

The responsabilization of aging under neoliberal health regimes:  
A case study of Masters athleticism

by

Bridget Jane McGowan  
B.A., University of Victoria, 2010

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## Abstract

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With amateur athleticism on the rise in Canada, older Masters athletes have been promoted as exemplars of “successful aging” in governmental population health campaigns that encourage all seniors to be physically active. This study investigates the life experiences of a group of ‘successfully aging’ Masters athletes to better situate their circumstances against the backdrop of a discourse of health responsabilization enacted by the state in its efforts to improve the health of aging citizens. Data were obtained from 15 in-depth interviews with Masters athletes age 60 and over. The findings revealed Masters athletes to have had exceptional life-long involvement in athleticism with intense physical training debuting early in adult life with several participants having been high-ranking amateur athletes prior to their involvement in Masters athleticism. Belonging for the most part to a high socioeconomic status, these participants were able to afford the costs associated with participation in high calibre athletic training and events. While these athletes might be held as exemplars of successful aging, they did not perceive themselves as such nor are their lifestyles and athletic achievements typical of the older seniors population that is targeted by state funded population health promotion efforts. This study offers insight into the socially constructed nature of successful aging under neoliberalism. It highlights a trend whereby health and aging are responsabilized as successful personal endeavours rather than as the outcomes of determinants largely outside the control of any one individual.

*Keywords:* aging, physical activity, seniors, population health, neoliberalism

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Dedication

*For Terry & Patrick*

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## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

### Background

For most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Western understandings of aging have reflected what Dionigi (2006) describes as “a medicalized and predominantly negative view based on a model of biological decline” (p. 181). During that period, the biomedical model represented aging primarily as a debilitating, degenerative process which was inevitably accompanied by pathology (Lupien & Wan, 2004; Wearing, 1995). Based on the ‘narrative of decline’ (Gullette, 1997) these ideas produced, doctors and health experts recommended milder therapeutic exercises and leisure pursuits like gardening, bingo, and cards, as more suitable and enjoyable for older adults. Up until the 1970s, the prevailing biomedical thought was that older adults would put themselves at risk for harm if they engaged in strenuous physical activity.

Beginning in the late 1970s, researchers found that older adults derived many physical, emotional, and social benefits from exercising regularly. This led to the emergence of ‘positive aging’ discourses from the fields of gerontology, health care, health promotion, and leisure studies (Dionigi, 2006; Dionigi & O’Flynn, 2007). Aging was no longer understood as an inevitable biological decline but rather as a process that could be managed with proper care (Estes & Binney, 1989). A landmark article published in 1987 by Rowe and Kahn introduced an innovative concept of ‘successful aging.’ The authors argue that older adults could delay age-related changes with regular physical activity and therefore successfully age in contrast to the more rapid decline that accompanies old age without physical exercise. For the authors, the ethos



of successful aging can be summarized as “the avoidance of disease and disability, the maintenance of high physical and cognitive function, and sustained engagement in social and productive activities” (Rowe & Kahn, 1997, p. 433).

Although successful aging has been criticized for its narrow definition of a ‘successful’ old age, the idea of a highly functioning, socially engaged later life became influential in shaping cultural and political understandings of aging. Successful aging was integrated into a larger set of aging discourses reflected in academic, medical, policy, and gerontological literature promoting healthy, positive, resourceful, independent, and normal aging (Dillaway & Byrnes, 2009). More recently, the concept of ‘active aging’ has been formalized by the World Health Organization’ in *Active Ageing: A Policy Framework* (2002), which has inspired a variety of state-sponsored population health initiatives such as ActNow BC ([www.actnow.bc.ca](http://www.actnow.bc.ca)).

The concept of successful aging must be situated against the backdrop of an important demographic development in Western societies – the aging of the population and concern about the burden that many older individuals could place on the health care system. Decrease in fertility, increase in longevity, and an aging cohort of baby boomers (individuals born between 1946 and 1964) has created a sharp rise in the number of older Canadians (Weir, Baker & Horton, 2010). Health Canada (2002) predicts that by the year 2042, one in four Canadians will be 65 or older. Although there is growing evidence to suggest that Canadian seniors are in better health (Statistics Canada, 2000) and more active than previous cohorts (Craig, Russell, Cameron, & Bauman, 2004), concerns over the soaring health care costs of an aging population persist. One response from neoliberal States has been to encourage older adults to engage in active aging by becoming physically active in order to ward off age-related illnesses and minimize the burden these place on the Canadian health care system.

According to Dionigi (2006), this effort is part of an “emerging cultural emphasis on physical activity, leisure, and sport as strategies for maintaining the physical, social and psychological health of older people” (p. 182). While population health initiatives encouraging physical activity have many positive effects, they have been criticised as an indication of a larger trend in Canadian governance, one in which responsibility for health is offloaded from the state onto individuals. This trend is termed responsabilization – the emphasis and promotion of personal responsibility. In the context of health policy, responsabilization has been widely critiqued. For example, Ilcan (2009) characterizes Canadian health policies as having a “responsibilizing ethos” whereby individuals are encouraged to take responsibility for their health. Ilcan argues that as individuals are encouraged to view systematic health problems (e.g. obesity) as “responsibility projects” (p. 221), many of the health and social services essential to fostering health are simultaneously being dismantled. Similarly, Bercovitz (1998) argues that the individualistic focus of Canada’s Active Living policy effaces structural barriers to physical activity by framing it as a personal responsibility and choice – “a ‘pull yourself up by the bootstraps’ alternative to state intervention” (p. 322). In this research, I argue that health and aging are also becoming responsabilized, as evidenced by state-sponsored health initiatives promoting the concept of active aging by encouraging older people to manage their health and avoid becoming a burden on society. For example, the Canadian Active Living Coalition and Act Now BC emphasize the importance and enjoyment of an active lifestyle, while the “Canadian Physical Activity Guidelines” recommend older adults to “walk, run, or wheel, and embrace life [and] and move more!” (Health Canada, 2011, p. 4).

## Research focus

Against the background of population aging and the offloading of state responsibility, Masters athletes appear to be the ‘poster children’ of active aging. Originating in the late 1960s and 1970s, Masters Athletics is now a worldwide movement which is involved in promoting competitive sports events for athletes 35 years of age and older. There is no age limit for competing – many Masters athletes compete well into their 70s, 80s, and even 90s. The oldest Masters athlete, Australian Ruth Firth, is 101 years old. Due to their athletic prowess, Masters athletes defy ageist stereotypes generated by biomedical understandings of aging (i.e. older adults as decrepit and falling apart), and are often associated with notions of “resistance, negotiation, and personal empowerment” (Dionigi, 2006, p. 192) against the effects of “deep old age” (Laslett, 1996). Their engagement with competitive sport often serves as an example of how to successfully manage the aging body (Phoenix & Smith, 2011). For example, Masters athletes are frequently described by the media as “ageless wonders” (Berquist, 2009) – a source of inspiration “that age is not a deterrent to an active, healthy lifestyle” (BC Government Online News Source, 2012). These ideas are important in promoting positive images, ideas, and understandings of aging. However, as Phoenix and Smith (2011) remark, the rise of older-adult athleticism results in a “tension [that] is a significant one because it has implications for how (active) aging is given meaning, at both an individual and a societal level” (p. 628).

This research explores the intersection between the personal, social, and political meanings of older adult athleticism by examining the phenomenon of Masters athletics as a case study in the neoliberal dynamics of active aging and responsabilization. Specifically, this research explores how Masters athleticism has come to serve as an exemplar of active aging,

which contributes to the neo-liberalisation of health care. More specifically, this phenomenon is conceptualized as being part of increasing efforts to represent aging as an individual responsibility and a quality of being that depends primarily on one's willingness to engage in physical activity, thus obscuring the role played by broader social determinants largely outside of the control of the individual (e.g. gender, ethnicity, work and employment conditions).

The phenomenon of older (>60) Masters athletes and their idealization through a population health discourse is of sociological significance. To begin, Masters Athletics and the rise of intense, competitive, older adult athleticism marks a relatively recent shift in the framing of health and physical activity in relation to the aging process. The move away from early biomedical theories towards more positive and inclusive views of aging and physical activity demonstrates the rapidly changing nature of cultural understandings of aging, as well as the fluidity of discourse. Discourse (i.e., meanings and understandings), can be challenged, contested and changed, allowing for the emergence of new and relevant cultural phenomena such as Masters Athletics. However, while the factors promoting the medical and cultural acceptability of physical activity in old age are well understood, the move towards the *idealization* of senior athletes is unexamined.

This study addresses this gap by examining the social, cultural and political contexts within which older athletes are promoted. In this regard, the concept of responsabilization is central to the value and logic of this research. While several authors have called attention to the rise of responsabilization (e.g., Ayo, 2011; Crawford, 1977, 1980, 2006; Galvin, 2002; Gray, 2009; Minkler, 1999; Yoder, 2002), there are few studies exploring this trend within the area of Canadian health care policy, and no studies focusing specifically on population health initiatives targeting older adults. As notions of personal responsibility efface the influence of environmental

and social determinants of health, presenting senior athletes as the standard toward which all older adults should aspire is a concerning trend. By presenting health in old age as an individual pursuit, responsabilization potentially fosters a mentality of “blaming the victim” (Crawford, 1977, 1980). Illness in old age is thus reframed as a personal failing rather than a social responsibility. There is a critical need for sociological research that examines the responsabilization of health and aging. Research in this area is important considering the aging of the population and increased attention to issues relating to the health of Canadian seniors.

This research explores the responsabilization of health and aging by examining the phenomenon of senior athletes as a case study in the neoliberal dynamics of successful aging and responsabilization. This is accomplished by investigating older adult athleticism from the perspective of a group of competitors aged sixty years and older. The intent is to document the athletic experiences of a group of highly competitive senior athletes and examine how these individuals, through their participation in the BC Seniors Games, are implicated in state efforts to further responsabilize health and aging. This is accomplished through a threefold approach.

To begin, this study seeks to understand the processes involved in becoming a senior athlete. Is athleticism in later life simply a matter of choice, or is it predicated on a lifetime of specific experiences and opportunities? Through 15 in-depth interviews, the experiences, motivations and meaning older (>60) athletes attach to sport and physical activity are explored. In order to situate the experiences of these senior athletes within broader sociocultural contexts, interview findings are contrasted against broader sociocultural discourses. This is accomplished through a targeted search of news stories, reports, and brochures to demonstrate how the sporting practices of older adults are “historically produced, socially constructed, and culturally defined” (Vertinsky, 2000, p. 390), and by examining the social, cultural and ideological factors driving

the current promotion of physical activity to older Canadians. To gain a more complete understanding of how these different levels of meaning operate empirically, findings from interviews and the literature review are triangulated with fieldwork observations recorded at the 2012 BC Seniors' Games, Burnaby, BC. The “celebrat[ion] of active and healthy seniors” (BC Government Online News Source, 2012) these Games represent provides a unique context in which to observe the state-sponsored promotion of active aging – i.e., a showcase for the responsabilization of health and aging. In sum, this case study approach provides a multifaceted and detailed understanding of the personal, cultural, and political contexts in which older adult athleticism is situated. These research strategies are detailed at length in the *Research Methods* section.

#### Overall research aim and individual research objectives

The overall aim of this study is to examine older adults' involvement in competitive sport as both a personal phenomenon and as an aspect of state efforts to responsabilize health and aging. Specifically, within the contexts of Masters athletics, the questions guiding this study are:

- What meanings do older Masters athletes attribute to their involvement in competitive sport; and to what extent could such meanings be influenced by the deployment of neoliberal discourses on successful aging and physical exercise in the Canadian context?
- How do older Masters athletes come to serve as exemplars of successful aging; and in what way does this process responsabilize health and aging as personal endeavours rather

than as a consequences of social determinants largely outside of the control of any one individual?

This research explores how the personal and political meanings older adults attach to athleticism intersect in contemporary social contexts. This is important in that through detailing the meanings, motivations, and experiences of older athletes, we gain a greater understanding of the degree to which the “successfully aged” senior athlete is promoted as a normative standard of old age function within the neoliberal political agenda. Objective two is therefore necessary in order to illuminate the discursive nature of understandings of older adult athleticism, and to understand the cultural and political factors driving the current idealization of senior athletes. This objective also allows for an examination of how these factors manifest empirically. These objectives will guide a detailed examination of the contemporary phenomenon of older adult athleticism, and contribute to the sociological analysis of older adult athleticism and neoliberal health responsabilization.

### Significance of this research

The phenomenon of older adult athleticism is of sociological significance for several reasons. As discussed, Masters athletics marks a recent shift in the framing of health and physical activity in relation to the aging process. Biomedical notions concerning older adults and physical activity have been challenged and replaced by a more sympathetic view of exercise in old age, reflected in the rise of Masters athleticism and the growing number of adults who engage in sport to maintain a ‘competitive edge’ over aging. However, sociological research

concerning the phenomenon of the older athlete is limited and tends to focus on the narrative (e.g., Grant, 2001; O'Brien Cousins, 2000; Poole, 1999) and phenomenological (e.g., Kluge, 2002; Tulle 2007; 2008) aspects of competitive sport in old age. While these studies have helped illuminate the uniquely subjective experiences and variety of meanings of older adults through their engagement with physical activity, this field of research has been criticized for lacking a critical engagement with the phenomenon of the older athlete. Specifically, if Masters athleticism challenges ageist stereotypes about physical exercise and older adults, it may also contribute to the framing of old age as a problem that can be managed with sufficient motivation and exercise (Dionigi, 2006; 2007; Dionigi & O'Flynn, 2007, Phoenix & Smith, 2011). This notion is problematic in reinforcing the idea that illness and poor health in old age are an individual responsibility and preventable through physical activity.

