

AGING HORIZONS BULLETIN

November/December 2012

Interview: Older Athletes Sweep Away Preconceptions

Study: Why Do Snowbirds Head South Year after Year?

Interview: The Power of Encore Careers

Study: Reaching Out to a Grandchild with a Disability

Roundup

- What Does it Feel Like to be 100?
- Grey Divorce on the Rise in Canada
- Fashion Meets Old Age
- *The Maytrees*: Ravishing Meditation on Life, Nature and Love

Interview: Older Athletes Sweep Away Preconceptions

Today, a growing number of men and women choose the thrill of competition and practice competitive sports into old age.

So what is it about competition?

A new Swedish study examines the trend and discovers engaging in competitive sports changes our understanding of growing old.

The research was conducted by Josefin Eman, a lecturer in the Department of Sociology at Umeå University in Sweden

The findings were published in the Journal of Aging Studies (December 2012).

AHB reached Dr. Eman in Umeå, Sweden.

Ruth Dempsey: So what drew you to the study of competitive sport and aging?

Josefin Eman: Competitive sport and old age are seen as a contradiction. Older athletics disrupt our notions of aging. This sparked my interest.

RD: Men and women in the study were aged 66 to 90 years of age. Were they active in sports throughout their lives?

JE: Yes, but some of the women withdrew from competition during the child-rearing years and returned to it later.

In old age, men and women engaged in similar forms of competitive sports: skiing, swimming and running, for example.

RD: A male cyclist sees an old man when he looks in the mirror, and a female runner talks about seeing her mother in the mirror in the morning . . .

JE: Like other older adults, many participants felt estranged from their aged exterior. Their outer looks did not represent their "true" inner core. So

neither the male cyclist nor the female runner felt connected to their aged selves in the mirror. We refer to this phenomenon as the mask of aging.

RD: Surprisingly, this changes when it comes to sports. How is that?

JE: When practicing competitive sports, older athletes emphasized their physical capabilities. As a result, they tended to reevaluate their understandings of old age. This could mean feelings of agelessness or a sense of coming closer to ones "actual" age.

For example, one male track and field athlete remarked, "In my private life I do not detect any major changes in my bodily functions, but it is definitely noticeable in my athletic results."

On the other hand, the male cyclist you mentioned said he feels young when he rides his bicycle because he has the stamina and mobility of a 45-year-old.

RD: What about the women?

JE: Women were also influenced by their physical capabilities. The runner who talked about seeing her mother in the mirror lacked the stamina of earlier years. She also felt her muscle power was decreasing.

But another female runner claimed she was able to maintain her speed through more practice and increased discipline.

RD: The men seemed to focus on results . . .

JE: Yes, while both men and women made sense of old age through assessments of their physical capabilities; the men were more black-and-white in their approach. Centimetres, seconds and races completed mattered to the men.

As one highly successful athlete put it: "I fear the moment when I will start seeing my results decline. I do not want to experience it. It is a fear of growing old, plainly speaking."

Male participants tended to buy into the cultural narrative of decline. It was just a matter of time before their results would deteriorate.

RD: How did female athletics make sense of growing old?

JE: They had a more positive view of old age. They admitted that growing old might entail physical setbacks and diminished athletic results, but they also saw it as a period in life when they could increase their endurance, hone their discipline and become more empowered.

RD: The findings showed males used competitive sports to distinguish themselves from other older adults. Is that right?

JE: Yes. Men tended to separate themselves from other old people on the basis of appearance or functionality. So many men used sports as their primary means of distinguishing themselves from other old adults, arguing their practice enabled them to transcend more physical barriers than their age-peers.

RD: Women were inspired by their 80 and 90-year-old peers . . .

JE: That's right. The women appeared to have felt little need to separate themselves from other old. In fact, they saw old women as "tough" and "inspirational" and lauded them as their role models.

However they viewed old men as relatively weak. For example, one woman described her husband as having poor stamina. "[He] gets winded and wheezes when we are walking over the smallest hills."

Women also separated themselves from older athletics who did not measure up to their high standards. Commenting on a 93-year-old swimming poorly, one participant remarked, "It is not fun seeing an old person struggling to do her best."

RD: So how did competitive sport alter participants' understanding of old age?

JE: As athletes, the participants in the study assessed themselves on different parameters than non-athletic aging individuals do. Athletes assess themselves primarily by what they are capable of doing, not by what they look like or how they feel.

