

5

DEVELOPING SPORT FOR OLDER WOMEN

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Introduction

The global population is ageing (World Health Organisation, 2015), with predictions that by 2050, one in five people will be over 60 years old (World Health Organisation, 2017). Older age is often associated with a decline in health (Haskell, et al., 2007). As poor health often results in a lower quality of life (Djäv, Wikman, Johar & Lagergren, 2013) and an increased burden on health services (Rechel, Doyle, Grundy & McKee, 2009), an increasing international focus is being placed on improving health for older adults. This is particularly pertinent for older women, as women tend to have a longer life expectancy than men (United Nations, 2017). As physical activity can improve health (Toepoel, 2013), there is a need to ensure there are diverse and appropriate opportunities for older women to be physically active.

This chapter examines trends in relation to sport participation of older women, potential motivations and benefits for older women to participate in sport, potential barriers that may deter their participation and their relationship with volunteering in sport. Opportunities for future research into older women and sport, examples of practical actions to service this population and recommendations for practitioners wishing to engage older women will be discussed, before a case study of an innovative older women's physical activity programme is presented.

The sport for health movement

The links between physical activity and health have been long established, with sport in particular being increasingly used as a vehicle to improve health (Edwards & Rowe, 2019). With ageing populations and the associated health concerns, public health organisations have increasingly turned to sport to try to increase physical activity levels. For older adults, this concept is often called 'active ageing'. Whilst the

relationship between older adults and physical activity can often be multifaceted and complex, there is strong medical evidence to suggest physical activity can mitigate some of the effects of numerous illnesses and diseases associated with old age (see, for example, Haskell, et al., 2007). Therefore, it is important to encourage and enable older women to be physically active, in an accessible activity they enjoy, to enhance their quality of life.

Who are older adults?

Globally, there is no definitive age when someone becomes an ‘older adult’. The World Health Organisation defines older adults as people aged 65 years old and over, which is widely accepted. However, a move away from chronological age has been suggested, as it does not always reflect perceptions of ageing in different parts of the world. The more subjective concept of social age – where people act the age that is deemed socially acceptable in their respective society – has been mooted instead.

In Masters sport, age categories can vary widely, often dependent on the sport. For example, in gymnastics, Masters events commence at 20 years of age, while in athletics, there are categories for 100 years and older. In community sport, New Zealand and Australian sporting policies define older adults as 65 years and older, while Sport England now focuses on adults over the age of 55 (previously it was 50+ years). To cover all possible definitions, this chapter will focus on sport for women over the age of 50 years.

What is sport for older adults?

This chapter will largely focus on Masters sport, community sport and physical activity for the general older female population, rather than those with specific medical issues and diseases associated with old age, such as dementia.

Sport participation trends

Whilst participation in sport is often dependent on life stage, and thus tends to fluctuate during people’s lives; it typically decreases with age (Eime, et al., 2016). In Australia, it is estimated that only 32% of older women (55+ years) meet the recommended physical activity guidelines (minimum of 30 minutes of activity per day) (Sport Australia, 2018). Historically, most of the activity options for older women have focused on general, low-impact physical activity, such as walking or swimming, and traditional sports, such as bowls, which are enjoyed by many older women. However, with the ageing global population, and the increased focus on using sport to improve health, alternative and diverse activity options are being explored to encourage older women to be active.

Potential motivations and benefits of sport participation

Older women may choose to participate in sport for many different reasons and may derive a number of benefits.

Health

Public health messages detailing the importance of improving health in older age have been well publicised. Thus unsurprisingly, playing sport to improve health is a major motivating factor for older women (Cedergren, et al., 2007) and also a key potential benefit (Jenkin, et al., 2017). Motivations include, for example, to become fitter and improve muscle strength and flexibility (Jenkin, Hilland & Eime, 2018a; Heo, et al., 2013), to prevent weight gain (Eman, 2012), and to mitigate disease/disability (Siegenthaler & O'Dell, 2003), in addition to using sport to rehabilitate after injury (Jenkin, et al., 2018b).