This study contributes to the literature in part by investigating the discourse surrounding the idealization of Masters athletes as exemplars of active aging. As noted, Masters athletes epitomize active aging in western society by embodying “the upper levels of physical performance” for older adults (Weir, Baker, & Horton, 2010, p. 10) and demonstrating a capacity to postpone the physical and mental deterioration associated with aging. Increasingly, senior athletes are being applauded for their efforts and promoted as the new standard of healthy, active aging. This study is therefore timely and original in considering the role of the state in encouraging older adults to engage in physical activity to ward off age-related illnesses and mitigate the strain that a growing and inactive older population could place on the health care system.

Although the promotion of senior athletes seems to counteract stereotypical views of old age, this study is also of critical importance through exploring the possibility that such efforts



might exert a discriminatory effect in representing health in old age as a simple consequence of physical activity. Grant and Kluge (2007) note that although health promotion campaigns targeting older adults are pragmatic on account of their ability to help promote quality of life and improved health, they inadvertently reinforce the idea that the prevention of illness and poor health is an individual responsibility. Similarly, Shilling (1993), argues that the cultural importance attached to individual responsibility represents an “unprecedented amount of attention given to the personal construction of healthy bodies [...] [through] strict self-care routines” (p. 5). Dionigi (2006) highlights the problematic nature of this imperative when she says that the “maintenance of physical activity in later life as self-responsibility ignores social constraints and assumes that all older people have the ability, desire, resources, opportunity, (and responsibility) to lead an active, health, productive, independent, and leisured lifestyle” (p. 184).

The responsabilization of health in old age is therefore problematic because it ignores the contributions of ethnicity and social class in determining physical well-being in old age. The majority of Canadian Masters athletes are white, middle class and educated males (Weir, Baker, & Horton, 2010) who are less likely than their poorer, visible minority and female counterparts to have suffered the debilitating consequences of poverty, malnutrition, and insalubrious working environments. Elite-level older adult athleticism is conceptualized as being part of an increasing effort to represent aging as an individual responsibility, thus obscuring the role played by broader social determinants such as gender, ethnicity, and socio-economic status. This study thus makes an important contribution to sociological literature by demonstrating how older Masters athletes are implicated in responsabilization of aging through a discourse that seeks to entice older adults to adopt “an ethic of self-government” (King, 2003, p 306) – health in old age is transformed from a social responsibility to a personal endeavor. While this type of activity is

undoubtedly beneficial to individual participants, it obscures the fact that older-adult athleticism is the purview of a comparatively small group of healthy individuals privileged by socio-economic status or good genes.

Secondly, the argument that Canada's aging population is in such poor health that they will overwhelm the health care system is increasingly being questioned (Gee & Gutman, 2000). On the contrary, there is evidence to suggest that Canadian seniors are in better health (Statistics Canada, 2000) and more active than previous cohorts (Craig, Russell, Cameron, & Bauman, 2004). However, continually emphasizing Canada's looming health care crisis legitimizes the cultural imperative for seniors to get active. Population health promotion campaigns targeting older adults must therefore be critically examined due to their tendency to reinforce the notion that the onus of responsibility lies on seniors themselves rather than with broader social determinants which are largely outside individual control (e.g., socio-economic status, ethnicity, and gender). Specifically, the trend of presenting Masters athletes as exemplars of active aging must be analysed in relation to the growing responsabilization of health and aging as a personal endeavour. Given the lack of understanding of how this engagement plays into state efforts to individualize the health concerns of older adults, the growing promotion of sport and physical activity for older adults and the recent phenomena of the older athlete need to be studied in the context of neoliberalism and state-sponsored population health promotion. Exploring older Masters athleticism as both a personal phenomenon and as an aspect of state discourse on health and aging is therefore important in illuminating "the co-constitutive relationship between discourse and social reality, how discursive meaning systems are created and particular discourses effect individuals, groups, and life systems" (Porter, 2005, p. 2).

## CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

### Introduction

In this chapter, I review literature that examines how historically older-adult physical activity has been framed by medicine and how current medical literature contributes to neoliberal state efforts to individualize the health concerns of older adults. I describe the nuances in the production of discursive knowledge, specifically how the sporting practices of older adults have been “historically produced, socially constructed, and culturally defined” (Vertinsky, 2000, p. 390). I use this framework in order to illustrate how the discursively created “ideal” senior athlete aligns with the rise of responsabilized health in the neoliberal state apparatus. I have divided this chapter into two sections. In the first section, I review literature that examines popular conceptions of older adult athleticism, specifically in the biomedical literature and in literature on the concept of “successful aging.” This literature draws attention to several interconnected discursive elements that are contingent to the rise of older adult athleticism within the neoliberal state apparatus. The second section concerns literature that examines the promotion of physical activity with older Canadians to highlight how senior athletes are implicated in state efforts to responsabilize health and aging and positioned in relation to increased concerns over population aging and fears of the strain a growing and inactive population might place on the health care system.

### Theoretical Framework

This study is guided by the theories of Michel Foucault, specifically his notions of governmentality and discourse. Foucault advances the notion of governmentality – generally defined as “the conduct of conduct” (Burchell, 1996, p. 19) – as a neologism comprised of the

French words “gouverner” (to govern) and “mentalité” (mentality) (Cupers, 2008). More specifically, Foucault (1994) defines governmentality as an “ensemble formed by the institutions, procedures, analyses and reflections, the calculations and tactics, that allow the exercise of this very specific albeit complex form of power.” (p. 224). To this extent, governmentality encompasses the complex assemblage of rationalities, mentalities and techniques involved in governing both the self and others (Cupers, 2008).

Foucault (1988) describes governmentality as the “reason of state” (p. 153) in its aim to influence the conduct of people, and also to constitute them as subjects that can be voluntarily governed in ways that meet the interests of the state. The theory of governmentality is helpful to understand how the state exerts its power directly but also in more diffuse ways by transforming human beings into subjects who are governed by others and by themselves. For Foucault (1993), “governing people is not a way to force people to do what the governor wants; it is always a versatile equilibrium, with complementarity and conflicts between techniques which assure coercion and processes through which the self is constructed or modified by himself” (pp. 203-204). In this way, society operates as a site for the exercise of state power. Indeed, Foucault (1991) argues that “it is the population itself on which government will act, either directly through large-scale campaigns, or indirectly through techniques that will make possible, without the full awareness of the people, the direction of the population in a manner consistent with their needs” (p. 100).

The concept of population is important in understanding the technologies through which the state exerts control over people. Foucault argues that the state has enhanced its power and its reach by intervening in the life of the population through a range of new bio-political technologies designed to monitor and improve the aggregate health of individuals, including the

use of statistics, health regulations, and health promotion interventions (Katz, 1996). The use of population-based interventions, particularly interventions designed to reduce risk and enhance health, testifies to the inventiveness of the state in rationalizing its existence and rejuvenating its power base. As Rose (1990) points out, “The actions and calculations of authorities are directed toward new tasks: how to maximize the forces of the population and each individual within it, how to minimize their troubles, how to organize them in the most efficacious manner” (p. 5). For this perspective, old age and its associated decline then is a prime “social problem requiring governmental response” (Katz, 1996, p. 24).

Governmentality does not simply refer to the institutional power of the state but rather is enacted through the production of discourses, which Foucault defines as “ways of constituting knowledge, together with the social practices, forms of subjectivity and power relations which inhere in such knowledges and relations between them” (Weedon, 1987, p. 108). In its simplest way, discourse can be defined as “assemblages of statements arising out of ongoing conversations, mediated by texts, among speakers and hearers” (Wearing, 1995, p. 264). However, Foucault (1978) also proposes that discourse should be understood as: “a delimitation of a field of objects, the definition of a legitimate perspective for the agent of knowledge, and the fixing of norms for the elaboration of concepts or theories” (p. 199). This expanded definition draws attention to how the production of knowledge through discourse is tied to relations of power that allow for certain types of knowledge to be legitimated and others to be excluded. Within discourses exist power relations that “construct, regulate and control knowledge, social relations and institutions,” while delimiting “fields of knowledge and inquiry, and [...] governing what can be said, thought and done within those fields” (Luke, 2001, para. 2-3). The production of knowledge must therefore be contextualized within the historical and social space in which it

is produced as a discourse. Discourse can thus serve as a normalising force upon populations by coordinating social practices and influencing popular perception and, therefore, knowledge of the social world.

Foucault's theories of governmentality and discourse help inform our understanding of the relationship between the involvement of older athletes in competitive sport and the neoliberal discourse on successful aging and physical activity. This discourse is reflected in policies and interventions that strategically target areas of intervention that are identified and monitored using specific technological measures, e.g., rates of illness, measures of disability, prevention metrics, etc. (Osborne, 1997). This discourse of intervention is informed by "an immanent principle of functioning intended to operate throughout the whole system and intended to animate and regulate it; namely, that of 'responsibilization.'" (p. 185). Through this principle, people are made not only responsible for their own health status but health care providers also operate within this principle in guiding their intervention and instituting programs to address the problem of 'irresponsible' individuals who fail to look after their well-being. This principle is reflected, for example, in efforts to encourage physical activity in older adults by state institutions like Public Health Canada and the Ministry of Community, Sport and Cultural Development; in the practices of service providers like physicians, fitness experts, and seniors outreach workers; and in athletic events such as Masters competitions and the BC Seniors' Games.

Given physical activity's salubrious effects (e.g., improved health, independence, and social engagement), its promotion to older adults is seldom critically examined (King, 2003; White, Young, & Gillett, 1995). This thesis addresses this gap in knowledge by examining how the state's involvement in promoting physical activity to older adults and responsabilizing health and aging serve as a case study of governmentality. Specifically, this research investigates how

state-initiated population health promotion discourse co-opts the phenomenon of older-adult athleticism to entice older adults into adopting “an ethic of self-government” (King, 2003, p. 306) in the maintenance of their health. What this discourse obscures is the fact that older-adult athleticism is the purview of a comparatively small group of healthy individuals privileged by socio-economic status or good genes. These health promotion efforts implicitly stigmatize older adults whose ill-health and inability to partake in strenuous physical activity may be the result of disadvantageous circumstances over which they have no control. Foucauldian notions of governmentality and discourse are, thus, valuable analytic frameworks with which to examine how the state promotes the engagement of older Canadians in physical activity. These frameworks guide this study’s exploration of how neoliberal notions of health and aging are reflected in the public framing of Masters athletes, and how their accomplishments serve as exemplars of successful aging in state-sponsored health promotion.



## Biomedicine, ageism, and aging

Prior to the 1970s, social views of aging had been largely informed by what Dionigi (2006) describes as “a medicalized and predominantly negative view [...] based on a model of biological decline” (p. 181). This understanding of aging has roots in the biomedical model of medicine, a reductionist paradigm based on a mechanistic understanding the human body (Powell, 2009) and which emphasizes “individual organic pathology, physiological etiologies, and biomedical interventions” (Estes & Binney, 1989, p. 587). Aided by the legitimacy of its scientific foundation, the biomedical model gradually extended, for the better part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, “medical jurisdiction, authority, and practices into increasingly broader areas of people’s lives” (Clarke et al., 2003, p. 164). Fields such as childbirth, mental health, and aging became “defined and evaluated in terms of a biomedical structure of thought” (Estes & Binney, 1998, p. 588). During that period, the biomedical model represented aging primarily as a debilitating, degenerative process which was inevitably accompanied by pathology (Wearing, 1995; Lupien & Wan, 2004). Old age was seen as a stage of life marked by a variety of physical and emotional decline, including “ill health, frailty, loss, disability, disengagement and dependency” (Dionigi, 2006, p. 361). According Gullette (1997), the dominance of the biomedical model produced a cultural “narrative of decline” in which old age, as a normal developmental process, was trumped by the ontology of old age as a disease (Kaufman, 1994; Tulle, 2008). Complex and diverse cultural notions of old age were thus gradually supplanted by reductionist views rooted in physiology and biological determinism (Powell, 2009).

The expansion of the biomedical model into the realm of culture paralleled the rise of physicians’ professional dominance around the mid-1900s (Chappell & Penning, 2009; Conrad, 2005). Biomedical understandings of aging perpetuated “ontologically arbitrary” (Powell, 2009,

p. 85) representations of older adults as mentally, physically, and socially inferior to their younger counterparts (Minichiello, Browne, & Kendig, 2000; Wearing, 1995). These ageist stereotypes contributed to the marginalization of older adults as “a class of elderly whose characteristics are fragility, dependence, society expense, and social redundancy” (Grant & Kluge, 2007, p. 400). From this perspective, older adults’ engagement in competitive sports and vigorous exercise were seen as unnecessary and even life-threatening pursuits due to the risk of overexertion (Dionigi, 2006; Dionigi & O’Flynn, 2007). Instead, milder therapeutic exercises and leisure pursuits like gardening, bingo, and cards, were recommended as more suitable and enjoyable. These ageist medical and cultural attitudes persisted for much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century; however, developments in medical knowledge in the late 1970s led doctors to reconsider the relationship between physical activity and the aging body (Grant & Kluge, 2007).

