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# Fine-tuning training for older athletes

By *Undefined*

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The really scary thing about getting older is how it sometimes feels like a mask someone slipped over your head while your 28-year-old inner self was dozing.

For some of us this is merely unsettling, like being stopped at a red light and realizing the person in the car to your left is staring at you through the window.

Now for aging athletes, this disconnect can be especially jarring.

But there's hope. A promising body of research suggests that athletes can preserve their cognitive skills, motor skills and physiological abilities # at a high level # even as they age.

What's more, declines in performance are slowed in aging athletes who keep training and competing in their later years. In other words, while we humans inevitably slow down as we round the bend, with the right approach aging athletes have a fighting chance of holding a good part of the deterioration at bay.

According to Martha Grinnell, 43, a five-time member of the U.S. Pro Triathlete world championship team who now trains athletes of all kinds here in the Valley, the secret is in adopting all the "little things" that we ignored when we were young.

"For the middle-age athlete that means working on flexibility, on balance, on core muscles, on technique # all of the things we take for granted when we're young and nimble and pliable and supple," Grinnell explains,

What may well be at the heart of the decline in performance is simply the ability to train hard. Middle-age athletes who strive to maintain effective training regimens with advancing age will continue to perform very much like their younger selves, according to Hirofumi Tanaka, an associate professor at the University of Texas at Austin who directs the Cardiovascular Aging research Laboratory.

Take Dara Torres, the 41-year-old mother who won three silver medals at the 2008 Olympics in Beijing, China. That put her in the record books as the oldest swimmer ever to reach the Olympics and also the first swimmer to qualify for five Olympics. (Sure, she employed a team at \$100,000 a year to keep her in fighting trim, but no one ever said this was going to be easy.)

"The other part of staying competitive or performing at a high level as one ages is shifting the focus and priorities of training sessions in subtle but essential ways to counteract # or at least push back against - the natural consequences of aging, primarily loss of muscle and bone density and less efficient intake of

oxygen during training," says Grinnell.

"What can we do to delay muscle atrophy? Well strength training, so that becomes a big part of the workout plan and also flexibility work to keep the muscles nice and pliable," she adds. "What can we do to delay VO2 max? We work at a high-intensity level."

So the secret ingredients in the athlete's anti-aging potion are strength training, targeted balance, core and flexibility sessions, working intensity training into the workout plan and allowing plenty of time for recovery.

Grinnell's last nugget of advice is to pay attention to technique, those specialized skills and particular movements that define your sport. Older athletes who want to stay competitive, or kick some 20-something butt on the race course or just feel like the girl in the old photo album again, need to focus on form.

"Technique is something you never want to stop working on," Grinnell says.

Technique will naturally suffer over time without focus and attention because muscles and bones weaken with age. Which, in the oblivious older athlete, leads to a mushy core, bad posture and poor form. Technique is a little thing that has a multiplier effect.

"We all just want to get out the door and move, put on our shoes and go and when you're 28 you can get away with it," Grinnell says.

But for middle-age warriors keeping track of the little things - technique drills, core exercises, routine stretching - are the difference between an OK workout and a peak performance.

But there is at least one advantage to hitting middle age - the clarity that comes upon waking up and realizing one day that the dizzy feeling you thought was sleep deprivation is actually your life flashing before your eyes.

Grinnell's client base is made up of people from roughly their late 30s up into their 60s. It's an oversimplification to say they want to hang onto their youth. Rather, they've become painfully aware that time is a runaway train.

"What they realize is they want to get out there now and take advantage of the time they have to train hard, to feel competitive again, to do something physically demanding and rewarding," Grinnell says.

"At this point in their lives they've got a clear goal. And they may have more time on their hands because the kids are grown," she adds. "Some are more financially secure than they were 10 years ago. Or something life-changing has happened. So what I see is people reorganizing their priorities and start training with real intention.

"One interesting difference I'm seeing between young athletes and many of older ones I meet is the level of challenge they're looking for," Grinnell says. "The older ones want to do something crazy like ultra-endurance cycling, racing across America on their bike, running 100 miles through the desert. A simple marathon just isn't enough."

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