This affected how men and women made sense of growing old. It offered them another way to think about aging.

More generally, female athletes, in particular, seem willing to counter cultural notions that equate aging with decline.

Women in my study were confident, uncompromising and inclined to rise above adversities. Many had had their athletic passion challenged continually over their lives with questions about whether it was safe, appropriate or interfered with their roles as mothers. As old athletes, they drew on each others' strength to empower their practice.

Unlike men, who saw aging as a down-hill slope, many women connected their increased athletic strength to the actual process of growing old, saying that their athletic discipline and endurance had increased with age.

But we must bear in mind that competitive sport is a celebration of strength. And does little to call into question society's disdain for decline and weakness.

Also, my research has focused on members of a relatively privileged white middle-class in Sweden. There are reasons to believe that marginalized old people may have greater difficulties confronting the stereotypes of aging. In future studies, we need to include a greater diversity of athletically-active old adults.

Study: Why do Snowbirds Head South Year after Year?

According to a new study, snowbirds who head south for the winter don't just escape the bad weather, they also ramp up their quality of life.

Kristine Bjelde and Gregory Sanders of North Dakota State University (Fargo, ND) interviewed 25 snowbirds from the upper Midwestern United States. Most resided in mobile parks or recreational vehicles in Arizona, Texas and Florida. Participants ranged in age from 61 to 86 years of age and had wintered in the Sunbelt from two to 27 years.

The researchers found seasonal migration provided snowbirds with a change in lifestyle and an extended network of friends, which boosted their quality of life.

The findings appeared in the *Journal of Applied Gerontology* (June 2012).

Lifestyle

Many older adults saw their winter experience as their vacation. "We have friends there, and we golf, take long walks and just vacation," one participant said.

More than half remained in the Sunbelt for four to five months. Some stayed near their children and grandchildren. In fact, "Ellen" and "Lenny" wintered at their son's home in Arizona. "We go there to get out of the weather and see the grandkids," explained Lenny.

Winter migration offered snowbirds a new location and a change of scene, but most engaged in activities that were part of their lives back home. Activities included volunteering and attending church services.

"Whatever I can add, you know, I would rather be adding value and I don't mind working," said "Hugh" who volunteered in Arizona.

Another participant touted her membership in a quilting group in Mesa (AZ). The group made Christmas quilts for the residents of two local nursing homes and the Children's Crisis Center.

Although no questions were asked about religious affiliation, researchers said most snowbirds mentioned church attendance as part of their winter experiences. Religious fellowship offered social support and opportunities to meet new friends.

Most participants maintained contact with family and friends back home through telephone and email.

Here is how "Betsy" described a typical Christmas Eve:

We go to church, then we have dinner with some of our friends, open gifts, talk to the grandkids, talk to everybody on the cell phone. The

next day, Bill and I would go to the clubhouse for dinner, and sit with all our friends. You're never really alone.

Friendships

The desire to escape the cold weather may have attracted older adults to the Sunbelt initially, but the friends they made along the way kept them coming back year after year.

Most lived in age-segregated retirement villages or parks and found that close proximity facilitated friendships.

"Like here, everybody lives within two blocks," said one male participant. "And then there are lots of activities, like the people that were here for Thanksgiving, why everybody gets together and we had a Thanksgiving dinner."

Common interests also helped to forge bonds between individuals. "I found a lot of people, and actually my friends down there have a commonality," Bill remarked. "They like golf, they're sociable and most of them come from the [agriculture] field."

Some felt friendships were stronger at their winter residences than back home because everybody's retired, and easy going.

In addition, many adults settled in Sunbelt communities with relatives. As one male participant explained: "So many of the people we knew, relatives and friends, ended up being there, so it was kind of a logical place."

Embracing change

As they aged, participants made changes to maintain their snowbird lifestyle. For example, some adapted their driving habits, taking alternate routes to their destination and traveling during off-peak hours to avoid heavy traffic in major cities.

Personal safety was also a concern. As "Renae" explained:

This year I'm going to go a month earlier. Last year there was a lot of ice, and I really don't want to take a fall or look forward to the cold weather, so I decided to just try it, to go a month earlier.

Even the loss of a spouse did not deter some older adults from heading south. Take "Shelly", for example, who was undecided about returning to Texas after her husband passed away.