Beginning in the 1970s, developments in medical research lead to a shift towards a more positive understanding of aging. Studies on the physiology of aging found that older adults derived many physical, emotional, and social benefits from exercising regularly (McPherson & Wister, 2008; O’Brien & Vertinsky, 1991). No longer perceived as deleterious to the aging body, physical activity instead was promoted as the “best medicine” for warding off the ailments of old age and increasing the quality of life in older adults (Burgess & O’Brien Cousins, 1998; Spriduso, 1994). The concept of ‘successful aging,’ advanced by Rowe and Kahn in their 1987 article *Human Aging: Usual and Successful*, is recognized as the first theory to differentiate physiological and cognitive changes attributable to pathology and those changes resulting from the ‘normal’ aging processes. As a result, Rowe and Khan established in gerontological literature the concepts of ‘usual’ and ‘successful’ ageing. ‘Usual’ aging was described as normal age-

related declines in social, cognitive and physical functioning. ‘Successful’ aging, in contrast, implied minimal loss and even enhancement in these areas.

Rowe and Khan’s theory has been influential in shaping gerontological and cultural understandings of aging by challenging the notion of aging as inevitable decline. Arguably, this notion has had significant negative influence on the thoughts, actions, and self-image of some older adults. Grant (2001) notes how older adults, who grew up with the notion that strenuous exercise in old age is dangerous, learned to slow down and rest. In essence, these adults came to embody the ageist norm of old age as a time of decline and rest. Wearing (1995) argues that older adults may be prone to internalize ageist notions of powerlessness, docility and dependence as part of their identity, which can result in a loss of their personal potential and autonomy. Similarly, Estes and Binney (1989) state that popular ideas of aging as decline can lead some older adults to adopt “sick role expectations, social withdrawal, reduction of activity, increased dependency and loss of effectiveness and personal control” (p. 588).

However, the concept of “successful aging” has been heavily criticized. In addition to being critiqued for its biomedical focus, it has come under fire for presenting a largely exclusionary depiction of ‘successful’ old age. Dillaway and Byrnes (2009) argue that successful aging theories present a conceptual hierarchy. For example, the ability to engage in interpersonal relationships and have high productivity is dependent on good health. The concept and ensuing research has tended to define ‘success’ according to narrow, empirically measurable categories that inevitably exclude certain groups of individuals such as frail, socially isolated, and cognitively impaired older adults. As a result, successful aging creates what Dillaway and Byrnes describe as “a calculable gold standard of aging” (p. 706) in which the outcome rather than the process is emphasized. The authors contend that such theories present aging not as “a

broad biosocial process that involves the development of new roles, viewpoints, and many interrelated social contexts but, rather, a game which can be won or lost on the basis of whether individuals are diagnosed as successful or usual” (p. 706). Similarly, Kaufman, Shim and Russ (2004) contend that the distinctions between ‘normal’ and ‘pathological’ aging is not objective, but tied to the social and political contexts in which they emerge.

Despite these criticisms, Rowe and Khan’s concept of successful aging has played a fundamental role in the development of a discourse that promotes aging as a stage of life that can be enhanced, delayed, and prevented through physical exercise. The concept is now part of several aging frameworks that have emerged since the late 1980s such as: healthy, positive, resourceful, independent, and normal aging. These frameworks have been integral in promoting the idea that an enjoyable old age is possible (Dillaway & Byrnes, 2009). The fitness boom of the late 1980s, the rise of health promotion efforts (e.g., ParticipACTION and Canada’s Active Living policy), and a growing public enthusiasm for personal achievement and exercise (Crawford, 2006; Gillick, 1984) have all further reinforced the “need” for older adults to participate in strenuous exercise and competitive sport (Tulle, 2008; Victorino & Gauthier, 2005).

### The rise of Masters Athletics

The structure of athletic sports in the 1960s presented limited opportunities for older adults to engage in high-level competitive sports. Most sports did not include events for adults over the age of 40, thus forcing older athletes to compete alongside younger athletes (McGowan

& Smith, 2010; Olson, 2001). This prospect discouraged many older athletes, who were also put off by persistent stereotypes about aging and exercise (Dionigi, 2006). This changed drastically with the emergence of the Masters Athletics movement in the late 1960s. This movement traces its origins to the sport of track and field (Tulle, 2008) and the efforts of lawyer and avid runner David Pain (Olson, 2001; Weir, Baker, & Horton, 2010). Pain introduced the idea of organized age group competitions – wherein athletes would compete in 5 or 10 year age groupings (e.g., 40–44, 45–49) – to address the lack of track, field and road running events for athletes over 40.

The first “Masters mile” was held on June 11, 1966 as part of the second Annual San Diego Invitational track meet. Fourteen male participants over the age of 40 competed. The event was a success and open track meets throughout the country started hosting similar events. As interest grew, running, jumping, and throwing events were added. In 1968, the first Masters US Track and Field Championships were held in San Diego (Olson, 2001; Weir, Baker, & Horton, 2010). In 1971, Masters events began to include women over the age of 35. Masters Athletics expanded by hosting events and establishing governing bodies throughout Canada and Europe. In 1975, the first World Masters Championships took place August 11–16, in Toronto. Male and female participants from 32 countries competed. Reflecting on the worldwide success of Masters Athletics, Pain stated, “It was an idea whose time had come” (as cited in Olson, 2001, p. 20). The number of Masters competitors has risen from approximately 7000 participants from 29 countries in 1985, to 30,000 participants from 112 countries in 2009 (Weir, Baker, & Horton, 2010). In North America, the number of sports in which older athletes compete has also expanded to include, for example, cycling, squash, swimming, ice hockey, triathlons, and soccer (Olson, 2001; Spirduso, 1994).

## The phenomenon of the older athlete

Masters athletics has spawned the phenomenon of the older athlete and a body of research on the phenomenon of older adult athleticism. By normalizing age-based attrition in performance, the Masters Athletics movement fostered the participation of older adults in competitive sports. As indicated in the International Masters Games Association's (2010) mission statement, Masters Athletics seeks to "promote lifelong competition, friendship and understanding between mature sportspeople, regardless of age, gender, race, religion or sport status" (Welcome to IMGGA, para. 1). Older adults, previously considered past their athletic prime, are now offered an avenue in which to maintain their athletic identities while individuals new to competitive sport found an inclusive environment in which to explore their athletic potential (Tulle, 2008). Masters athletes, through their impressive physicality and their devotion to training, challenged ageist norms about age-appropriate physical activity (Stebbins, 2001; Vertinsky, 2000).

As with previous understandings of aging, much of the research supporting older-adult athleticism is based on biomedical and quantitative models (O'Brien Cousins & Horne, 1999; Dionigi, 2006a). For example, sport-science studies analyzing the physiological responses of the aging body to exercise. These studies provide scientific support to the promotion of physical activity to older adults, but also dominate cultural understandings at the expense of what Grant and Kluge (2007) term "other body(s) of knowledge" (p. 399). This includes studies exploring "the many dimensions of a person including their personality; their psychological and emotional make-up; their previous life experiences, beliefs, and values; and the effects of the environment

on a person's life" (p. 399). It is important to understand these factors as athleticism in later life cannot be fully understood without considerations of its subjective and social dimensions.

Researchers in the area of older adults and physical activity have acknowledged the limitations of the biomedical paradigm and call for a greater emphasis on qualitative understandings of the meanings older adults attribute to their athletic experiences (e.g., Boot, Bauman, & Owen, 2002; Grant & Phoenix, 2009; Grant 2002; Markula, Grant, & Denison, 2001; Sankar & Gubrium, 1994). Sociological research on older adult athleticism is underdeveloped and predominantly based on narrative and phenomenological perspectives (Grant & O'Brien Cousins, 2001). Narrative studies illuminate how aging is inseparable from its subjective experience by providing an in-depth understanding of the diverse processes of self-constitution and meaning making individuals engage in (Grant & Kluge, 2007). These studies aim to capture the essence of older adults' experiences with physical activity by incorporating the voice of the individual, and by exploring the influence of broader social narratives such as sport, fitness, gender and medicine (e.g., Dionigi & O'Flynn, 2007; Grant, 2001; O'Brien Cousins 2000; Poole, 1999). Phenomenological investigations also examine the meaning older adults attribute to physical activity. Emphasis, however, is on exploring "the subjective experiences of *being* and *having* a body" as an older athlete (Phoenix & Grant, 2009, p. 367). As Phoenix and Smith (2011) state, phenomenological research demonstrates how "involvement in Masters sport – and/or a physically active lifestyle in older age – can create possibilities for people to age positively and reconstruct what aging 'normally' means" (p. 628) (e.g., Kluge, 2002; Paulson, 2005; Wainwright & Turner, 2003).

From these two bodies of literature, the works of Dionigi (2002a, 2002b, 2004, 2006a, 2006b, 2010) and Tulle (2000, 2003, 2007, 2008) are central in informing this study. Dionigi's

research concerning ‘veteran’ athletes (the UK equivalent of Masters) emphasizes issues surrounding the motives, experiences, meanings, and identities of older athletes, and the ways in which their understanding and engagement in physical activity are shaped by broader sociocultural discourses. Dionigi (2006b) employs a post-structural perspective, participant observation, and in-depth interviews to explore the dominant medical and cultural narratives regarding aging, sport and physical activity. She argues that older athletes simultaneously mobilize and resist seemingly contradictory discourses. For example, Dionigi observes that participants frequently expressed a belief in the idea of ‘use it or lose it’ advanced in positive aging and health promotion discourses – i.e., that inactivity results in a loss of athletic ability. This idea was important in providing athletes with a sense of empowerment and in helping them maintain their athletic identities despite age related declines. However, Dionigi argues this idea also suggests that older athletes devalued old age. The idea that age related declines should be managed and resisted through physical activity therefore has the potential to confirm and reinforce “other dominant values and ideologies such as those associated with active living and health and fitness promotion” (p. 191). Dionigi’s findings lend support to this research’s objective of exploring how the idealization of older adult athleticism in dominant institutional health literature and media campaigns can stigmatize less active seniors

Tulle’s (2000, 2003, 2007, 2008) research is similar to Dionigi’s in exploring medical and cultural discourses surrounding physical activity. However, her phenomenological research concerning veteran athletes differs in its emphasis on the embodied experiences of older runners – “the ways in which [their] bodily or corporeal processes are intertwined with and moulded by social processes” (2003, p. 65). For example, in *Ageing, the Body and Social Change: Running in Later Life* (2008), she presents an ethnographic and theoretical investigation into the lives of



21 veteran runners. Tulle focuses on the sensory, bodily dimensions of running in later life in order to highlight the ways in which biography, meaning, movement, and age are connected. She argues that participating in the culture of veterans' athletics creates a means through which aging runners are able to negotiate the tension involved between balancing athleticism and the limits of the aging body. Training and competing are not about denying aging, but about adjusting to change through the pursuit and maintenance of athletic competence. Tulle's work informs this research by highlighting the processes of self-constitution involved in becoming an older athlete. Her emphasis on biographical narrative and the convergence of agency, structure and meaning lend support to this study's objective of exploring older athletes' experiences with physical activity in order to understanding the processes involved in becoming a senior athlete. This study addresses the gap in the literature noted by Dionigi (2002a, 2002b, 2004, 2006a, 2006b, 2010) and Tulle (2000, 2003, 2007, 2008).

However, in order to further this contribution, I will examine the vocabularies of motive that older Masters athletes use to justify their involvement in competitive sport. Mills (1940) defines vocabularies of motive as the language individuals use to describe and explain their motivations and behaviours and which constitute "accepted justifications for present, future or past programs or acts" (p. 907). Mills states that vocabularies of motive are not psychological (i.e., unconscious drives and urges), but socially situated. As such, certain types of motives are more acceptable in specific social contexts. Exploring the vocabularies of motive of older athletes illuminates the complex processes involved in becoming a senior athlete, and how such processes are integrated as part the state discourse on successful aging. Although the neoliberal discourse of successful aging is reflected in individual participants' views of aging and

athleticism, the focus of this research is on how Masters athletes, through their public and mediated actions, become embedded in a discourse that targets an aging population.

### Neoliberalism and responsabilization

In the first half of this literature review, I reviewed literature detailing how biomedicine contributed to the idea that strenuous and competitive physical activity was inappropriate for older adults for the better part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This notion has been challenged and replaced by a more sympathetic view of physical activity in old age. This is reflected in the rise of Masters athleticism and the growing number of adults who engage in sport to maintain a ‘competitive edge’ over aging. Although narrative and phenomenological studies have helped illuminate personal, social, and cultural dimensions of older adult athleticism, sociological literature in this area is underdeveloped. Specifically, there is a lack of understanding of how the activities of older athletes play into state efforts to individualize the health concerns of older adults at the expense of socio-economic context. The growing promotion of sport and physical activity for older adults and the recent phenomena of the older athlete thus need to be studied in the context of neoliberalism and state-sponsored health promotion. In order to address this gap, I now examine the factors driving current promotion of physical activity to older adults in the neoliberal state. This section briefly introduces key elements of neoliberalism, the responsabilization of health to the individual, and concerns over population aging.