Social health is an umbrella term that can cover a multitude of interactions. Within social health, developing social support and connections are significant determinants of participation. Social aspects can be especially important for this age group, as social isolation tends to increase with age (Grenade & Boldy, 2008). Using sport to reduce social isolation, in particular, as a reason to leave the house (Cedergren, et al., 2007), for company and to make friends (Berlin, et al., 2018; Jenkin, et al., 2018a), and to give a purpose in life (Berlin, et al., 2018), are key motivators to participation.

It has been reported that older women are more motivated by the potential social health benefits of sport than older men (Kolt, Driver & Giles, 2004). These benefits can include meeting new friends and increasing social support (Berlin, Kruger & Klenosky, 2018; Heo, et al., 2013), reinforcing social identity (Heo, et al., 2013) and decreasing social isolation (Jenkin, et al., 2018b; Naar, et al., 2017). Research has also suggested that older women enjoyed being part of a team (Jenkin, et al., 2018a; Kirby & Kluge, 2013). Similar to other population groups, enjoyment and to have fun are other reasons why older women may want to play sport (Berlin, et al., 2018; Naar, et al., 2017).

For mental and psychological health motivations, older women report they wanted to play sport to relax (Naar, et al., 2017) and relieve stress (Berlin, et al., 2018), in addition to enjoying the mental stimulation of playing sport (Jenkin, et al., 2018a; Wong, et al., 2018). Developing their self-confidence (Jenkin, et al., 2018a; Naar, et al., 2017), in addition to achieving goals (Berlin, et al., 2018), have also been identified as potential mental and psychological benefits of playing sport.

Negotiating the ageing process

Using sport to negotiate the ageing process is a specific motivator for the older population. This can be split into two subsections: the positive ageing discourse; and to mitigate the negative stereotypes of ageing. A positive ageing discourse relates to the social motivations of participation, as older women often play sport to develop or maintain their self-, and social, identity (Heo, et al., 2013; Litchfield & Dionigi, 2011; Pfister, 2012). For example, they may have played sport all their life and see it as an important component of their identity. Some older women may also use sport to mitigate societal stereotypes that sport is the domain of younger people (Dionigi, 2006; Naar, et al., 2017), to minimise the effects of ageing (Jenkin, et al., 2018b), to

not feel ‘old’ (Horton, et al., 2018; Pfister, 2012) and to differentiate themselves from the often negative image of an older adult (Kelley, et al., 2014).

Potential barriers to sport participation

Health is a particularly important determinant for participation. Improving health can motivate people to participate and can be derived as a benefit. However, poor health can also deter participation. Poor physical health, in particular, can be a barrier (Jenkin, et al., 2017; Wong, et al., 2018), for example, older women may be contending with disease, pain and injury (Horton, et al., 2018), and that the body takes longer to recover after exercise at an older age (Jenkin, et al., 2018b; Naar, et al., 2017). Poor psychological health, such as low self-confidence (Women in Sport, 2017), is another potential barrier. Research has identified that to enable older women to be active, social support is needed (Kirby & Kluge, 2013). Therefore, a lack of social support – for example, resistance or apathy from family members (e.g. Horton, et al., 2018; Naar, et al., 2017), particularly their concerns about the perceived risk of injury for their older relatives (Jenkin, et al., 2018a; Kirby & Kluge, 2013) – can deter participation.

Societal expectations, ageist stereotyping and negative comments (Gayman, Fraser-Thomas & Baker, 2017; Jenkin, et al., 2018b; Pfister, 2012) are other age-specific barriers older women often experience. In particular, Kirby & Kluge (2013, p. 291) describe that older women not only face ageist discrimination, but that this is compounded with negative gender stereotypes: ‘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’.

Finally, access to few appropriate opportunities (Jenkin, et al., 2017; Pfister, 2012) and lack of organisational resources (van Uffelen, et al., 2015) can be organisational barriers to older women’s participation, as sporting organisations have historically focused on engaging younger population groups. As detailed in this chapter, more participation opportunities are emerging; however, these are often ad hoc and are dependent on local providers, in addition to relying on external, largely short-term, funding.

