 years) have used quantitative methodologies and have focused on the motivations or participation patterns of athletes within an average age range of 40–50 years (see Cuskelly & Boag, 1996; Cuskelly, Boag, McIntyre, & Coleman, 1993; Harada, 1994; Kavanagh & Shephard, 1990; McIntyre, Coleman, Boag, & Cuskelly, 1992; Ryan & Lockyer, 2000; Stevenson, 2002; Tantrum & Hodge, 1993). These studies have consistently identified fitness, enjoyment, friendship, social interaction, self-expression, and personal challenge as reasons for participation in masters sport. As a result of this focus on younger or middle-aged masters athletes, our ability to generalize from existing research on masters athletes to older cohorts is limited.

Nevertheless, similar results have been discerned from studies that have focused on athletes over the age of 55. For instance, a survey by Pepe and Gandee (1992, p. 195) on 466 competitors (age 55–90) from the 1984 Ohio Senior Olympics found that 50% participated to keep themselves physically fit, 36% because of the enjoyment of the activity, and 34% for social interaction. Similarly, Gill, Williams, Dowd, Beaudoin, and Martin (1996) found that the competitive orientations and motives of 87 senior athletes age 55–99 years were multiple and diverse. The athletes rated competition, mastery, affiliation, fitness, flexibility, and health motives highly on their survey. The authors claimed that “although seniors are competitive, they are not particularly focused on winning” (Gill et al., p. 317). Grant (2001) carried out a small-scale qualitative study of masters games competitors’ beliefs and perceptions about playing sport. He conducted in-depth interviews with 8 female and 7 male New Zealand masters competitors in their 70s who were involved in individual sports such as swimming, croquet, badminton, tennis, bowls, athletics, cycling, golf, or running. Most of the participants in Grant’s study had returned to play their chosen sport after the age of 60. Grant found that the reasons they participated in sport were to maintain a good state of health and well-being, give life purpose, provide an emotional high, distract from body pain, escape from negative life events, experience social interaction, and have fun. “There was a chance to socialize, meet new people and, most importantly, to do something that provided a great deal of personal satisfaction,” said one of his participants (Grant, p. 789). Such findings conform and contribute to the orthodoxy that sport for older adults is centered on having fun, keeping fit, and making friends, but this connection was not made in the studies mentioned earlier.

Health benefits have been motives commonly identified in past studies. Through surveying the self-perceptions of 1,375 Senior Olympians, Fontane and Hurd (1992) identified a personal fitness challenge, social motives, recreation, competition, and public recognition as reasons that men and women maintain regular involvement in sports competitions and physical training. Notably, health was listed as the first or second most significant reason for competing by 71% of both men and women. The participants indicated a desire to maintain a self-perceived positive level of health and prevent the onset of debilitating health problems associated with aging (Fontane & Hurd). These findings raise issues about the extent to which older athletes are using positive-aging and health-promotion discourses to rationalize their involvement in physically demanding competitive sports. According to Fontane (1996), older adults who exercise habitually express a belief in the health-promotion and healthy-aging discourses grounded in research that claim that physical activity will improve their health and quality of life and delay physical deterioration.
In addition, Fontane and Hurd (1992) claimed that older athletes are extremely health conscious, and they express this value in the context of sport. The authors also argued that prior athletic experience among older athletes underscores the significance of competition as a key motivator. “Here, health factors are joined with competitive goals as motivators for physical fitness and are expressed as recreational activities” (Fontane & Hurd, p. 107). This link raises questions about the possibility for competitive and health motives to be satisfied in a sporting context. For instance, Smith and Storandt (1997) statistically compared the past sporting experiences, health beliefs, motives, and personalities of 246 healthy American adults over 55 years old who varied in their degree of physical activity from competitors, \( n = 100 \) (i.e., who had competed in a local, regional, or national sporting competition within the preceding 5 years), to noncompetitors, \( n = 83 \) (i.e., who do not compete but have participated in aerobic exercise), to nonexercisers, \( n = 63 \) (i.e., who do little more than is required for activities of daily living such as cleaning, gardening, and shopping). The three groups were significantly different in their motives for exercising, and the competitors’ motives were more varied than those of the noncompetitors. Both competitors and noncompetitors rated “to improve appearance and feel better physically” (8.26 and 9.19, respectively, on a 0–10 scale) as significantly more important than did the nonexercisers (Smith & Storandt, p. 106). The competitors cited not only health benefits and competency in competition but also socializing (6.47) as a motive, whereas the noncompetitors focused mainly on the health benefits of exercise.