State efforts to responsabilize health and aging must first be situated within broader political contexts; specifically, this refers to economic and political projects to reform Canada’s

private and public sectors (Benoit, Zadoroznyj, Hallgrimsdottir, Treloar & Taylor, 2010). These projects are guided by the political and economic philosophy commonly referred to as neoliberalism. Rather than a set political platform, neoliberalism is an economic and political philosophy that manifests differently according to institutional, geographical and socio-political factors (Benoit et. al, 2010). However, it is generally driven by the following tenets: minimal government intervention, market fundamentalism (i.e., the free market), and the belief that inequality is an inevitable consequence of the choices autonomous individuals make (Ayo, 2012; Ericson, Barry, & Doyle, 2000).

The rise of neoliberalism and the subsequent dismantling of many of the health and social resources previously provided by the post-war welfare state is well documented in Canada (Coburn, 2004; Steger & Roy, 2003). Within the health sector, Navarro (2008) recognizes a decline in Canadian public expenditures, privatization of health care services, and the impoverishing (if not dismantling) of public health infrastructures. Ilcan (2009), in her discussion of Canadian public sector reform, notes these trends along with several other manifestations of neoliberal governance, such as the retrenchment and offloading of state responsibility, the mobilization and exploitation of the social economy, and the emphasis of personal responsibility. It is this last aspect of neoliberalism that is central in linking senior athletes to the neoliberal state.

The promotion of individual responsibility, alternatively termed responsabilization, is central to the rationality of neoliberalism. This concept is premised on the neoliberal assumption that individuals are autonomous, rational, and self-interested (Ericson, Barry, & Doyle, 2000). Assumptions of autonomy ignore structural factors (e.g., health care access, socioeconomic status) and are integral in the rise of normalizing and promoting individual responsibility in

Canadian health policy. Ilcan (2009) argues that the retrenchment of state services and offloading of responsibility is largely made possible through the rise of a “responsibilizing ethos” (p. 220) that operates ideologically to reframe how certain segments of the population think and act on problems by viewing them as uniquely their own. For example, systematic health problems (e.g., obesity, smoking) are transformed into personal “responsibility projects” (p. 221) and reframed as personal failings. As the neoliberal health discourse emphasizing individualized responsibility is taken up by targeted populations and health care providers, attention is shifted away from social, environmental, and structural factors perpetuating health problems. For neoliberal governments seeking to scale back public expenditures, responsibilization is thus an economically efficient tactic.

### Health Promotion vs. Population Health Promotion

Responsibilization is demonstrated in the programmatic emphasis on personal responsibility within Canadian health policy, as found in earlier health promotion discourse, and, more recently, in the discourse of population health promotion. Health promotion can be defined as the process of encouraging and empowering individuals to improve their health (World Health Organization, 1986). In contrast to the reductionism of the biomedical paradigm, the concept of health promotion conceptualizes health somewhat more holistically as a combination of social and cultural conditions and, to a lesser extent, political and economic conditions (Ayo, 2012). Canadian health promotion traces its roots to the publication of the Lalonde Report, *A New Perspective on the Health of Canadians* (Lalonde, 1974). The report was the first to

acknowledge that health promotion, in addition to biomedicine and the health care system, was a key component in determining health status (Hancock, 1986). Although the report addresses structural and social factors affecting health, an emphasis on individual lifestyle and behaviour change subsequently came to dominate Canadian health policy and public health program planning (Robertson, 1998).

The tendency of health promotion to emphasize individual agency over social, environmental, and structural contexts has been widely criticized (Navarro, 1984; Strong, 1986). Martin and McQueen (1989) suggest that the emphasis on individualized risk-factors in health promotion was contingent on health promotion emerging at a time when the dominant political agenda promoted notions of individualism. These authors also draw attention to the discrepancy between a health promotion rhetoric that is social, yet targets action at an individualized, behavioral level with maxims such as eat better, exercise more, drink less and give up smoking.

Several reasons exist for the rise of the individualistic focus of health promotion. For instance, Jackson and Riley (2007), in their overview of Canadian health promotion initiatives from 1986-2006, suggest that the bias towards targeting individual lifestyles and behaviours is largely influenced by its alignment with dominant neoliberal political attitudes during this time period. The responsabilization of health, rather than enacting expensive structural and institutional changes, can be positioned as an effective means of containing health care costs. Similarly, Armstrong and Armstrong (2001), in their discussion of health care reform, argue that welfare state restructuring and pressures to reduce government deficits contributed towards health promotion being reconceptualised as both a method of cost containment and a mechanism through which to shift responsibility from the state, as provider of care, to citizens to reduce their demand for care.

Criticisms directed at health promotion discourse for emphasizing individual lifestyle rather than broader social and structural determinants of health can also be directed at population health discourse. Robertson (1998) states that beginning in the early 1990s, the discourse on health in Canada began to shift away from health promotion towards a discourse of “population health.” Robertson, who characterizes the population health as “a reductionist epidemiological explanation of health [...] wedded to economic thinking” (p. 158), describes the key features of this approach: equal weight is given to all causes of ill health rather than consideration of the social, political and economic circumstances in which ill health is produced; an emphasis on epidemiological and biological explanation of health; and the contentious belief that redirecting funding from the health care sector into “wealth producing” areas of the Canadian economy in order to increase overall wealth will result in greater health overall. Robertson argues that population health has eclipsed health promotion as the guiding discourse of Canadian health policy and research, largely due to the powerful rhetoric population health provides for the retreat of the welfare state. Connecting the population health approach this to this research’s focus on governmentality, neoliberalism, and segments of the population deemed “problematic,” this research situates State efforts to promote physical activity to older adults within the discourse of population health.

### Population Aging

In a political climate of cutbacks to health and social expenditures, concerns over population aging are also an important factor to consider when examining the political

motivations behind population health initiatives. Fears of the strain a large and inactive older population may place on the health care system contribute towards the promotion of physical activity as a method to ward off age-related illness and reduce costs to the health care system (Dionigi, 2007). Fears of population aging are even perpetuated by ‘apocalyptic’ demographic projections of the Baby Boom generation increasing the strain on an already exacerbated health care system. Although the inevitability of these scenarios is questioned (see Evans, 1987; Foot, 2002; Gee, 2000), apocalyptic demography has become a guiding paradigm in discussions of Canadian public policy and in furthering neoliberal social policy reforms (Gee, 2000; McDaniel, 1987). Emphasizing these demographic projections may function as a central tactic in cultivating a political climate of pessimism and crisis (Foot, 2002) wherein population health initiatives targeting older adults serve as an important strategy for mitigating projected health care costs.

A growing body of print and online health literature created for the consumption of older adults is increasingly available to those wishing to achieve a more physically active lifestyle. For example, websites such Canada’s *Physical Activity Guide to Healthy Active Living for Older Adults* offer clear and specific instructions on how to incorporate the recommended thirty to sixty minutes of moderate physical activity into daily practices (Public Health Agency of Canada, 2009). Older adults are also encouraged by provincially-funded population health campaigns to capitalize on the wholesome effects of physical activity in order to mitigate the costly effects of aging. The exercise DVD *Move for LIFE!*, distributed free of charge by ActNow BC, reminds older adults that “every move is a good move!” (Engage Communications, 2011). Seniors BC encourages older adults to “[s]ign up for a class, join a walking or running group, or make plans with an exercise buddy. Or, consider training for a local sporting event or the BC Seniors Games” (Staying Motivated, n.d., para. 3).

### Concerns over responsabilization

The responsabilization of health and aging is of concern for several reasons. For example, Low and Thériault (2008) remark in their case study of Canadian health promotion initiatives that “it is infinitely easier to focus on the individual than to write policy that addresses structural change” (p. 205). Amidst neoliberal efforts to scale back public expenditures, reducing population health problems to the level of the individual diverts attention away from the social factors affecting health. As Bercovitz (1998) reinforces in her critique of Canada’s *Active Living* policy, this tactic enables government to employ the lifestyle rhetoric of health promotions as ideological justification for not addressing broader social determinants of health.

As discussed, this individualist focus is reflective of neoliberal assumptions of the free-acting and autonomous agent as “exemplar of responsible behaviour and rational choice” (Galvin, 2002, p. 124). Such assumptions are demonstrated in the language of population health promotion discourse. I wish to highlight an example from the Public Health Agency of Canada (2012) advising older adults to “Take a step in the right direction [...] Get active and see what [they] can accomplish! Move more!” (para. 7). However, despite the proliferation of advice as to how older adults can incorporate the recommended 2.5 hours of moderate to vigorous intensity aerobic activity each week into their lives, it must be emphasized that knowledge does not always equal action. Following this, Grant and Kluge (2007) contend that “[n]ot all older people have the freedom, desire, knowledge, range of prior experiences, or resources to opt for an active lifestyle in a way deemed necessary for good health” (p. 403). Therefore, I contend that



presenting a physically active old age as a standard for all older adults fails to consider carefully the powerful, external mediating factors and processes contributing towards engagement in physical activity. A short list of these could include environment, health status, social support, gender, and ethnicity.

Population health promotion initiatives framing health and aging as a personal responsibility should also be critically examined for issues concerning moralization they may present. Galvin (2002) outlines these implications in her analysis of chronic illness framing within contexts of health promotion and welfare reform. Here she argues that by framing chronic illness as preventable given known risks, health promotion discourse reifies notions of personal responsibility and agency within “a distinctly moral framework” (p. 127). The behaviours and attitudes advocated become increasingly representative “with the choices and aspirations of the free liberal citizen” (p. 127). I contend that understanding this dynamic is central in conceptualizing how successful aging ideals promoted through population health discourse devalue other pursuits in old age.

White, Young, and Gillett (1995) lend support to this argument in their analysis of the modern health movement. The authors argue that fitness programs, such as those advocated through health promotion discourse, encourage individuals to work on their bodies in order to reflect specific cultural ideals. For example, lean, muscular bodies are seen to reflect moral values such as effort, discipline and self-control. Ayo (2012) reinforces the connection between these values and neoliberalism in her discussion of how contemporary health promotion policies contribute to the formation of a specific version of health and wellness. Ayo argues that health promotion reinforces neoliberalism by encouraging individuals to change their lifestyles in order to follow the imperatives set out by governing health bodies. As individuals act upon these self-

regulating practices, specific notions of health and wellness are advanced at the expense of others. I contend that this trend is evidenced in the idealization of the senior athlete in population health discourse. Equating successful aging ideals with vigorous, visible athleticism is highly problematic because of its potential to devalue other pursuits in old age. For example, the senior track athlete receives more media adulation than the moderately active bridge player.

In this manner, the population health approach can be seen as individualizing the responsibility for health and aging by advancing the physically fit, successfully aged senior as the new standard to which all older adults should aspire. As Ayo (2012) contends, the “principle of personal responsibility is not only a matter of economic efficacy, but it is also highly value-laden and situated as a code of ethics, an obligatory duty of citizenship” (p. 103). Health in old age thus becomes symbolic of responsible neoliberal citizenship, reframed as a moral obligation rather than a social right (i.e., a responsibility of the state to care for citizens). The onus of “body vigilance” (White, Young, & Gillett, 1995, p. 160) is placed solely on the individual while social and cultural conditions affecting health are ignored.

The implications of this discourse are serious: while not explicitly stated, the darker side of notions of individual responsibility is blaming the individual for becoming ill (Crawford, 1977, 1980; Labonte & Penfold, 1981; Mitchell, 1982; Ryan, 1971). Brandt (1997) contends that conflating notions of risk, responsibility, and choice redefines illness “as a failure to take appropriate precautions against publicly specified risks, a failure of individual control, a lack of self-discipline, an intrinsic moral failing” (p. 64). Although efforts to celebrate senior athletes are important in redefining cultural understandings of old age and helping to improve the health of older adults, it is important they be critically examined for the possibility of fostering a mentality of victim blaming. By framing failure to be healthy, active, and independent in old age – that is,

successful aging – as a personal responsibility, one risks marginalizing those who become ill as behaviourally culpable. Furthermore, advancing senior athletes as the “poster children” of successful aging ideals creates an unrealistic standard. As Tulle (2008) remarks, the experiences of many seniors athletes are atypical in their intensive and compulsive pursuit of athletic excellence. Population health discourse linking the physically fit older adult to the ideal neoliberal citizen must therefore be critically assessed as a political tactic through which to pressure older individuals to embody the needs of neoliberal government (i.e., exercising to mitigate projected health care costs) (Tulle, 2008).

### CHAPTER THREE: RESEARCH METHODS

## Introduction

As specified in the Introduction, this study is guided by the following research questions:

- What meanings do older Masters athletes attribute to their involvement in competitive sport; and to what extent could such meanings be influenced by the deployment of neoliberal discourses on successful aging and physical exercise?
- How do older Masters athletes come to serve as exemplars of successful aging; and in what way does this process responsabilize health and aging as personal endeavours rather than as a consequence of social determinants largely outside of the control of any one individual?

Central to this research is an exploration of the discourses (i.e., meanings and understandings) shaping older adult athleticism, both as a personal phenomenon and as an aspect of state discourse. Investigating this dynamic is crucial in understanding how older athletes, and their discursive construction in dominant institutional health literature, are implicated in state efforts to further the responsabilization of health in old age. As such, this research addresses several gaps in the sociological and qualitative literature concerning older adults and physical activity.