Volunteering in sport

In England, it is estimated that 6.3m adults (16+ years) volunteered in sport and physical activity between May 2017 and May 2018 (Sport England, 2018). While this data does not provide specific information on older women, it suggests that adults aged 45–54 years old were more likely to volunteer than any other age group (apart from 16–24-year-olds), while women of all ages tended to volunteer less than men. Research has suggested that older adults are often more likely to volunteer in club committee or other administrative roles (Jenkin, et al., 2016a; Nichols, et al., 2016) than younger people. Most research on volunteering and older adults tends to examine mixed gender groups. General motivations for their volunteering can include supporting their children/grandchildren’s participation (Cuskelly, 2004; Jenkin, et al., 2016a); staying involved in a sport and to ‘give

back' – especially if they no longer actively participate (Nichols, et al., 2016) – and to contribute to society (Misener, Doherty, & Hamm-Kerwin, 2010).

Many of the benefits associated with volunteering reflect those of active participation, including health (Thoits & Hewitt, 2001), social interaction (Misener, et al., 2010) and social inclusion (Nichols & Ralston, 2011). Other identified benefits could be the chance to interact/bond with children/grandchildren (Jenkin, et al., 2018b) and to develop/enhance a sense of identity (Nichols & Ralston, 2011). For sporting organisations, engaging older women to volunteer could also help increase local sport club capacity (Adamson & Parker, 2006; Jenkin, et al., 2016a). This research demonstrates that engaging older women to volunteer in sport can bring benefits for both older women and sporting organisations.

Opportunities for future research

In the past ten years, more diverse sporting opportunities have been developed for this age group, in particular, modified sports. Research in this area has largely focused on the potential physiological benefits of walking football, with minimal consideration of the potential psychological and social aspects of these activities. Furthermore, this is a sport mostly participated in by men. Whilst this preliminary research has provided useful starting points, future research should review different forms of modified sport. In particular, to explore potential motivations to participate and social benefits that can be derived; whilst also specifically focusing on older female participation.

Another opportunity for research would be to look specifically at culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) older women. Whilst CALD covers a plethora of ethnicities and cultural backgrounds, research shows lower than average participation by CALD women of all ages (Long, et al., 2015). Furthermore, diseases that can be somewhat mitigated by physical activity, such as Type 2 diabetes, are often more prevalent in older CALD women. Therefore, it would be beneficial to further understand CALD older women and their relationship with sport.

Practical actions taken to address the issue and service the population

Some sporting organisations have developed products to provide useful advice on how to service this population. For example, Sport England has created market segmentation profiles to identify key attributes of different population groups, including older women. Some sporting bodies have established specific policies and funding to engage older adults in sport, such as Sport England's Active Ageing fund and Sport Australia's Better Ageing Grant programme, whilst some activities are run by charities and social enterprises.

In Masters sport, the International Masters Games Association holds a multisport event every four years for women and men participants aged 35 years and over. As per most Masters events, participating athletes compete against others within their

five- or ten-year age bracket (e.g. 50–55 years). For this competition, there are no further specific entry requirements, enabling any appropriately aged athlete to enter as an individual (rather than on behalf of their country), regardless of ability level. Some regions, such as Europe, the Americas and Asia-Pacific, run continental tournaments, and most individual countries also host local, regional and national age specific competitions, such as the Senior Games in the US. For all types of Masters events, there is an emphasis on social interaction, in addition to the competitive element.

In community sport, some areas have local, age-specific competitions. However, a more recent initiative is modified sports for older adults. While some sports were originally modified to introduce accessible versions of sports to young children, this concept has now been extended to older adults. The first version of this was walking football, established in the UK in 2011; now, walking versions of netball, basketball, rugby and hockey, amongst other sports, have been developed and utilised in different countries. Some of these programmes run independently; however, modified sport has also been used as a health referral pathway. For example, the award-winning Active Herts programme, in Hertfordshire in the UK, offers walking football for those with cardiovascular disease (CVD) risk factors and those with mental health issues. Another version of a modified sport that has been used in residential care homes in London is sitting netball (London Sport, 2017), where participants sit in a circle around a standing hoop and shoot balls into the hoop.

