

The Aging Athlete

Are you an athlete? I am sure that for many of the readers of this publication, the answer to that question is “yes.” Are you getting older? I’ll bet that answer is “yes,” too. After all, that’s part of life, we age. Do you have some concerns about how to maintain your sport(s) as you get older? I am sure that would be a “yes” again.

“Aging” has different meanings for different athletes in different sports, even at the professional level. Roger Federer is only 32 but showing signs of age, dropping his fourth-round match at the US Open in September to a 19th seed, Tommy Robredo of Spain, in straight sets no less. In pro football, running backs are often considered “old” at the same age or even younger while, on the other hand, some quarterbacks (e.g., Brett Favre and Peyton Manning) seem to be able to go on forever. In baseball, “old” is even a bit older for many players. I remember growing up as a New York Giants baseball fan. In the early 50s they gave up on one of the great early relievers, the Hall of Famer knuckleballer Hoyt Wilhelm, considered old by the Giants at 34 in 1956. Hoyt finally retired in 1972, just 16 days short of his 50th birthday.

What about the recreational athletes? What is considered “old” for us, and what do we do about it? In distance sports, it may be as simple as just slowing down. Of course everything is relative. My very good friend, *AMAA Journal* Editorial Advisory Board Member Dr. Don Ardell, is in his mid-70s and has had a couple of injuries (from which he is now fully recovered). In the past five years, his 5k

Following completion of his “Message to the Editor” Dr. Steve Jonas shared it with me for comment. I read his piece on aging in sport with much interest. Staying healthy in your sport as you age is one thing, and a highly desirable one at that, particularly if continuing to play and even competing are to remain enjoyable, as is the case for Dr. Jonas with triathlon.

A related matter is to understand, or at least explain to those who ask, the basis of your success (if your performances attract attention).

I have reached an advanced age. Like Dr. Jonas and every other athlete on the planet who has continued to play his or her sport over the years, I’m not nearly as fast as decades or even years ago. But, in my case, and this is why the question comes up, I am much, much faster than my peers and most in younger age groups. I can’t figure out how to communicate this modestly, but the fact is my times in road races and triathlons very much interest many other competitors of all ages. I can’t recall a race this year when someone or many athletes have not asked me the simple questions, “To what do you attribute your success? How can you go so fast at 75?”

I have not done double-blind, randomized studies on the matter but, after pondering these



time has slipped from 18:30(!) to around 21:28. Still, an impressive time, even for many more than half his age. Then there are the duffers like me, and I will offer my advice for the Ordinary Mortal® athlete for healthy aging while staying in your sport, based on my own experience.

Like many of us, I’m in a distance sport. I have been a triathlete for 31 years. I’ve done 235-plus triathlons and duathlons during that time. I have never been fast, but I used to go long from time-to-time. As recently as 2010, at age 73, I “doubled” at the USA-Triathlon Age-Group National Championships in Tuscaloosa, Alabama, doing the Olympic-distance event on Saturday and the sprint on Sunday. Although slow, I was not dreadfully slow, and I finished both events “happily and healthily” (as I like to say). Over the past three years, granted I have had had some problems with



questions for many months, I have worked out an explanation I find satisfying. I truly think there is something to my conclusion.

Here’s how I explain it. Three major variables have turned in my favor over the long haul of the years that account for my successes: 1) random good fortune; 2) unusually beneficial contingencies; and 3) positive natural selection.

Space does not allow for a full description of these three factors as applied to my sporting life but I believe each variable is clear enough to readers of this publication. Other minor factors include what I consider to be a sensible training regimen, a

bike accident-induced chronic back-pain (but am now healed), I have suddenly found myself going slower than ever. Doubling again? Fuhgeddaboutit!

So what does this mean? How have I adapted to the slowing process and what advice might I offer to you on the subject, and what advice might you offer to your athlete-patients? The most important thing for me has been to not fight it. I have not tried to pretend I am not getting older and that if I only gave it a little more in effort and training time, I could get things back to the way they were. That might be the case, but then I ask, “Why do that?” What is my objective?” Instead, I want to focus on setting goals that are reasonable and rational for me, the way I am now, not the way I was three years ago. I have, therefore, determined that the most important objective is to stay in the sport I love. So, I must go with the flow. If that means I have to go more slowly and/or do shorter races, so be it. The end result is that I get to stay in the sport.

If you are facing similar issues as you “progress” in your sport, you may also need to think about making adjustments in both your assessment of yourself and future athletic goals. Perhaps that means entering shorter races or going a tad slower in the distances you normally tackle. Otherwise, unless you are a truly exceptional athlete, you could end up running, swimming, or cycling yourself right out of your sport.

Go well,
Dr. Steve Jonas

vegan diet, a loving and supportive wife, a favorable environment, and a bit of discipline. Good equipment, especially a good bike, helps too.

When I mentioned this conclusion to my writing partner in Australia, the polymath Dr. Grant Donovan, his reply was typical of his clear thinking: “Don, just one, small, possible amendment to your claim that your success is achieved through ‘random good fortune, unusually beneficial contingencies and positive natural selection.’ I would add the most critical element is training with religious zeal at a divine level well above the realm of mere mortals and with the spiritual guidance from the God of REAL Wellness.” Well, there you go.

It will be interesting to see how folks respond when I run my explanation (not Dr. Donovan’s) past them, assuming I don’t slow down too much and consequently fail to dazzle anyone with my fast times for an old guy.

Donald B. Ardell, PhD

Ed. Note: The reference to “REAL Wellness” pertains to the fact that Dr. Ardell developed the concept of REAL (Reason, Exuberance And Liberty) Wellness and authored a few books on the subject.