Older adults appear to place great emphasis on competing in sport for health reasons, which is not generally associated with the performance ethos of mainstream sport participation (Roper, Molnar, & Wrisberg, 2003). Roper et al. examined the sporting experiences of an 88-year-old competitive runner from the United States (named Max). Some key themes emerging from two in-depth interviews with Max related to the continuation of a physically active lifestyle: being perceived as “special” or “unique,” the significance of social support, and the importance of competition, performance, and training. Max argued that his running was predominantly linked to living a healthy lifestyle. Although the study by Roper et al. points to stereotypical images and expectations that society has for the elderly and for the practice of mainstream sport, it does not explain how these conflicting discourses and actions interacted with Max’s sport behavior. Further examination of the extent to which the desire to be fit and healthy encourages participation in competitive sport and how these motives intermingle with dominant discourses is required.

The findings from the studies reviewed so far are limited on the competitive motives of late-life sports participation. Although it has been found that some older athletes place importance on receiving rewards and recognition for their athletic successes, Rotella and Bunker (1978) argued that many older athletes are intrinsically motivated to improve their performance based on their own previous standards. In this sense, an external reward only confirms their internal achievement, and older adults are not thought to be concerned about winning medals or outperforming others (Fontane & Hurd, 1992). A contradictory finding to emerge from Fontane and Hurd’s study (discussed earlier) was that both men and women rated public recognition for their accomplishments quite low among their reasons for competing in sport. Nonetheless, the qualitative data appended to many of the survey questions in their study revealed that public recognition was more valued by
participants than they had admitted in the survey. These findings show that qualitative methods have the potential to expose conflicting data that cannot be discerned from closed-ended surveys. This outcome also highlighted a tension between public recognition and internal satisfaction as sport motives for older athletes. It could be that older adults do not like to admit that they value rewards and recognition because the accepted view is that older adults are not supposed to be “competing to win,” but “participating for fun.” This supposition raises an issue requiring further investigation, with the authors concluding that more research was needed to determine the role of competition for older athletes (Fontane & Hurd).

Through the use of a self-report questionnaire on benefits, Cuskelly and Boag (1996) discerned two groups from a sample of 366 participants of the 1994 World Masters Games in Brisbane: serious competitors (48%) who valued intense competition, fitness, recognition, personal challenge, and risk-taking benefits and casual competitors (52%) who competed to socialize, make friends, and experience “friendly competition.” These findings open up possibilities for further research into the interaction between these groups. Are some athletes serious competitors in certain events or sports and more casual in others? Are athletes serious when “on the field,” yet friendly and social “off the field”? Do some athletes participate to equally satisfy both competitive and socializing motives? Qualitative methodologies allow for the exploration of these questions and the exposure of this fluidity in motives and benefits.