As discussed, the work of Dionigi (2002a, 2002b, 2006a, 2006b, 2010) is crucial in exploring the ways in which Masters athletes accept, reject, challenge, and create the discourses shaping understandings of older adult athleticism (e.g., biomedical and ageist discourses). However, literature in this area remains underdeveloped. This chapter details the research methodologies utilized in the analysis of Masters athletics as both a personal phenomenon and as state strategy to promote successful aging. Topics covered include research strategy, data

collection techniques, and data analysis procedures. The chapter concludes with a discussion of possible problems and/or limitations involved in implement these research strategies.

### Research strategy

My research design is grounded within qualitative methods, as they are suited for the study of phenomena in their natural setting where the subjective meaning individuals attach to these phenomena (e.g., actions, decisions, beliefs, values, etc.) is emphasized (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994; Snape & Spencer, 2003). Qualitative research is therefore interpretive, and aims to provide “in-depth and interpreted understanding of the social world by learning about people’s social and material circumstances, their experiences, perspectives and histories” (Snape & Spencer, 2003, p. 22). Qualitative research also allows for the use of flexible approaches, including the use of multiple methodologies for triangulation in order to extend inferences drawn from the data (Ritchie, 2003) and develop in-depth, multifaceted understandings.

Within qualitative research methods, Lewis (2003) argues that although the exact definition of a case study may vary, it is widely agreed that its key features include the use of multiple perspectives, and that the research is grounded in contexts critical to understanding the phenomena under study. Biggam (2011) argues that the goal of a case study is not to answer cause and effect questions, but to gain a deeper, more nuanced understanding of a specific phenomenon. Similarly, Cohen and Manion (1995) state that case studies allow the researcher to probe and analyse intensely “the multifarious phenomena that constitutes the life cycle of [a] unit” (p. 106). A descriptive case study allows for multiple data collection methods, but also the

use of “diverse indicators for representing a theoretical concept and for securing the internal validity of [...] theoretical interpretations for these cases” (Given, 2008, p. 4). Finally, a descriptive case study approach also allows for the comparison and contrast of empirical findings to theory detailed in the literature review in order to broaden sociological understanding of older adult athleticism and responsabilization in Canadian health policy.

### Data collection

In order to understand the personal meanings ascribed to athleticism in old age, in-depth interviews were conducted with fifteen older athletes. These interviews, through documenting personal stories and views of aging and physical activity, clarify the processes through which older adults come to identify as athletes. As a result, they not only paint a picture of the types of individuals who train for and compete in Masters athletics events, but also help elucidate the processes of self-constitution through which one becomes a senior athlete. Understanding how one becomes a senior athlete is important as the literature review also highlighted factors (e.g., health and socioeconomic status) which frequently function as barriers towards engaging in physical activity in later life. This research, by documenting the lifelong experiences of older athletes with physical activity, helps provide a greater understanding of the experiences, opportunities, and resources (both personal and social) that mould older athletic subjectivities. Understanding the uniqueness of these athletes’ trajectories is imperative in helping counter the increasingly prominent view that poor health and inactivity in old age are simply matters of choice and individual agency.

Further data were obtained through a case study of the 2012 BC Seniors Games, held in Burnaby, BC, August 18-21. While the Games comprised of approximately three thousand seven hundred competitors in twenty-six events, held in venues throughout Burnaby, observations were primarily of the track and field events held in Swanguard stadium. These events included race walking, sprint and distance running events, shot put, javelin, long jump, and pole vaulting among many others. Of the fifteen individuals interviewed for this study, nine participated in these events. I also observed the swimming events, but only secondarily to the track and field events. Seniors athletes and the BC Seniors Games play a central and unique role in population health promotion efforts. The games, first held in Vernon in 1988, are funded through a combination of corporate (e.g., Black Press), private, municipal (e.g., host cities), and provincial sponsors. In British Columbia, the Ministry of Community, Sport, and Cultural Development provides approximately \$440,950 in funding, promoting the Games as a celebration of healthy, active seniors (BC Government Online News Source, 2012). In media reports, Minister Ida Chong states that “competitors encourage and inspire others to adopt active lifestyles which contribute to good health,” (BC Government Online News Source, 2012, para. 6). BC Seniors’ Games Society president June Parsons contends that “participants [...] showcase to the community that age is not a deterrent to an active, healthy lifestyle” (para. 7). I argue that senior athletes reflect and reinforce successful aging ideals by advancing the BC Seniors Games’ imperative of portraying “a contemporary image of seniors as physically fit and socially engaged” (Parsons, 2009). They are thus central in promoting notions of successful aging and responsabilization through public displays of social engagement and high physical functioning achieved through individual effort.

As Biggam (2011) emphasizes, it is essential that researchers delineate the boundaries of their case studies – where description starts and where it ends. As the contexts in which phenomena are situated are often complex, boundaries must therefore be drawn around what constitutes ‘the culture of Masters athletics.’ Considering the plethora of Masters athletics events and the diversity of sports involved, my decision to relegate observations to the track and field events of the BC Seniors Games (BCSG) was largely pragmatic. I justify delimiting this study to the BCSG for several reasons. In addition to providing a temporally bounded event (i.e., set dates and a set location), the Seniors Games are state-sponsored and publicized as a celebration of healthy and active seniors (BC Government Online News Source, 2012). I hypothesized the Games would function as an ideal event in which to observe the responsabilization of health and aging in action. Secondly, the Games are geared specifically towards athletes age fifty-five and up. In comparison to Masters events attracting participants as young as thirty-five, the age of competitors at the Seniors’ Games is more demonstrative of individuals representative of successful aging.

The decision was also made to relegate my observation primarily to track and field events held in Swanguard stadium. This was primarily due to logistics (e.g., the difficulty involved in traveling between venues), and also due to my background as a researcher. My athletic history as a competitive runner provided a familiarity with track and field events and the activities, interactions, norms and values competitors exhibited. This understanding helped facilitate an emic (i.e., insider’s) and nuanced understanding of events (e.g., participants’ behaviour and the structure of events). Although I do not share the experience of competing in an older body, overall my athletic experiences allowed for a greater level of understanding of events.



## Sampling method

The sampling of participants for this study was purposive and criterion based. Participants were selected to ensure the inclusion of specific characteristics, experiences, knowledge, and understandings in order to enable a detailed exploration and understanding of the phenomenon under study (Ritchie, Lewis & Elam, 2003). In this manner, purposive sampling aims for symbolic representation, in which “a unit is chosen both to ‘represent’ and ‘symbolise’ features of relevance to the investigation” (p. 83). In order to include individuals most representative of the ideal of the “successfully aged” older athlete, selection criteria were that participants be sixty years of age or older, and had competed in the BC Seniors Games. Although participants shared many commonalities of experience, I believe that their unique characteristics and biographies allowed for heterogeneity despite the small sample size. Furthermore, while purposive sampling precludes formal representativeness, it is compatible with this case study’s objective of developing in-depth understanding and insight into the phenomenon of older adult athleticism from the perspective of a very specific type of individual – older Masters athletes that had competed in the BCSG. I therefore believe that purposive sampling based on these criteria is both justifiable and appropriate.

A modified snowball sampling strategy was used to recruit participants. Snowball sampling utilizes a small number of initial participants to nominate other individuals eligible for inclusion (Morgan, 2008). It is a convenient strategy given time and resource restraints. A participant I interviewed for my honour thesis research agreed to distribute the recruitment poster within the local Canadian Masters Athletics community. The recruitment poster outlined the

purpose of the study, identified participant eligibility, and requested interested individuals contact me by phone or email if they required further information and/or to book an interview time. Initial response was positive. In total, I was contacted by twenty-one individuals interested in volunteering for the study.

### Data Collection Techniques

Empirical data for this research was generated through in-depth interviews and fieldwork observations. Interviews are compatible with the case study approach as they allow for an intensive, focused, and detailed examination of individual perspectives. Interviews allow the participant to express and reflect on their points of view, and the researcher to listen intently while aiming to understand the research phenomena from the perspective of the informant's experience (Palys, 2003). Ritchie (2003) contends that interviews are the only method through which researchers can gain an understanding of specific psychological phenomena such as motivations, beliefs, and decision processes. As such, interviews are an appropriate strategy in meeting this research's objective of gaining an understanding of the personal contexts in which Masters athletics is situated.

In total, fifteen interviews were conducted with older athletes (>60) who participated in track and field events at the 2012 BC Seniors Games. Interviews were semi-structured. A flexible topic guide consisting of five open ended questions (see Appendix III) and possible probes were employed to facilitate data collection. Participants were given every opportunity to express their views, explain their perspectives, and expand on answers. This approach allowed

for the generation of a fluid and dynamic interview in which unexpected and relevant issues could be explored and meaningful responses encouraged (Patton, 1990). My status as a runner and tacit knowledge of athletics culture helped create rapport, giving the interviews a conversational tone. Participants were often keen to learn of my athletic history, and were able to share their experiences knowing I possessed a similar cultural and experiential knowledge. For example, on several occasions the statement, “You’re a runner. You’ll understand,” would preface an explanation of, for example, the joy of completing a gruelling workout, the frustration of being injured, or the intensity of competition. This shared understanding helped broaden the variety of experiences participants felt they could express.

Interviews were approximately one hour in length and scheduled at the participant’s convenience, most frequently a coffee shop or the participant’s home. After establishing rapport, confidentiality and anonymity were established and the consent form (see Appendix II) signed. Permission was obtained to record the interviews in order to ensure accurate record for data analysis. Opening questions gathered background information concerning athletic history and established interview flow. Questions then aimed to elicit attitudinal, evaluative, and explanatory responses (Legard, Keegan, & Ward, 2003, p.114) by focusing on experiences with Masters athletics and the personal and social significance of these interactions. Interviews wended down with participants shifting their focus ahead and considering their future athletic goals and how long they foresaw themselves competing. No questions or concerns arose. Particular emphasis was placed on exploring statements suggesting interpretations of cultural discourses shaping the role of the older athlete (e.g., successful aging and responsabilization). Interviews were later transcribed verbatim using the software Express Scribe (NHC Software, n.d.). All efforts were made to remove identifying information such as names, dates, and venues, where appropriate, in

order that participants' identities remain anonymous. The complexity of the information sought did not complicate data collection utilizing this method.

This research also utilizes fieldwork observations of track and field events of the 2012 BC Seniors Games. As Holloway and Todres (2003) explain, fieldwork provides a means through which to “describe, interpret and understand the characteristics of a particular social setting with all its cultural diversity and multiplicity of voices” (p. 348). Observations were thus sought to examine how athletes are positioned within the Seniors' Games, and how the personal and political meanings of older adults athleticism intersect within these contexts. While fieldwork is traditionally associated with ethnography, it is also a central component in case study analysis. As Yin (2003) states, a case study is “an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident” (p. 13). At the BC Seniors' Games, the personal and political meaning attached to older adult athleticism are not clearly delineated. The fieldwork component of this study is therefore compatible with a case study approach in detailing the real-life contexts within which the discourses attached to older adult athleticism and responsabilization are expressed.

Observations were taken over a course of five days, from 7am to 5pm. All events occurred in Swanguard stadium with the exception of the swimming event involving two of the participants. Although all events were open to the public, permission was obtained from event organizers beforehand to make observations (see Appendix IV). Attending these events both as an observer and a volunteer allowed for “direct experiential and observational access to the insiders' world of meaning” (Jorgenson, 1989, p. 15). Attending the Games in the role of participant-as-observer also helped minimize reactivity by allowing me to immerse myself

within the narrative of the event (Jaffe & Miller, 1994). As there were more volunteers than tasks, I was able to record field notes during the event. These were written in a stream of consciousness, free-flowing, and spontaneous manner (Brodsky, 2008). Notes were fleshed out later in the evening, adding details and reflections. Field notes specified the time and place of observation, who was present, their spatial distribution, interactions, and other details I considered relevant (Palys, 2003). For example: social interactions, media coverage, officiating of events, medal ceremonies, uses of the body, gender differences, and the nature and meanings of language and apparel.

Lastly, secondary data in the form of online material concerning the BC Seniors Games was analyzed. This material includes documents produced by the BC Seniors' Games Society (e.g., newsletters, strategic plans), news media concerning the 2012 Games, and references to the BCSG in state-funded population health promotion initiatives (e.g., ActNow BC, Seniors BC). These sources were selected because they concerned the topics of the BCSG, older athletes, and physical activity. I hypothesized that these materials would reflect themes of individual responsibility due to their role in promoting the preceding topics to the Canadian public.

### Data analysis

The transcript and field note data were analyzed “to explore the co-constitutive relationship between discourse and social reality” (Porter, 2005, p. 2). This research conceptualizes discourse as any instance of oral or written language that creates meaning surrounding what it means to be an older athlete and how the notion of individual responsibility

is reflected in the participants' viewpoints and attitudes (Porter, 2005). The analysis sought to identify how participants' meanings are reinforced socially by exploring the subjectivities of older Masters athletes (as reflected in the interview transcripts), as well as the ways in which their involvement in competitive sports promotes neoliberal notions of responsabilization and aging (as reflected in BCSG field notes).