One sport that has become popular for older adults is pickleball. Originating in the US in the 1960s, the sport is played on a badminton court using a type of tennis net and a paddle racket. It is now played across the world and while it is not a sport specifically designed for older adults, it is popular with this age group, as it is slower and often more accessible form of racket sport. Many other types of programmes and initiatives, such as the Love to Dance programme and the second This Girl Can campaign in the UK, try to motivate and provide opportunities for older women to be physically active.

Designing and promoting sport for older women

A range of recommendations can be posed based on findings from numerous sources (for example, Jenkin, et al., 2016b; Jenkin, et al., 2018a; Kirby & Kluge, 2013; Women in Sport, 2017; Wong, et al., 2018). However, the 50+ age range spans a range of ages/life stages, and it is important to recognise that the group referred to as older women – as with any population group – is a very heterogeneous group. For example, some older women are still working, while others are retired, and some might care for their children or grandchildren during weekdays. Therefore, these recommendations may not be applicable to all older women or all activities that are aimed at this population group, but they are a useful starting point from which to design and deliver activity programmes.

- *Fun & enjoyment*: Focus on the fun and social element of sport in designing and promoting programmes. This includes making the sessions fun but also providing opportunities for participating women to socialise outside of the session. For example, visiting a local café after a session or regular social outings.
- *Engage with family members*: Older women may want to use sport to interact with family members that already play that sport. Family members also often provide older women with social support, both of which demonstrate positive family engagement. However, family members can also sometimes deter their participation, especially based on concerns about injury risk. Engaging with family members may mitigate some of this resistance and encourage older women to participate.
- *Peer support*: Some older women may lack confidence to attend sessions or try a new activity. Utilising peer support could include attending with a friend or asking more experienced members of the group to support newer members and also less abled participants.
- *Competition*: The opportunity to be competitive has been identified as a key reason for Masters and community sport participation. Some may want competitive fixtures against external teams and be part of a formal league structure, while some may want ‘fun’ competition within their weekly session.
- *Marketing*: Engage with older women when designing and disseminating marketing materials, specifically on language and imagery. For example, an older participant in Jenkin and colleagues’ (2018a) study wrote an article to publicise a programme she was involved in. This participant used phrases and language that were likely to resonate with other older women, such as focusing on the social interactions and that participating was fun, rather than a focus on health (Jenkin, et al., 2018a). Furthermore, some older women do not like being identified as ‘older’, as it can sound derogatory; involving older women in the marketing and promotion of these activities ensures the messaging is appropriately phrased and avoids unhelpful stereotypes that have been shown to represent a barrier to participation.
 - a Imagery is also very important. Research has shown that getting the right imagery can be difficult and that in two example programs (Jenkin, et al. 2018a; London Sport, 2018) some women who eventually participated were initially discouraged if they felt the women portrayed in images looked older or frailer than they felt but decided to participate for other reasons. It is likely, though, that the imagery deterred other women from taking part. In these programmes, older women were not part of the initial consultation on imagery.
- *Age specific opportunities*: As people age, they may feel uncomfortable playing against younger, and sometimes more physically capable, opponents. Chronological age categories are standard in Masters competitions, but often are not available in community sport.
- *External partnerships*: In sport development generally, developing high quality and relevant partnerships is key for programmes to be successful. For

programmes for older women, sporting organisations need to develop relationships with partners such as Age UK, University of the Third Age, local older adult charities/organisations, religious organisations and, if appropriate, local residential villages and homes.

Finally, it is vital that older women are not patronised or stereotyped. Many older women are likely to be more physically capable than younger women and some may be far more competitive than other age groups. Some older women may enjoy traditional older adult sports and physical activity, such as walking or bowls. Some may want – and are more than capable – to continue to play sports they have played their whole lives. Some may still want to play sport but would prefer to play a modified version, or only participate against peers of their own age or ability level. Some might want a combination of all these options. Others might want to formally compete at regional, national and/or international level. As with any population group, it is important to provide a variety of physical activity options to enable participation in an activity that they enjoy. Therefore, it is essential to engage with older women throughout the whole programme life cycle – the design, marketing, implementation and evaluation of a programme – to ensure it is suitable and attractive for the target audience.