Cuskelly and Boag (1996) acknowledged that serious involvement in competitive sport can be significant to older adults, and many enjoyed the recognition and indicated that they were not afraid to take risks or challenge themselves. Likewise, in Smith and Storandt’s (1997) study (discussed earlier), competitors rated “to gain weight or muscle mass, to prepare for competition,” and “to meet a goal” as significantly more important reasons for exercising than did the noncompetitors and nonexercisers (p. 106). From a qualitative perspective, a key theme to emerge from Roper et al.’s (2003) study pointed to Max’s extremely competitive nature. He considered himself competitive and he competed to win: “For Max, being able to compete successfully and being taken seriously were extremely important” (p. 385). Furthermore, a theme to emerge from Grant’s (2001) study on New Zealand masters athletes was “serious play.” It described how the participants valued an appropriate level of competition, fairness, success, and winning, although they did not display a “having-to-win” attitude (p. 790). The notion of competitiveness was spoken about by participants in broad terms, and success was defined in a variety of ways, such as the satisfaction of achieving personal goals, testing their abilities, and trying to win. Grant argues that although the participants expressed interest in a variety of different leisure activities, “all participants took playing sport seriously” (p. 792). The competitiveness seemingly expressed by some masters athletes presents an area requiring further investigation because it appears to challenge the “friendship, fun and, fitness” philosophy underpinning masters sport.

There have been few other studies that have used in-depth interviews or observations to gain qualitative insights into the meaning of older adults’ experiences in competitive sport. For example, Boyle and McKay (1995) explored how older women were exploited in the game of lawn bowls, and Langley and Knight (1999) examined how lifelong involvement in sport served as “a primary adaptive strategy for coping with the aging process” (p. 32) for one 68-year-old male tennis
player. Neither of these studies, however, was overtly concerned with physically intense sports or the influences of discourses about sport and aging on older adults’ experiences.

The studies reviewed here provided some insight into the experiences and motives of older athletes. Most of them, however, relied on quantitative methodologies, were primarily written from a sport-psychology perspective, and did not consider the sociocultural factors or dominant discourses that influence why people compete in sport at an older age. They have, on the other hand, highlighted common reasons for competing in sport given by older adults. These motives can be summarized into four broad groups: physical and psychological health benefits, social networks, enjoyment, and competition. Issues of “serious competition” versus “friendly participation,” resisting negative stereotypes associated with aging, and reproducing health-promotion discourses also emerged as important from the aforementioned research but were not explored in any depth. Moreover, many of these studies did not show how these varying motives or issues interact, what meanings older athletes ascribe to them, or the ways in which older participants negotiate the complexities and contradictions that underlie their behavior. To achieve these aims, qualitative methodologies within an interpretive paradigm would have needed to be employed. The following discussion uses my research as a catalyst for discussing the benefits of qualitative research in addressing the aforementioned gaps in knowledge.

The Strength of Qualitative Research Into Sport and Aging

Dionigi (2004a) conducted an exploratory qualitative study into the motives and experiences of a group of older Australian masters athletes. In particular, the study explored the multiple ways in which participants negotiated conflicting discourses of both sport and aging, as well as the contradiction between their identity as athletes and their aging bodies, as they spoke about and experienced competing in physically strenuous individual and team sports.

This research was situated in an interpretive paradigm, and three stages of data collection and data analysis were carried out. Interpretive qualitative researchers attempt to represent the world from the perspectives of the participant and consider all knowledge to be fundamentally subjective and interactive (Markula et al., 2001; Schwandt, 2000; Weber, 1949). Therefore, from an interpretive perspective, “the important reality is what people perceive it to be” (Taylor & Bogdan, 1998, p. 3). Generally speaking, “qualitative research is multimethod in focus, involving an interpretive, naturalistic approach to its subject matter” (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998, p. 3). According to Jaffe and Miller (1994, p. 52), the goal of qualitative research is not only “to understand social life by taking into account meaning, [and] the interpretive process of social actors” but also “the cultural, social and situational contexts in which those processes occur” (see also Blumer, 1969). Qualitative researchers, however, acknowledge that there is no such thing as uninterpreted phenomena because the researcher always adds another layer of interpretation and reconstruction to the findings (Giddens, 1976; Heidegger, 1962). The processes of qualitative interpretation, representation, and analysis “are always ongoing,
emergent, unpredictable, and unfinished” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003, p. 420). Therefore, it is recognized that the outcomes of this study were influenced by my theoretically informed decisions regarding research design, data collection, and analysis.