All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim and field notes were typed in preparation for the analysis. Using the principles of thematic analysis, I line-numbered and coded the transcripts using an iterative process based on the procedures of grounded theory (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). Specifically, I started the analysis using open-coding and then applied the constant comparison method (Thorne, 2000). I read the transcripts and field notes first to identify important passages and keywords denoting a theme, and then I gradually put these themes into broader categories based on recurrence but also according to relevance to the concepts of what it means to be an older athlete, participation in the BC Seniors Games, and notions of successful aging and individual responsibility. I continued using this iterative process until the themes were saturated (Patton, 2001).

A content analysis of online materials concerning the BC Seniors' Games was also performed in order to determine salient themes and ideas. For instance: how was the BCSG presented in the media, which events and individuals were featured, what sort of language was employed, and what sorts of images were presented? In exploring how the 2012 Games were framed, specific attention was paid to notions of individual responsibility, and to the frequency and characteristics of these messages. Findings from the content analysis were triangulated with findings from interviews and field notes in order to extend the depth and breadth of analysis and to corroborate findings from different perspectives.

One limitation of this study is my inability to verify the interpretive validity of the findings by returning to participants and asking them to review the meanings I attributed to their statements and observations of their athletic practices. This is due to time restraints. However, I increased interpretive validity by determining the position and significance of each theme in relation to the objectives of the study and by looking for rival explanations over the course of the analysis. As this research follows a case study approach, it may be critiqued regarding the inferential generalisation of findings – the degree to which findings are of relevance beyond the sample of older athletes and context Masters athletics (Lewis & Ritchie, 2003). As this qualitative study aims to provide an in-depth, detailed exploration of the phenomena of older adult athleticism, it is justifiable to trade generalizability for depth of study (Biggam, 2011). Doing so provides valuable insight into a sociocultural phenomenon on the rise, and helps address an underdeveloped area of sociological literature. Furthermore, while the experiences of BCSG participants may lack representational generalization to the broader population of older Masters athletes, the trend of responsabilization is pervasive within Canadian health policy. As a result, this study has theoretical generalisation and external validity by illuminating social processes and ideological structures informing the behaviours and beliefs of many older Canadians (Lewis & Ritchie, 2003). This research also lends empirical credibility to other sociological studies in the area of sport and physical activity employing Foucauldian frameworks by developing theoretical propositions and principles regarding governmentality and discourse.

The reliability of my findings have been strengthened by the detailed procedures and efforts made to collect the data. I have followed a transparent, detailed and structured approach, and employed well established research strategies and data collection techniques deemed valid by the broader research community. This chapter details my choices regarding the

appropriateness of these strategies, and the procedures followed during their implementation. I have also ensured the external validity of my research by using methodological triangulation to improve the clarity and precision of my findings (Lewis & Ritchie, 2003). My personal background also enhanced reflexivity during the analysis. As Denzin and Lincoln (1994) explain, “[t]here are no objective observations, only observations socially situated in the worlds of the observer and the observed” (p. 12). As our biographies inherently influence our work, it is possible that my status as an athletic woman sensitized me in my understanding of the participants’ devotion to training and athletic competition. I understood and appreciated the motivations behind the strenuous training participants engage in as it is something I enjoy. As tacit knowledge is central in determining meaning, the knowledge, values, and beliefs I hold regarding sport and physical activity have positively influenced my ability to establish empathetic rapport with the participants, which in turn enhanced data collection particularly during the in-depth interviews.

However, to keep track of these influences, I have followed Cutcliffe’s (2003) recommendation of reflexive journal writing in order to make my values, beliefs, and attitudes explicit throughout the research process. In these entries, I follow Ahern’s (1999) definition of reflexivity as a twofold process of identifying and laying aside personal feelings and preconceptions. Admitting tacit knowledge in this manner not only strengthens my analysis, but also facilitates the emergence of theory (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). While “total objectivity is neither achievable nor desirable” (Ahern, 1999, p. 407), accounting for who I am and my tacit beliefs, values, knowledge, and biases enhances the credibility of my findings.





## CHAPTER FOUR: PARTICIPANTS AND THEIR VOCABULARY OF MOTIVES

### Introduction

Chapter 4 describes the social demographic characteristics of the participants and provides an overview of their attitudes, life experiences and vocabularies of motives for participating in Masters athletics. This chapter seeks to answer the following question – is athleticism in later life simply a matter of choice, or is it predicated on a lifetime of specific experiences and opportunities? While this chapter is largely descriptive, it lays the groundwork for Chapter 5, where I situate the biographies and vocabularies of motive of research participants within broader socio-political contexts, specifically, the BC Seniors' Games.

### Participant Demographics

A total of fifteen participants were interviewed, ten male and five female. Participants ranged in age range from sixty to eighty-four. Fourteen participants appeared to be of European ancestry and one self-identified as Hispanic (i.e., Columbian). All were English speaking Canadian citizens. Ten participants lived on Vancouver Island and four within the Lower Mainland. Overall, participants' highest level of educational attainment was high: three participants held PhDs and seven had completed Bachelor degrees. At the time of the interview, one participant was employed full-time, one part-time, and thirteen were retired. Six participants

had been employed as teachers, and two female participants had not worked on account of being full-time mothers. Other occupations included oil and gas exploration, an engineer, two university professors, a cartographer, a home-based business, auto manufacturing, and an electrician. Based on occupation and highest level of educational attainment, participants appear to comprise socioeconomic strata far above average; this was confirmed by an online review of participants' publicly available property value on their municipal websites.

### Participants' Athletic Histories

#### *Childhood, adolescence, and early adulthood*

Participants were asked to recall their early experiences with sport and physical activity. With one exception (Ned), athletic involvements began around the age five, and can be characterized as both formal and informal involvement; ten participants reported formal involvement, four reported informal involvement, and three did not mention playing sports as children. Formal involvement consisted of playing organized sports with practices, games, and sports with specific equipment requirements and coaching supervision. For example, as children, Byron and Harold played ice hockey, Derreck and Murray played soccer, and Mary and Peter played basketball. Participants described how this involvement was facilitated through their parents, many of whom were athletic themselves. Parents would take them to practices and competitions, pay registration and facility fees, and purchase the necessary equipment. For

instance, Frances stated that both her parents had been incredibly supportive of her involvement in sports. She described how her father had taught her and her many siblings to ski at an early age, and how her mother would drive them to their respective practices, even those at five in the morning.

Other participants characterized their involvement as informal. As Arron described, he was involved in “unorganized things like backyard games, not team sports” until becoming involved in running in junior high. Similarly, Katy and Hillary grew up in rural Europe and stated that although they did not play organized team sports or sports requiring extensive equipment and athletic facilities (their families lacked sufficient economic resources), their childhoods were extremely active. However, they spoke of many hours spent walking, running, cycling, swimming, and generally staying active outside. Katy spoke fondly of the cycling trips she would make with her family, while Hillary described accompanying her father on long distance walking trips (activities both women would rekindle later in life). In contrast, William described how a lack of parental support had forced him to put his athletic interests on hold until after high school graduation: “I tried to be an athlete but... I didn't have the coaching. My parents didn't really want me to get involved [because they needed my help around the farm]. Deep down inside I wanted to, but I had to let it go.”

The majority of participants indicated they played several sports during their childhood and adolescence, switching activities according to opportunity, interest, and ability. Mary recalled that while the individualism of track and field appealed to her, there was limited opportunity, especially for girls, to compete past the elementary school level. As a result, she focused on basketball, resolving to return to track and field at a later date. Murray mentioned that he half-heartedly explored numerous sports (e.g., volleyball, soccer and baseball) before a former

Olympic long distance runner recognized his talent and encouraged him to start running. Tom and Peter related stories about their injurious attempts at contact sports (e.g., football and rugby), and described their first experiences with track and field as discovering a sport for which they were physically well-suited. Tom, who described his childhood physique as “a stack of bones” (i.e., a small and skinny boy), stated that when he took up track and field: “I found I could run faster than anybody else, so all the records were broken.”

The majority of participants stated that they began focusing their energies on a single sport beginning in adolescence, usually upon entering high school. For example, ten of the fifteen participants became members of a high school sports team. These individuals stated that while this athletic involvement entailed dedication and hard work, it was rewarding and formative to their careers as athletes. For instance, Murray described himself as a “lazy” teenager. He stated that as “hurdles are very demanding, very disciplined, and require a lot of mental concentration,” training for this provided him with a sense of discipline. Frances described her athletic involvement during this period as “falling in love” with track and field while taking on a “sporty” persona. Norma, a member of her high school swimming and track and field teams, stated that these activities were central to her life. She described her group of athletic friends with whom she would socialize and attend parties. Many of her high school boyfriends, including her current husband, were also athletes. Finally, Peter spoke of his memorable experiences competing in high schools track and field meets. He became emotional when speaking of the intensity and camaraderie of these events, which he termed “peak experiences” in his life.

Five of the fifteen participants (four men, one woman) who excelled as high school athletes were awarded athletic scholarships to attend university. These scholarships allowed them

to pursue post-secondary education and the training and coaching they received helped mould them into exceptional varsity athletes in their early twenties. For instance, Arron attended an American university on full athletic scholarship for track and field. He admitted that while this was a challenging point in his running career with respect to intense training (e.g., two runs a day, six days a week), it was not without reward. Arron said he was regularly funded to attend major athletic competitions, and in his senior year, he became a National Collegiate Athletic Association Champion in his division. Other participants in this group achieved a high enough athletic calibre to compete in elite national and international athletic events such as the Pan American Games and the Olympic Trials. These participants felt being a varsity athlete fostered in them a propensity for intense training and competitiveness that helped them excel in Masters athletics.

### *Early adulthood and middle age*

With the exception of Katy, Ned, and Derreck, who reported little physical activity until middle age, all participants remained physically active after graduating from university. Four individuals focused on a single sport, while five engaged in multiple sports. For instance, Murray and Peter continued to pursue track and field throughout graduate school and into their thirties and forties. They engaged in strength training (i.e., weightlifting), but this activity was geared toward their main objective – enhancing their performances in track and field. In contrast, Byron recounted engaging in hiking, canoeing, skiing, curling, aerobics, jogging, and weightlifting before discovering track and field at the age of sixty-one. Mary reported a similarly extensive list

of activities before returning to track and field at fifty-five: basketball, yoga, calisthenics, baseball, strength training, and squash.

As during childhood, these participants transitioned between athletic activities according to interest, opportunity and ability. Several participants cited the availability of athletic facilities where they lived and worked. For instance, Byron worked for many years in a building with a state-of-the-art gym. He exercised during his lunch break to burn off energy. Likewise, Harold noted that the proximity of a Nordic skiing facility to his work facilitated his involvement in cross country skiing.

Eight participants took a hiatus from competitive athletic activity during middle age primarily due to the demands of family and careers and the difficulties in devoting the necessary time and energy to their sport. Tom abandoned his successful athletic career at twenty-six despite consecutive wins in the long jump and triple jump at indoor and outdoor track and field competitions. This was due to the combined demands of a new child, house, job, and a foot injury. As Tom admitted: “I think I was wanting an excuse to stop. I was wanting to get out, and I banged up my heel and said that’s it! And I never did a thing since. Roughly didn’t do a thing for thirty-four years.” Similarly, Murray competed regularly in Masters athletics throughout graduate school and into his thirties, but during his forties he struggled to balance the demands of a stressful job requiring regular travel and twelve-hour shifts with the demands of training. He stated: “Training was exhausting, but I wanted to do it.” He continued to compete sporadically in North American and World Masters events before reluctantly taking a seven-year break near retirement.

Six participants indicated that family responsibilities had curtailed their athletic engagement as adults. For example, Katy married in her early twenties and reports that for

approximately thirty-five years, during which time she raised six children, she partook in little physical activity. At age fifty-five, she gave up smoking and joined a gym. Norma, William, Harold, Hillary and Connor reported their engagement in athletic activity to be recreational rather than competitive even though they facilitated their children's involvement in competitive sports. Norma mentioned she officiated her son's swim meets even though she seldom swam, while William's involvement in his sons' hockey teams consisted of "coaching and fundraising and all that sort of stuff." Similarly, Harold struggled to balance childcare demands with work and school and stated: "I used to take the kids and play hockey in the winter, but I would just sit there and watch them. I was never very enthusiastic. I was just too whooped all the time." These participants reported devoting more time and energy to athletic activities once their children were older.

Three participants had injuries and illness forcing them to scale back their athletic involvement. For instance, Frances and Arron sustained injuries during their final year of varsity competition, forcing them into extensive hiatuses (seven and eight years) from track and field until appropriate treatment became available. Frances stated that her torn Achilles tendons prevented her from doing much physical activity other than "limp around." She returned to competitive running following reconstructive surgery and quickly became a top Masters athlete, setting several world records in the women's fifty to fifty-four division. Arron focused on his career and abandoned running. He said: "I can run forever, and I'm going to run forever, and as soon as I settle down at whatever job I'll just pick up running again." He returned to running seven years later and was surprised at how quickly his running ability returned.