Conclusion

With the rising average life expectancy for women, there is a greater emphasis on their quality of life in old age. As physical activity can positively contribute towards quality of life, providing a diversity of appropriate physical activity options for this population group is extremely important. As detailed in this chapter, there are numerous organisations around the world that offer such activities. However, participation levels are generally lower for older women than at any other age. Thus, there is a need for a greater focus on continuing to mitigate the participation barriers women may encounter as they age.

CASE STUDY

Digital marketing for walking groups

This case study will focus on a 'digital marketing pilot for Walking Groups' (London Sport, 2018), a project designed to use social media to engage older women and encourage them to join free, local, existing walking groups. Technology and social media are often seen as the domain of younger people. However, even in these age groups, using technology to encourage participation in sport is still greatly underutilised. It is often assumed that older adults rarely use social media or technology, therefore using digital marketing to engage with this population group was an exciting initiative. This programme was devised and led by London Sport, which is the Active Partnership for

London in the UK. At present, Sport England, and consequently, the Active Partnerships, has a strategic focus to use behaviour change techniques to engage inactive people in physical activity.

The project was piloted in 2018 and worked with partners, including The Ramblers, Make Sport Fun and ten London boroughs (suburbs). The purpose was to utilise Facebook Lead Generation adverts, to specifically target older women (55+) residing in these ten boroughs. The programme organisers used social media, as they felt traditional marketing methods, such as posters and leaflets, were not particularly effective in engaging those who are inactive and often socially isolated. Older women who lived within one mile of a walking group were targeted in the Facebook adverts. Using existing activity sessions meant the programme was likely to be more sustainable and provide the women with a long-term activity to engage in.

Different messages and images on Facebook were used throughout the pilot to determine which type of advert worked best. Figure 5.1 was deemed to be the most successful advert. The messaging provided a clear call to action,

GET ACTIVE Get Active London
Sponsored · 🌐

Get more out of your day!

Join a free and friendly Health Walk near you. You'll meet lovely people, get fitter, enjoy a cup of tea and a chat. You'll feel refreshed both in your body and mind.

Sign up to get more details!

WWW.GETACTIVE.IO/LONDON/SPORT/WALKING

We'll match you with your nearest free Health Walk! [Sign Up](#)

👍❤️👤 · and 350 others · 47 Comments 73 shares

👍 Like 💬 Comment ➦ Share

FIGURE 5.1 Most successful advertisement for Walking Group initiative, London Sport (2018)

meaning woman saw a purpose to sign up and made it easy for them to take the next step. It was determined that the most attractive images were close up shots of attendees' faces, people looking happy and of people in the 'younger old' older adults' category, generally those aged 55–65 years old.

A number of communication methods were then used to mitigate common barriers for older women to exercise. Text messages were used to firstly welcome the women and also to provide details of a nearby walk. Participants were also sent an automated text reminder before the walk and after four weeks; a final text message asked if they had attended any walks. Emails were sent regularly over that first two-week period, post-sign up – to provide information, such as what to wear – and case studies of group attendees, who they could relate to. The women could also communicate with London Sport staff via Facebook Messenger and text messages to ask specific questions, enabling programme staff to alleviate concerns and mitigate some potential barriers.

In the pilot phase over a three-month period, 2,799 women signed up via Facebook and 360 reported that they had joined a local walk (13%). The majority of those who signed up (71%) were classed as less active, with 55% of those deemed inactive, which demonstrated the success of using digital marketing to engage with inactive older women. Those who had yet to attend a walk were provided with behaviour change support by the programme, either through being encouraged to download a physical activity app (NHS Active 10 app) or through continuing conversations with the team to discuss other activity options in their local area. To understand the longer-term impact of this programme, older women who joined the walking groups were to be contacted after six months, to determine if their activity levels had improved.

In 2019, London Sport is expanding this programme to all 33 London boroughs, to encourage more older women in the capital city to increase their physical activity.

The use of technology to engage older women to be more physically active was an innovative idea and will hopefully be used in other types of physical activity programmes. Longer term academic evaluations of technology use will enable practitioners to understand best practice for the effective use technology and social media to increase activity levels for this population group.

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