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Date: Sat, 04 Feb 2017 18:09:06 +0000

Sent from my iPad

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From: Will Ford <[REDACTED]>
Date: February 4, 2017 at 8:26:12 AM EST
To: undisclosed-recipients;;
Subject: (WPT) 'Do Or Decline': An Athlete's Age May Be Less Important to Performance Than Persistent Practice

'Do Or Decline': An Athlete's Age May Be Less Important to Performance Than Persistent Practice

Friday, February 3, 2017 10:40 AM

by Ginny McReynolds

Feb. 3 (Washington Post) -- For three decades, Joseph Baker has been swimming, cycling and running in triathlons some would call punishing. Baker, 47, is also a professor of exercise sciences.

As he competed in races as a younger man, he would watch people of all ages alongside him, and he soon became fascinated with the parameters of human performance. Why could some 70-year-olds compete in triathlons and some got winded walking up a flight of stairs?

He wanted to know whether age decline is a result of simply getting older or being sedentary. In other words: Are we racing against time, or are we racing against ourselves?

[Older Americans are most happy in Hawaii, least happy in West Virginia, according to new Gallup ranking]

Baker points to a seminal 1996 study from Stanford University analyzing age-related decline that looked at areas such as the number of muscle cells, DNA repair, fingernail growth and physical activity. The finding was that there is a 0.5 percent decline per year, a statistic he says has served as the biomarker of the aging process.

Since that time, Baker and his colleagues at York University in Toronto have dedicated their research to determining how much of that decline is out of human hands, and how much we can control. Baker leans heavily toward the latter.

He studies people in their 60s and 70s as they play handball, particularly the goalkeepers, reaching, grabbing and lunging into the air to stop the ball from going into the net.

"Their motor skills may have declined a bit, and they might be a little slower," Baker said. "But if they've kept up the practice, they can be as good as any elite athlete."

Baker honed his interest in aging athletes as he received his PhD in applied exercise and then continued his studies in exercise epidemiology as a professor and head of the LifeSpan Health and Performance Laboratory in the School of Kinesiology and Health Science at York. He and colleagues from the departments of psychology and nursing founded the university's Center for Aging Research and Education (YU-CARE) in 2008.

The idea was to study athletic performance beyond the development of muscles and skill. Baker's goal was to study aging from a broad perspective "rather than the negative, disease-focused approach that typically happens," he said.

"Our attitudes about older people, even when we age into this group, have been built on a life history where older people are thought of as less capable and less interesting," said Baker. "And it's very hard to deconstruct these beliefs. We used to think that development ended at adulthood, but we know now that it happens across the life span."

Aging is a reality, he said, but "we all have potential for growth."

Attempts to study the aging process over long periods are time-consuming and costly. Baker and his colleagues have found it useful to study masters athletes, older adults beyond the peak age of performance in their respective sports, like swimmers or golfers.

Because so many measures are taken and records kept in sporting events, it gives researchers data to track over time. It also allows them to examine what is possible when an individual is in top condition.

Baker conducted a study in 2007 that examined 96 golfers who played on the PGA tour for at least a dozen years. Detailed PGA records showed that, although the golfers' driving distances declined, their putting skills did not. Baker saw this as a win for the notion that cognitive, perceptual and motor skills do not have to suffer if people stay active.

In a 2010 study titled "Do or Decline," published in the *Journal of Health Psychology*, Baker and four other Canadian researchers sampled more than 12,000 people. Questions covered everything from health conditions to cognitive capacity to social engagement and physical activity. Results showed that "inactivity was a much stronger predictor of functional limitations than either chronic disease or being socially unengaged with life."

Baker says these findings indicated that physical activity, "even at moderate levels," creates and enhances optimal physiological, psychological and social conditions. This improvement in a person's psychological state is important, Baker says, because older people sometimes believe they are declining simply because that is the stereotype associated with aging.

Baker's emphasis on stereotypes in overall health and fitness of older people points out a key piece of the aging puzzle. "Self-efficacy, your belief in your ability to achieve an outcome is very important for predicting performance outcomes and a person's behavior," he said.

[People who possess this one thing enjoy much better health as they age]

Some people might have given up exercise because they are "too old," while others are reluctant to begin it for the same reasons. The result is the same. If people have been sedentary for a few years, the body isn't going to function nearly as well as if they'd been practicing some kind of sport for that time.

He reached this conclusion in his studies of elite athletes — those golfers, in particular — concentrating on how they practice and maintain their skills.

"Their performance didn't really change much as they moved through their careers," he said. "Skills that take a

long time to acquire seem to be much more stable as we age than other skills or capabilities."

The more we practice any complex skill, such as playing hockey, Baker says, the easier it is to maintain that skill. But the older we get, the less likely we are to practice skills we learned long ago.

"If we've learned something, we often think we've learned it as well as we're ever going to learn it," Baker said. "In truth, there is really no good evidence to support that."

Case in point: those older handball goalkeepers. Baker and his colleagues delight in seeing them still able to anticipate their opponents' movements and, even as they acknowledge their slower motor systems, see potential for growth. Jörg Schorer, one of Baker's co-researchers on the handball court, acknowledges that the player might take longer to get to the ball, but "we're still exploring the extent to which this slower movement is the result of age versus lack of practice."

Baker doesn't think it's too late, even for the most inactive. Though he doesn't advise jumping up and joining him in a triathlon, either.

"The key here is to be careful and systematic in how you approach this," he said. "Start slowly and have a realistic plan on how you will develop your capabilities over an extended period of time. Just don't let negative images of aging and getting older be the measuring stick for your experience."

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