In contrast, Peter was captain of his college's track and field team until an injury forced him out of sport for a year. Although Peter competed occasionally in Masters track events, he no



longer considered himself “fit” and found it difficult to train. His health problems made consistent training difficult and often resulted in further injury (e.g., tearing a component of his knee while undergoing chemotherapy). However, Peter felt physical activity helped him recover from several illnesses:

It’s helped me deal with the emotions accompanying illness, and to not let these things defeat me. After my second pulmonary embolism, I was really depressed about that until I said, “Right. I’m going to go back out onto the track and I’m going to do well anyway.” And I did. So I learned that illness wasn’t going to stop me. Same thing with the prostate cancer. You come back and say, “I’m still a complete, functional, excellent person,” otherwise I’d probably be dead, because I wouldn’t of taken care of myself and worked back.

### *Involvement in Masters athletics*

The majority of participants typically transitioned from recreational to Masters sport between the ages of forty to sixty years. Three participants (Harold, Byron, and Connor) reported this decision as the result of developing a passion for a particular sport whereas seven participants re-established their commitment to a sport they had previously enjoyed. The participants received various forms of support in their engagement in Masters Athletics, including coaching, which participants stated had facilitated their development as athletes. For instance, Ned received advice from a coach, one of the best in North America, on running form and technique which helped him avoid injury. Katy credits her coach’s extensive knowledge of

training techniques for helping her improve as an athlete: “He knows what's going on and he passes that on to us.” Similarly, Byron noted the importance of coaching for developing a systematic approach to training. Byron described the detailed notes his coach compiled on him, and how useful this information had been in helping him develop as a middle distance runner. Accessing expert coaching was therefore central in helping participants develop into senior athletes.<sup>1</sup>

Participants stated that social support was also an important factor in fostering their involvement in Masters athletics. Harold spoke of how, in his early forties, the friendships he developed through his running group fostered his passion for running: “There was quite a group, so we did long runs together, we did track sessions together, and they were all just wonderful friends who had a lot of passion for running. These guys all were my best friends, and they were the inspiration.” Similarly, Bryon received encouragement from other Masters runners which made him decide to pursue track and field. Katy described her track and field club as family, and stated that the camaraderie among members helped motivate her to work hard even when she does not feel like it. Participants’ social support mitigated the pain and discomfort of training. Peter found having a training partner essential for intense track workouts: “It’s very important to have somebody to run with. The joy shared is twice the joy and the pain shared is half the pain.” Frances similarly stated:

Training is just really uncomfortable! And I see that as a huge barrier to people who have not been active. I mean, here I am, probably at a much higher level than the average population, and I’m struggling trying to keep myself motivated. If I was

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<sup>1</sup> Fees for Masters athletic clubs vary significantly. Two participants belong to a track and field club that charges \$50.00 a year in membership fees, while one participant belongs to an all-ages athletic club that charges \$375.00/year (this fee includes a more intense level of coaching, a uniform, and a BC Athletics Membership). Two participants belong to a swim club whose annual fees vary from \$315 to \$585/year depending on how many times a week the athlete wishes to swim.

overweight, if I had been a smoker, if I'd had any other kind of joint problems and was trying to get active I probably wouldn't do it, unless there was somebody guiding me and I had over the moon encouragement.

These participants thus viewed the combination of coaching and social support derived from their membership in a Masters athletic club as important factors in fostering engagement in competitive sports.

### *Current involvement*

As they entered their sixties, participants' athletic engagement reflected a pattern of sports activity established in childhood and developed further in adolescence and early adulthood and, in some instances, during middle age. Two themes characterize this life-long commitment: the routinization of intense physical activity and accommodating the aging athletic body.

In regard to intensity, the amount of time participants dedicated to physical activity far exceeds the recommended combined 30-60 minutes of moderate daily physical activity recommended by Public Health Agency of Canada (2009). Participants devoted a significant amount of their time to training, on average one to two hours per day, five days a week. Most participants stated that retirement had allowed them to increase the time and energy they devoted training and competing. For example, Harold cycles five days a week and runs six days a week, while Murray states that he sometimes "goes a little crazy" and trains day after day until his body tell him it's time for a rest. With the exception of Hillary, who trains alone on her rural acreage, all participants reported engaging in group training sessions with other members of their Masters

athletic club – two per week on average. Frances intensified her daily training efforts (i.e., two hour morning training sessions) to recover the declines in performance she attributed to menopause. “I have no excuses now,” she stated, “so I’m going to see how far I can push it again.” Participants also augmented their fitness routines with stretching, calisthenics, weight lifting, cycling, and swimming. For instance, Hillary, age eighty-two, completes an hour of calisthenics and stretching each morning. Standing up from the kitchen table, she proceeded to demonstrate her jumping jacks, stating: “At first I could only do six. Now I am doing sixty!” Ned described his training routine: “I interspace my stretching all along the line. Run, stretch, run, stretch. And I stretch as much as I can, right from my neck all the way down to my toes. I even stretch my toes!” Murray and Arron dedicated time to visualization exercises where they imagined specific aspects of a race (e.g., catching competitors, running a specific section of a race course, winning the race) in order to help them mentally prepare for competition. Both men felt these activities gave them a psychological advantage in competitions, and were a central part of their athletic success. As Murray summarized: “You can be defeated in your mind if your physical training and your mental training is not balanced.” He intentionally keeps his commitments to a minimum in order to train seven days a week in pursuit of his current goal – to win a medal in the hurdles at the 2013 World Master Games in Italy.

Participants explained their commitment to intense physical activity as a priority in their lives. Katy said: “Its easy to give up or think, ‘Let’s do something else. I don't have time.’ But you have to make time for it. If you don’t then you might as well stop the whole thing.” Similarly, Mary stated: “Its not about ‘I don’t have time to exercise.’ You make time!” Peter summarized his approach to track and field as follows: “[O]n the whole, if you work out hard and watch your weight and do all the things you’re supposed to do, and take good care of

yourself and go to the gym and do the right kinds of workouts and suffer on the track, you will do better in the competition.”

Participants set specific athletic goals to motivate themselves. For instance, Arron marked specific races on the calendar to remind himself that his ultimate goal is to win and beat his old records. Characterizing his collection of training records as “meticulous,” Arron pulled out a sheet of paper from a nearby drawer and passed it to me. The page was covered in carefully written numbers, arranged in lines and columns. In addition to mileage, Arron also charted where he ran and the time of day he ran, and explained how this allowed him to track and predict his progress while keeping track of successful and unsuccessful training methods. “Its an incentive tool,” he explained, although he admitted that the need to boost numbers for an inadvertently low mileage week often leads him to run into trouble with injuries. Other participants were equally goal-oriented. Byron stated: “I’m always looking at the records. Can I break this record? Can break that one?” Tom similarly noted: “By nature I tend to be very goal oriented, sort of set targets and see what can I do, what can I achieve? Can I go further or faster or longer? It’s just my temperament.”

Six participants described their engagement in athletics as driven by an “addiction” to physical activity and spoke of the negative emotions they experienced when injury, illness, and other obstacles prevented them from exercising. Ned candidly admitted: “I’m addicted. Oh Christ! There’s no doubt about it. I’m lost when I can’t get out and run.” Similarly, Derreck described his mood as “down in the dumps, grumpy and unhappy” when he is unable to run, while Connor stated: “I’ve been active all my life and if all of a sudden I had to stop cold turkey and do nothing I don’t know what I’d do.” As Frances stated: “[Y]ou don’t ever want to give up that feeling of feeling good. And I guess that’s the factor for someone who has been an athlete all

their life. They don't know any other lifestyle." In some cases, this pattern of activity often prevailed over concern for one's well-being. Harold spoke of the numerous injuries he suffered as a result of his obsession with running:

We ran until we were injured, and then we kept running. I should let you have my training logs from the eighties. They're scary! Your standard week would be sore right knee, sore left ankle, don't know about my hip but went out and did another hard twelve miler today [...] And then we'd be off every weekend. Every weekend we'd race. I look back now and go, "What was wrong with our heads?," 'cause I bet you there wasn't any of those people who ran a month out of any of their running careers without being injured.

Harold persisted with his running until the onset of his arthritis in his mid-sixties. "I wasn't prepared to put up with the damage or the pain," he stated. He now takes a more moderate approach to training and competing, and stated his enjoyment of the sport has increased, "Probably because I don't hurt as much," he added. However, he stated he still occasionally trains more than he should, particularly before a competition.

The participants also spoke of their aging bodies and the impact this had on their involvement in athleticism. Ned suffered "pain after misery after injury," including a torn abdominal muscle and a slipped disk, when he first started running at sixty-seven, despite the supervision of a coach. He attributed his injuries to a lack of variety in his training regimen and now incorporates stretching and strengthening exercises into his daily training. He admits learning the importance of rest and listening to his body: "I'm a senior. I know you can hurt yourself real bad at this thing. I make damn sure now, which I never did before, that I take the time off so those muscles can heal." Other participants described the injuries they incurred through their sporting activities. For example, Connor suffered a broken hip

from a cycling accident, a torn rotator cuff from weightlifting, Achilles tendonitis from running, and arthritis and bone spurs in both knees, which he attributes to overuse. “All of it can be related back to physical activity,” he admits, “that I probably overdid it” and acknowledges he may not be able to run for much longer: “It’s getting harder and harder. It doesn’t take very much running before my knees start to hurt. I take Advil and that helps, but I wonder for how much longer.” As a result, Connor focuses his energies on cycling. Mary gave a comparable account in describing how she underwent knee replacement surgery but continues to run against her doctor’s advice: “I don’t think there’s anything that would stop me,” she stated laughingly. “I always say if my knee gives out on me cut my leg off and I’ll use a fake leg to set high jump records. There’ll always be something I can do.” Similarly, Byron reported recent heart problems which compromised his ability to run, and described how he had taken up pole vaulting instead. These participants’ determination to train and compete despite injuries and complications to their health suggests a strong commitment to physical activity that is more likely found among professional athletes than in individuals doing such activity for recreational purposes.

The majority of participants indicated being inspired by older senior athletes’ abilities. For instance, Tom expressed his admiration for a competitor in her 90s: “Boy, it’s inspiring to me! I mean, most 90 year olds are either dead or on a stick, and here she is in her Spandex running a 100m in 20 seconds!” Similarly, Frances viewed senior athletes as role models:

I think as more people see fit and active seniors, that’s going to become the norm. And that’s going to be what people are going to do rather than, “I’m retired. I’m just going to sit on the couch. I can’t do anything anymore.”

Byron also found Masters competitors in their nineties inspiring. Watching these athletes compete made him believe that he would be able to compete in track and field well into his nineties. When I asked Byron how he thought the public viewed senior athletes, he stated:

They think it's fantastic [...] I don't know how many people pay attention, but the people that are active in track and field or in other sports they have great admiration for somebody who is still functioning that well in their nineties. They find it hard to believe.

Frances was also inspired by older athletes:

I just go, hopefully I'll still have the interest and I'll still be physically able to do that. Because I know that from that it means that they're leading these incredibly healthy lives, both physically and socially, cause they're travelling, they're meeting people, they've got meaning in their life, and just going for it. Like, living, never complaining. Just loving it. And I just think that's such an awesome role model for anybody to see.

Frances also felt older athletes exemplified how to avoid age-related declines:

I think the older population they're just going, "I'm just staying upright as long as I can and I know this is going to help because I don't want to be like that. I don't want to be on a walker. I don't want to be on a cane, and I sure as heck don't want to be in a wheelchair yet."

Murray also said athletic involvement illustrated a way to void the stigma of old age:

It makes me feel very sad about people maybe even younger than me that have to use a cane or walker. But you never know what happened in their lives, how they treated their body and it reacted to things in life. It could be an accident, it could be an abuse of the body or things like that. So it's hard to say, but the feeling is, I don't think I want to be like that. I'm fortunate enough not being that way. I want to keep myself healthy.



Ned stated that: “As long as I’m knocking off the gold medals and I’m winning I’ll continue doing it, but I won’t do it when I start to lose [...] I don’t feel it’s credible. Let somebody else do it [...] I win. That’s it. You want to learn something; I’m the guy that can teach you.” Ned said he was motivated to compete in order to promote physical activity to other older adults. In this regard, he felt that his status as a track and field champion made him “credible” spokesman for physical activity:

That’s why I run. When I run and get a gold medal then I can say [to other seniors], “Well if you do this, and this is good for you. And I just won my last medal a week ago, not twenty years ago. A week!”

### *Aging Athletes as Role Models*

What also motivated participants was an awareness of senior athletes serving as role models for older and younger generations. For instance, Murray spoke of a seventy year old cyclist who had won several gold medals at the 2012 BC Seniors’ Games:

A seventy year old person being able to cycle twenty miles sends a very clear message to the young population to be healthy and not go in wrong directions with alcohol and drugs and anything that is going to harm your body. I think a health body is also a healthy mind and it’ll help you a lot. It sends a clear message to the younger generation, and also to governments. Because, the more that they sponsor seniors I think it’s the best for them to lower the cost of medications, because a lot of seniors are medicated.

The majority of participants hoped they would also become role models. Mary stated: “I hope that I inspire some people in doing it or to start, especially my grandkids. I want them to realize that there are things they can do in life. It’s a lifestyle.” Ned said: “Well, it seems to me that the biggest problem they have is just the one group of people, baby boomers. So if the baby boomers don’t exercise they’re going to swamp the system, and then we’re all going to pay the price. There’s no question about it.” He added that senior athletes could set an example for aging adults:

The health care system can’t afford to have a bunch of senior people out of shape or not exercising. They can’t afford it! [...] And therefore, if more people like myself and these other guys who run could get their point across to these people... I mean an athlete on the track is not in the hospital!