My kids said, what will I do all winter? And, they said I live in the country, and I could get snowed in . . . And, my friends [down south] said, what would you do? Down here you can do all kinds of things.

The snowbirds provided an informal support network, offering rides for those who could no longer drive, sharing potlucks and just hanging out.

But deteriorating health could pose problems. Most participants made little use of health services while at their winter residence. According to the study, they "saved up" their health care needs until returning home in the spring.

"Vic," 85, whose health had taken a turn for the worse, told researchers he was undecided about going to Florida again, after more than two decades. "If you become seriously ill, it would be better, I'd feel more secure here than down there for that simple reason."

Interview: The Power of Encore Careers

The growing number of older workers isn't due simply to needing work: many want to stay part of the labour force.

As Marc Freedman pointed out In The Big Shift: Navigating the New Stage Beyond Midlife (PublicAffairs), people in their 50s and 60s today are looking at a 30-year retirement. He argued it is time to put new social structures in place to engage aging workers in "encore" or second careers that provide personal meaning, as well as a pay cheque and social purpose.

But some argue that encore careers are more about meeting the economic needs of society.

So what do encore careers mean to the over-60s?

New research by Mary Simpson of the University of Waikato and colleagues sheds light on the experience of workers aged 55 to 84 years. The findings show encore careers hold a different meaning for each person.

The research was published in the journal Work, Employment and Society (June 2012).

AHB reached Dr. Simpson in Hamilton, New Zealand.

Ruth Dempsey: The number of older people in the workforce has jumped in New Zealand since compulsory retirement was abolished in 1998. Why is that?

Mary Simpson: Two reasons spring to mind. First, many people reach 65 years of age and want to continue working, whether in full-or part-time work. Second, with the removal of the formal barrier, compulsory retirement, these people are now able to carry on in their existing work or take up different roles in the workforce.

RD: So how do you describe encore careers?

MS: For the purposes of the study, we defined encore careers as paid or unpaid work conducted within a formal organization. The encore work is different from the worker's previous employment and seen as meaningful by the worker.

We also applied the concept to workers aged 55 or more engaged in paid or voluntary encore positions.

RD: Some of the participants saw encore careers as job opportunities.

MS: That's right. So workers talked about the benefits of being able to use existing skills to earn money to help family or save for an overseas trip.

Older workers also saw encore careers as way to "keep up-to-date" with current practices.

RD: Others viewed encore careers as a path to self-actualization, a way to boost their identity . . .

MS: To say "boost their identity" doesn't quite capture the depth of feeling these older adults held when speaking of their work.

They talked about a sense of achievement, "giving back" and increasing self-worth through their encore careers.

RD: Some even talked about having meaningful work for the first time.

MS: Yes, this sentiment was expressed often by women who had had careers in looking after others, although several men mentioned this as well.

RD: The team interviewed managers from business, social service and community-based organizations. How did they view encore workers?

MS: Managers spoke of encore workers as desirable because of their experience, flexibility and the sometime calming influence they brought to the workplace.

Managers tended to notice the potential utility in encore workers values, that is, what it meant for the organization. For example, one manager reported that encore workers were "reflecting on values, the meaning of life and often quite happy to work for organizations... [with] a values base".

However, some managers drew on ageist stereotypes in their descriptions and expectations of older workers. "We have no interest in people who won't grow," one said.

Both managers and workers identified challenges in organizational structures and processes, for example, in the recruitment process writing a CV and managing job interviews. One former forestry worker talked about the inability to "sell" himself.

The findings showed encore workers rather than organizations were largely held responsible for currency and up-grading.

RD: There was a difference in how men and women viewed encore careers . . .

MS: The difference was more complex than simply between men and women. Women and older men (over 65 years of age) tended to focus on the meaningful aspects of encore careers, those that lead to self-fulfillment and enhanced identity.

Younger men (55 to 60 years of age), on the other hand, tended to focus on the productive and useful aspects of encore careers, those aspects that use experience, maintain currency and provide the necessities of life.

RD: You argue encore careers can be a trap. How so?

MS: Encore careers become a trap when work becomes a "must" for older adults, and society expects older people to remain in the workplace.

Older adults need to be able to choose not have "employment" at the center of their lives. Other dimensions of life are important and relevant for elders. In other words, there is the danger that people are no longer allowed to be simply old or retired.