Stage 1 involved carrying out field observations, participant observation, and on-site short (5- to 30-min) semistructured interviews with 110 participants, an even gender split, age 55–94 years (55–59, n = 26; 60–69, n = 55; 70–79, n = 20; 80–89, n = 8; 90–95, n = 1) at the 8th Australian Masters Games (AMG) held in Newcastle, New South Wales, in 2001. During and after this initial data-collection process preliminary analysis was undertaken and tentative themes and understandings that were grounded in the data were identified. This process led to collection of additional data (Stage 2) that shed light on the tentative themes and insights, while still remaining open to the emergence of additional themes and applicable concepts.

Stage 2 included in-depth interviews with 28 masters athletes (15 women, 13 men) age 60–89 years (60–69, n = 14; 70–79, n = 9; 80–89, n = 5) who were not part of the Stage 1 sample. Each participant was interviewed once for 50–150 min (approximately 5 months after the 8th AMG). To ensure theoretical saturation (Strauss & Corbin, 1998; albeit within the confines of a doctoral candidacy) final follow-up strategies were conducted (Stage 3). This stage involved phone conversations with 5 of the in-depth interviewees and participant observation at a small-scale regional masters games event in 2002.

Each study participant competed in one or more of the following individual or team sports at the masters games and on a regular basis: long-distance running, race walking, triathlon, cycling, track and field athletics, indoor rowing, canoeing, swimming, gymnastics, sport aerobics, beach volleyball, netball, tennis, baseball, ice hockey, squash, soccer, badminton, field hockey, softball, cricket (indoor and outdoor), basketball, and touch football. Approximately 50% of the sample had had a continued involvement in their sport for most of their life, and the other half were divided into individuals who restarted involvement in their sport after an extended break (usually because of work or family obligations) and those who did not begin competing in their sport until later in their life (usually after the age of 55 years).

After all data were collected, an overall analysis involved refining, discarding, or elaborating on the themes and using theories to explain the data (see Taylor & Bogdan, 1998). Specifically, the analysis of data included inductive coding, constant comparative analysis (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), and thematic analysis (van Manen, 1990). Four major themes emerged from the data analysis that best explained why older adults competed in sport, how they negotiated contradictory discourses about sport and aging, and how they managed the tension between their athletic identity and aging bodies. The four key contradictory themes related to notions of friendship and fun, competition, youthfulness, and the aging body. The study drew on insights from poststructural 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 adults competing in physically demanding sport (see Dionigi, 2002a, 2002b, in press a, in press b).

It was found, despite age-appropriate norms that sport should be nonserious and fun, that intense competition was significant to many of the participants. Study participants embraced the ideologies and practices of competitive sport and
used them to define aging in terms of youthfulness, physical ability, and personal empowerment. Simultaneously, however, a denial of or desperate resistance to the physical aging process accompanied this feeling of empowerment. The process of competing in sport can be simultaneously empowering and problematic at both the individual and social level. Therefore, it was argued that a multifaceted and conflicting interplay of resistance and conformity, empowerment and denial, identity and the aging body was embedded in the phenomenon of older adults competing in physically demanding sport. These contradictory findings exposed alternative ways of understanding sport, competition, aging, and older adults in the West and raised many questions requiring further investigation.

To demonstrate the strength of qualitative approaches in exposing the complex nature of older adults’ relationship with sport in the context of dominant discourses of sport and aging, I discuss my four specific themes in greater depth.

The first theme related to issues of “fun, friendship, and fitness” as both a justifying discourse for participation and a “here and now” experience of competing in sport. The second theme, “competing to win,” was about the centrality of competition to older adults, in particular their desire to compete against others and themselves. It examined the various ways in which competition was experienced and spoken about by participants. Together, these themes explored how resistance, conformity, and empowerment were being played out on various levels through the negotiation of the two opposing sides to masters sport, “friendly participation” and “serious competition.” The participants’ management of these conflicting viewpoints was situated along a continuum. Many of them spoke about their experiences in terms of “friendship, fun, and fitness” and remained silent on the competitive nature of their behavior, and some recognized that it was not age appropriate for them to be extremely competitive. These findings emerged as salient from data that was collected at the masters games, a context in which “friendship, fun and fitness” was promoted by the organizers (e.g., Hill, 2001) and in the media (e.g., Hurley, 2001), and frequent social functions were held. The findings suggested that these participants either did not consider themselves competitive or were (subconsciously or deliberately) choosing not to talk about their competitiveness because it was considered inappropriate. In doing so, however, their meanings of sport participation were consistent with the philosophy underlying the masters games. Therefore, they actually served to reinforce at some level the orthodoxy that older adults were not really competitive or serious about winning.

Qualitative sociological researchers need to consider broader sociocultural issues, as well as the specific time and place that data were collected, and acknowledge how the “context” can affect the findings or influence the meanings participants attached to their experiences. Previous quantitative research about masters athletes did not consider these framing discourses that influenced older adults’ motives of friendship and fun.

On the other hand, many other participants overtly embraced the competitive ideology framing their experience. This group consisted of people who had always played sport, as well as those who began later in life. They all defined themselves as competitive and said they competed in sport to win. This finding contradicted Fontane and Hurd’s (1992) argument that prior sport experience accentuates the significance of competition as a key motivator. It was also found that many participants said that they were not competitive but, when observed participating in
their event, they pushed their bodies to their limit, strove for success, and felt pride in beating others or receiving medals (see Dionigi, in press a, 2004b). Many participants were also friendly and social when off the field yet seriously competitive when on the field. The use of multiple qualitative methods, such as interviews and observations, and comparative analysis allowed this entrenched tension, contradiction, and ambiguity about the nature of competition when undertaken and expressed by older adults to be revealed.

Therefore, the second theme established that serious competition was significant to many participants, despite some of them finding it hard to admit (i.e., because society does not expect them to worry about winning medals or taking competition seriously). Nevertheless, external rewards brought feelings of pride, status, and satisfaction to the participants. Some participants wanted to be acclaimed and have their successes noted (which was understandable in light of the negative positioning of older adults in the West). These findings contradicted previous quantitative studies that reported winning and recognition as not important among older athletes (e.g., Gill et al., 1996). The use of qualitative research added richness and posed challenges to past studies by painting an alternative picture of some older athletes as extremely competitive. The two remaining themes explored the empowering and problematic nature of this behavior at both the individual and social levels.

The third theme, “I’m out here, and I can do this,” related to expressions of youthfulness. It was found that participants embraced the practice and discourses associated with mainstream competitive sport and mobilized them to define aging in terms of youthfulness, independence, and resilience. By “playing such a young person’s game,” having fun, and being socially and physically engaged in life, the study participants were seeking to express a powerful, youthful, vital, and active image of older adults that challenged the passive, disabled, and dependent depiction that is prevalent in Western society (see Dionigi, in press b, 2002b).

In addition, participants believed that by regularly physically exerting themselves through sport they were increasing their chances of a prolonged enjoyable and healthy life. Arguably, this positive aging discourse was being used, in part, to justify what was actually (for many) physically extreme and highly competitive behavior. In other words, the participants were mobilizing contemporary health-promotion discourses about the benefits of physical activity and the importance of self-responsibility in maintaining health, which underpinned the development of masters sport.

There was also a complex interaction between health motives and competitive motives that was being managed by the study participants. The findings suggested that the process of satisfying health and fitness motives in a competitive sporting context was not as straightforward as previous studies have indicated. It was a circular and complex process in which fitness can motivate competition, and competition can motivate fitness and health. It also required a negotiation of the contradictory discourses of “serious competition” and “friendly participation” that frame masters sport. These findings extend from quantitative reports by showing that participants’ stories reflected positive aging discourses and represented a negotiation between conflicting discourses of sport and aging (Dionigi, in press b).