RD: Debates about the abilities and rights of aging workers are on the rise today. Looking ahead, how do you see encore careers?

MS: Encore careers have the potential to both enhance and diminish the contribution of elders in paid and unpaid roles.

So, if encore careers are seen as a "luxury" or at the other extreme a "must" for older adults, then elders are at risk on not being seen as valued contributors to society.

If, on the other hand, encore careers are positioned as an opportunity for the utilization of valued experience and for personal growth, then they have the potential to enhance the contribution of elders within the broader community.

Study: Reaching Out to a Grandchild with a Disability

Grandparents experience an emotional roller coaster when a grandchild is born with a disability. According to a recent study, they see their primary role as supporting their own child and the family.

Sandra Woodbridge of Queensland University of Technology and colleagues interviewed 22 grandparents of children under 17 years of age with a range of mild to severe intellectual, sensory and physical disabilities.

Participants ranged in age from 55 to 75 years of age and lived in Brisbane, Australia. Most were retirees, and all had at least two other grandchildren without a disability. A large number of the grandparents had significant prior experience working with children with disabilities as nurses, teachers and support workers.

The findings appeared in the *Journal of Aging Studies* (December 2011).

Supporting the family

Researchers found grandparents took on a range of practical chores in the family such as small errands, babysitting, taking grandchildren on vacation and paying for books and specialist medical assistance.

Some took their grandchildren to doctors' appointments: "I think they were working, so we had to take [her] to the neurologists and the ear, nose and throat specialists," a grandparent of a child with Rhetts syndrome explained.

One participant talked about supporting her daughter whose 5-year-old son had severe spina bifida: "I think, you know, that it is important for her to still have a life, to not feel trapped by the child's situation."

Others stressed the importance of helping their grandchildren connect with the wider family and community.

We have taken them to different areas, you know, to widen their feel of the country and the people and their relatives and introduce them to aunts and uncles and cousins. . . . the cousins parents don't always want him, but we take him whether they want him or not.

Finally, grandparents expressed enormous pride in how their child and the family was coping with a challenging situation.

Relationship with grandchildren

The participants worked hard to develop a close relationship with all their grandchildren. They did their best to ensure the needs of their typically-developing grandchildren were not overlooked.

"You are conscious of wanting to make sure that each one gets that little bit of special attention," one grandmother said.

The older adults described assisting their typically-developing grandchildren with homework and caring for them when their parents were pre-occupied with the needs of the child with disability.

Grandparents also mentioned the difficulty they sometimes had in following parental rules.

For example, one mother refused to allow her typically-developing children do anything without their sister (who had severe brain damage from lack of oxygen at birth). Since the grandparents could not physically care for their grandchild with a disability overnight, none of the grandchildren could come to their home for a "sleep-over."

Yes, it would be so special to take one and then another one or even the two little ones and that would make them feel special. And I can't spend time with them. I have little things I would like to make with them and it just really hurts, it just really hurts. I could cry over that.

Finally, several participants reported the relationship with disabled grandchildren had changed them like this 64-year-old grandmother of two autistic grandsons:

I was inclined to be very impatient and I gradually learnt that you can't be like that . . . really I did change my outlook and my point of view an awful lot seeing these two, how they were.

Making a vital difference

The study found that a grandchild's disability meant the usual retirement options weren't likely to be available for some grandparents. Gone, for example, are plans for relocation or dreams of long periods of travel.

Yet, these grandparents accepted the situation and took significant pride in their role as a key support persons because, according to them, their grandchild's disability have forced them to re-evaluate their priorities.

Nevertheless, the study showed that fulfilling the needs of all family members, including parents, grandchildren with a disability and typically developing grandchildren was a tiring balancing act for grandparents.

ROUNDUP

WHAT DOES IT FEEL LIKE TO BE 100? When researchers put the question to 16 centenarians living in the United Kingdom, the findings revealed six themes. Here they are in brief:

1. Engagement: All 11 women and five men were meaningfully engaged in the world around them. For example, "Alex," was honorary president of the bowling club and an active member of the Masons. "Hetty," a strong believer in world peace, marched against the war in Iraq in the streets of London.

2. Happiness and a good life: When asked what she would wish for had she one wish, "Alison" said: "I'm perfectly happy to go on as I am. I'm not wishing for anything and I'm glad I've got good health. That's an enormous thing."

And "Albert" told researchers: "I've had a good life. I'm the oldest in a line of five generations. I'm a great-great granddad. I don't think of the bad times, you've got to think of the good times . . . "

3. Stoicism: Centenarians recalled their memories of two world wars. Scenes of bombing, air raid shelters and food shortages. "Phyllis" said: "We just took it in our stride, I suppose. You have to don't you . . . I'm afraid I am one of those resilient people. I don't just sit down and cry when it comes. I've just got to get on with it."

4. Sources of support: Seven of the 16 were still living independently in their own homes. Their children, who themselves were in their 70s and 80s, provided support. Many said that their spirituality was a major source of strength. Others received support from their church community. And "Nita"

touted the crew at her local swimming pool: "Everybody knew me, yes, everybody, all the swimmers."

5. Sources of frustration: Participants mentioned mainly physical frustrations such as the loss of sight and mobility. "Olive," who was wheel chair-bound wished to regain the use of her legs. Phyllis still played bridge at the bridge club that she started but her fingers cannot spread the cards.

6. Talking about death: Sixty years after her beloved husband's death, Alison still feels the warmth of his presence. Alex and "Bob" said that they would like to have their wives back, if it were possible. Many talked of the death of parents and siblings, but only Nita mentioned her own impending death. "I say 'Thank God' for every day that I wake up . . . because when's it's my time, I want to go without knowing I'm gone."

Nimmi Hutnik and colleagues reported their findings in *Aging & Mental Health* (September 2012).

GREY DIVORCE ON THE RISE IN CANADA: As baby boomers hit retirement age, divorces among couples 65 years and older are becoming more and more common, according to Statistics Canada (2011 Census). The numbers have been steadily growing among those 55 and over, with rates expected to increase as more people continue to age.

In the United States, some are turning to divorce coaches to help ease the split. Coaches offer pre-legal advice and draw up the legal documents needed for divorce. But perhaps more important, they act as guides creating a safe, patient and nonjudgmental environment during divorce proceedings that may drag on.

Many people use coaches to minimize the cost of lawyers, but coaching fees can add up. According to Randall Cooper, co-founder of CDC College for Divorce Coaching in Tampa, Florida, the average hourly fee for a divorce coach is \$100 to \$150 U.S.

In Canada, Ontario residents who have questions about divorce can download *What You Should Know About Family Law in Ontario*, in any one of nine languages from the [Ontario Ministry of the Attorney General](http://www.attorneygeneral.ca) website. The free guide covers many aspects of separation and divorce including mediation, division of property and your rights and obligations.

Source: With notes from globeandmail.com.

FASHION MEETS OLD AGE: Fashion is finally waking up to the power of the older woman.

[*Advanced Style*](#), a blog by Ari Seth Cohen, focuses on stylish older adults on the streets of New York. This hugely successful blog is the basis of a book with the same title. The new volume features women over 60 moving to the beat of their own drummer with dazzling grace and panache. It will be made into a film in 2013.

In 2009, fashion designer Fanny Karst launched her niche label [*The Old Ladies' Rebellion*](#) in a small Parisian gallery. The 20-something designer set out to revolutionize the stylish options available to women her grandmother's age. The garments are straight, bold and modeled by silver-haired women.

And two years ago, Leni Goggins launched [*GranPaparazzi*](#), a website dedicated to showcasing stylish women and men on the streets of Vancouver.

All of which prompts the question: why now? Ari Seth Cohen says the answer is simple: "In the U.S. alone there are a reported 78 million baby boomers, aged 60-something and above, who control 70 per cent of the domestic income. That's a lot of purchasing power."

Source: With notes from FT.com.

THE MAYTREES: RAVISHING MEDITATION ON LIFE, NATURE AND LOVE: *The Maytrees* (HarperCollins) by Annie Dillard, follows Toby and Lou across their long lives as they marry, divorce and live together again.

Toby is a poet. Lou takes up painting. The couple live a bohemian life among artists and writers at the tip of Cape Cod after World War II. Their lives are nourished by books, the sea, the turning of the seasons and the miracle that is their son, Pete.

After 14 years, the relationship comes to an abrupt end. Just as unexpectedly, it picks up again 20 years later.

This poetic novel is about the search for what is essential in life and how we view life over the long stretch of a lifetime. Dillard's prose is profoundly imaginative, weaving scenes of old age of rare beauty and insight.