Through an appropriation of symbols of youth and good health it was asserted that the participants expressed a positive identity and a sense of personal empowerment. The fourth theme, “Use it or lose it,” revealed that in order to maintain this
sense of control over their lives, participants felt that they had to use their aging bodies as much as possible. In other words, the feelings of youthfulness and empowerment expressed by participants were primarily driven by a fear of the eventual physical decline and loss of independence associated with deep old age. In this sense, their actions went beyond the negotiation of discourses and demonstrated a desperate resistance to (or denial of) the physically aging body. This final theme highlighted the potential losses and problems associated with the aging process, as well as the ways in which older athletes debate the tension between acceptance and denial of old age.

Therefore, the phenomenon of older adults competing in physically demanding sport is perhaps not as empowering or primarily about “fun” as it initially seems (or has been portrayed in past literature) because it is riddled with tensions, uncertainties, and fears. The actions of older athletes have the potential to perpetuate the value of youthfulness and the repression of deep old age at both the social and individual levels. Furthermore, their behavior can simultaneously reinforce age-appropriate discourses and establish new sets of orthodoxies that legitimize older adults as competitive.

Qualitative analysis enabled the exploration of how participant stories about their motives and experiences interacted with, challenged, and reproduced dominant discourses within the immediate and broader social contexts. The qualitative approach was sensitive to the ambiguity and subjectivity of human behavior, provided a more holistic understanding, and unearthed the complexities and inconsistencies that are at the heart of this phenomenon. Rather than attempt to ignore or resolve the emerging contradictions in the data, this study acknowledged their existence, brought them to the fore, and sought to understand them. In particular, it has raised awareness of the social and personal complexities of older adults competing in sport, while bringing attention to the social and personal issues of active aging, in general. These contradictory findings exposed new challenges, and presented alternative ways of understanding sport, competition, aging, and older adults in the West.

Concluding Comments

The purpose of this article was to highlight and address the imbalances in the literature on older competitive athletes and promote the need for and strength of qualitative research if we are to better understand this complex and rising social phenomenon. It comes as no surprise that calls have been made by those engaged in researching the relationship between sport, physical activity, and aging (Grant, 2001; McPherson, 1999; Roper et al., 2003; Sankar & Gubrium, 1994; Stathi et al., 2002) for the use of qualitative methodologies in order “to be more sensitive to the ways in which older adults interpret their lives and the society in which they live” (Grant & O’Brien Cousins, 2001, p. 239).

Without aiming to devalue the role of quantitative research into aging and physical activity, an increase in qualitative research is essential if we are to learn more about older adults in the context of sport, a major reason being that “no one paradigm can capture all the subtle variations of any phenomenon” (Grant & O’Brien Cousins, 2001, p. 238). For example, “In the course of quantifying physical performance, functional capabilities, and psychological characteristics of the aged,
the ineffable and less tangible are either suppressed or absent,” and consequently “the central character (i.e., the older adult) is hidden from the text” (Grant & O’Brien Cousins, 2001, p. 238). In ignoring older adults’ stories about competitive sport we sacrifice an exciting context for exploring the multiple, dynamic, and complex meanings of the aging and sport experience. Therefore, the field of sport and aging needs to embrace different methodologies and the particular forms of knowledge gained from them if it is to advance both theoretically and practically.

Furthermore, aging is a complex, dynamic, sociocultural, psychological, and biological process. Gilleard and Higgs (2000) argued that “ageing has become more complex, differentiated and ill-defined, experienced from a variety of perspectives and expressed in a variety of ways at different moments in people’s lives” (p. 1). These characteristics of growing old and their relationship to sport highlight the need for a qualitative research design that is sensitive to the ambiguity and subjectivity of the aging experience. My research (Dionigi, 2004a) has attempted to address this imbalance in knowledge and explore the questions I raised in the introduction. This study provided alternative ways of thinking about older adults and their relationship with competitive sport to what is typically found in the sport and aging literature. More of this type of qualitative sociological research is needed if the field is to grow and contribute to an enhanced understanding of the complex phenomenon of older athletes that is expanding with the aging of populations.

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