Similarly, Frances viewed exercise in older adults as having a preventative benefit:

If you can cut down your Medicare costs then that’s got to be good for the government [...] We have a major crisis it seems in hospitals. We don’t have enough beds, we don’t have enough doctors, we don’t have enough nurses, you know. And if we could start to deal with things that are lifestyle choice related then more than likely that’s a big chunk of our government’s support money that could be alleviated. And in addition, [alleviating] depression, giving back to the community, all those kind of things that healthy individuals do because they have enough energy to take care of themselves plus go into the community and do whatever [...] And so for us to kind of lose track of [senior athletes] and not use that is crazy.

However, Byron felt there should be a limit to the public recognition of senior athletes:

I think you can overdo it because there's so many old people suffering and you don't want to go around parading your wellbeing in front of some of these older people that are suffering from cancer or from leg pain or knee joints that are not working any more, or hips that are not working anymore. But on the other hand, a lot of them kind of seek you out for their encouragement as well, and you don't mind sharing opinions if you're asked by them, but you have to be a little careful not to wave your own flag because you just might make, at least I think you could affect them maybe a little to their detriment rather than try to encourage them.

Per way of example, Byron referred to his younger brother who suffers from old hockey injuries:

He's had knee replacements on both legs and I kind of get the impression that he feels that every time I tell him about my accomplishments... I get no reaction from him at all and I kind of sense that he feels maybe that he is maybe a failure because he can't do the same things.

As a result, Byron said he prefers to keep his athletic accomplishments to himself. "I'm not looking for publicity," he added.

### Summary

In answering my original question "is athleticism in later-life simply a matter of choice, or is it predicated on a lifetime of specific experiences and opportunities?" I argue that although,

ostensibly, engagement in athleticism in later-life is a matter of choice, the findings in this chapter suggest that senior athleticism is strongly associated with a lifetime of previous engagement with sport and physical activity. My analysis of the athletic histories of participants and their trajectories towards senior athleticism reflect several similarities. For the majority of participants, being physically active began at an early age. They received encouragement and parental support in their sporting activities. They remained physically active in clubs and team sports throughout adolescence, adulthood and “middle-age,” which I defined as forty to sixty. The frequency and intensity of their involvement varied due to external factors such as family and career responsibilities, and also personal factors such as injury and illness.

As participants reached what can be generally described as “old age” (age sixty and over), they continued to defy normative expectations by intensifying their engagement in sport and physical activity. Two central themes emerged from the data that reflect participants’ current athletic engagement: the routinization of intense physical activity; and the need to accommodate the aging athletic body. Participants described the significant amounts of time and energy they devoted towards training (which they often characterized as an “addition”), and detailed the steps taken to adjust their training regimes on account of age (e.g., stretching and strengthening activities; longer recovery times).

In all, participants revealed a breadth of social supports that made their athletic engagement possible. We cannot underestimate the role of family encouragement (from an early age) and access to various economic privileges. These participants are exceptional in many ways that position them as atypically athletic seniors. While there could be an argument made to suggest participants had some degree of natural, “raw talent,” the results of this chapter are in support of a contextual perspective that explains participants’ elite athleticism not simply as a

product of individual commitment, desire, and drive. Indeed, this explanation draws attention to the full breadth of participants' athletic histories, leisure time, and "class-based" privileges that accrued over a lifetime – in subtle and diffuse ways – to finally give the appearance of individual-level achievement.

## CHAPTER 5: THE 2012 BC SENIORS GAMES

### Introduction

This chapter situates the athletic experiences of participants within the context of the British Columbia Senior Games (BCSG). The first section traces the history of the BCSG. In the second section, I triangulate field notes, media stories, BCSG promotional material, and participant interviews to explore the participants' experiences according to the following themes: camaraderie, competitiveness and the lure of medals. I conclude with a discussion of how the

2012 BCSG reflect a gradual evolution of the Games toward elite athleticism and away from its original ideal of fostering inclusive participation of all seniors into sporting events.

This chapter is primarily based on a “thick description” (Geertz, 1973) of participants’ involvement in the 2012 BCSG and examines what participating in the BCSG means to them. Thirteen of the fifteen individuals interviewed for this study self-identified as regular BCSG competitors. On average, they had been participating in the Games for ten years. Ten participants competed in the 2012 BCSG (seven in track and field events, one in cycling, and two in swimming), while three were unable to attend due to injuries. Only two participants, both runners, never attended the BCSG even though they had competed regularly in Masters track and field events. Most research participants reported initially learning of the Games through an acquaintance, frequently a family member or an athletic friend. For example, Tom reported he had never heard of the Games before his son-in-law encouraged him to participate, while Katy confessed she had been unaware of the BCSG until informed by her daughter. Hillary and Mary both stated they learned about the BCSG through their local paper – Hillary through a flyer and Mary through what she described as “those tiny black and white ads on the sports page, the ones that hardly anyone reads.” Norma reported finding out about the Games through a fellow Masters swimmer.

### History of the BC Seniors Games

The BCSG is an annual, multi-sport, competitive event open to residents of BC aged fifty-five and older. Every summer since 1988 this event has been hosted by communities across

the province and has grown to include over twenty-five events, including competitive sports like track and field, swimming, and cycling, and less physically demanding events such as darts, lawn bowling, and bridge. Host communities have the option to select “demonstration sports” that include disk golf, dragon boating, and pickleball. This variety of events is meant to encourage participation from seniors at all levels of athletic ability. Events are held across the selected city at various venues throughout the community.

The BCSG are organized by the BC Seniors Games Society (BCSG Society) which was founded following a meeting on November 28, 1986, organized by former Vancouver Mayor Gordon Campbell. Campbell acted as Organizational Consultant of the Sport Branch of the Ministry of Community, Sport and Cultural Development, in inviting thirty representatives from seniors’ groups throughout BC to attend the meeting to discuss the possibility of a Seniors Games (BC Seniors Games Society, 2012, p. 1). These representatives believed that sport and recreational development for older adults would have “a positive impact on the health and quality of life for older British Columbians” (BC Seniors Games Society, 2007, p. 5). They presented the concept of an annual provincial sporting event for seniors to the provincial Social Credit government of Bill Vander Zalm. The concept received unanimous endorsement.

The BCSG Society became a registered provincial, non-profit/charitable, volunteer-driven organization society on July 10, 1987, receiving core organizational grants from the provincial government (via the Sport Branch of the Ministry of Community, Sport and Cultural Development), Health and Welfare Canada (now Health Canada, and Human Resources Development Canada), and various corporate and private sponsors. The following year, 1988, the first BCSG were held in Vernon, BC, June 14-16. Approximately seven hundred participants attended the games, competing in fifteen events.

Since 1988, the BCSG have grown significantly. The Burnaby 2012 BCSG, which celebrated the Games 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary, boasted 3700 participants. The BCSG is well-known among the community of senior athletes. Norma, who organizes the swimming events, says she rarely puts any effort in promoting the BCSG: “They just look on the website or have heard about it and they contact me and want to take part, which is great.” When asked why she thought more people were aware of the BCSG, she pointed to the increased prevalence of the population health discourse: “Everywhere, you know, the paper, the TV, everything is on physical fitness now. So much encouragement and advertising to take part and take care of your body.” However, Frances argued more could be done to promote Masters athletics to a broader audience. “It’s still too much of a closed community,” she stated.

The BCSG Society now has a complex organizational structure consisting of a board of directors, twelve provincial zone committees, and the host city directorate. The board of directors includes an executive committee, which functions as a steering committee for the BCSG Society, and twelve provincial zone representatives. Responsibilities of the twelve Zone committees, which include a representative for each sport/activity, include registration, organization (e.g., helping participants with travel arrangements), supplying uniforms, local public relations, and promotion and fund raising activities. In 1994, the BCSG partnered with the BC Games Society (organizers of the summer and winter BC Games). The purpose of this agreement is “to ensure prosperity, quality and evolution” of the BCSG Society and the BCSG (Policies and Procedures of the BC Seniors Games Society, 2013, p. 5). The organization relies on a province-wide, grass roots, volunteer driven structure, “designed and managed by seniors for seniors” (BC Seniors Games Society, 2007, p. 2). However, additional support is provided by BC Athletics, a



Provincial sports organization that provides sanctioning expertise (e.g., officiating track and field events).

Funding is provided through a combination of Provincial and Municipal Governments, corporate and private funding partners, the BC Games Society, and fund-raising activities. In 2012, the BCSG Society received \$85,000 from the provincial government. At the opening ceremonies of the 2012 games, Minister Ida Chong, from the Ministry of Community, Sport, and Cultural Development, announced an additional \$265,950 in funding, provided by the new Community Gaming Grant funding available for non-profit organizations providing programs and services of direct benefit to the broader community (BC Online News Source, 2012). The money was to be divided among 10 provincial zones to pay for expenses such as uniforms, administrative costs, and registration fees.

As BCSG Society President June Parsons stated at the opening ceremony of the 2012 Games, the Society's objective is: "To promote an active, healthy lifestyle, at the community level, to all fifty-five plus residents of BC" (field notes). This endeavour is accomplished through two objectives: "1) by organizing the BC Seniors Games as an annual opportunity for Seniors to participate in physical and social activities; 2) by proactively portraying a contemporary image of Seniors as physically fit and socially engaged" (BC Seniors Games Society, 2007, p. 8). The mission statement also emphasizes the Society's commitment to promoting "the health and social benefits of participation in sport, recreation and cultural activities" (p. 8) to all British Columbians. As stated in the *BC Seniors Games Society Strategic Plan: 2007-2012* (2007), this entails the following goal:

The majority of British Columbians 55 years of age and older will be the epitome of the active lifestyle of the West Coast and will set an example for other Canadians. They will

be physical active and socially engaged and will be celebrated as role models for the 'responsible' health plan for the future (p. 8, my emphasis).

The BCSG Society contends that organizing a sporting event for older adults facilitates their involvement with provincial and local sports organizations and recreation centres. The inclusiveness of athletes at all level of abilities is promoted in press releases and promotional material. The 2012 Burnaby Games website described the Games as “the most Memorable, Inclusive, and Sustainable Games ever!” (Burnaby BC Seniors Games, 2012). The ability of all older adults to participate, regardless of their physical capabilities, was also mentioned in some media coverage of the BCSG. In an online episode of Senior Living Magazine on the BCSG, the narrator says: “No matter what sport or event you’re involved in, be it low impact or high, physical or non, the BC Games provide a wonderful outlet for you to get involved in your community, while keeping you healthy physically and mentally” (2012).

BCSG Society policy documents parallel Canadian health policy on population health and personal well-being. For instance, the Society’s strategic plan (*BC Seniors Games Society Strategic Plan: 2007-2012*, 2007) underlines the challenges an aging population and rising inactivity rates present to the health care system. The plan cites studies estimating \$2.1 billion in annual health care costs resulting from inactivity, and a senior population wherein 70% are not active enough to achieve health benefits to emphasize the value of the BCSG in promoting physical activity as a preventative health measure. The BCSG Society also acknowledges evolving cultural understandings of old age by presenting itself as “a principal catalyst in changing the image and the reality of the BC ‘senior citizen.’ Tomorrow’s senior is physically fit, active for life and socially engaged” (p. 3).

## The 2012 BCSG

The opening ceremony of the 2012 BCSG took place August 22 at Swangard Stadium, Burnaby, BC. The BCSG Society (2012a) described the opening ceremonies as “an event you don’t want to miss” (p. 2), while Burnaby organizers encouraged friends, family, and community members to “Come out to get the first look at over 3600 valiant senior athletes” (Burnaby BC Seniors Games, 2012). In email correspondence with volunteers, the ceremony was described by the Communications Coordinator as a celebration of “25 years of seniors sportsmanship [showcasing] the diversity and skill of over 3600 senior athletes from all over British Columbia” (A. dela Cruz Yip, personal communication, August 20, 2012).

The ceremonies took place on a 100m stretch of track. The BCSG torch stood approximately ten feet tall near the centre stage. At the right end of the track a choir and several musicians assembled. Banners listing BCSG sponsors (e.g., The Black Press, The Salvation Army, The Independent Times) were prominently displayed. The parade began around 7pm with the entrance of five RCMP officers in their ceremonial uniforms followed by a band of elderly bag pipers and flag bearers from the Burnaby Legion. Next were past and present board members of the BCSG Society, members from the Burnaby community responsible for the Games’ organization, local politicians, and official guests in uniforms. Games participants entered to the musical accompaniment of a brass band carrying placards and banners displaying their respective provincial zone numbers and names. Most participants wore athletic uniforms, many adorned with badges and pins from previous games. They chatted, smiled, and waved to the crowds. The audience cheered and clapped. The participants paraded down the track and onto the infield, each

zone assembling side-by-side facing the crowd. After all the zones assembled, participants left the infield to take their seat in the stadium.

Elite athletes from the sporting community gave speeches. The President of BCSG Society emphasized that although many aspects of the BCSG have changed and improved over the years, “the purpose of the society has never changed – to promote an active, healthy lifestyle, at the community level, to all fifty-five plus residents of BC. That’s how it started, and that’s how it still is.” Applauding eleven individuals who have participated in all BCSG since their inaugural year, she added that the Games showcase, “in each different community throughout BC, that age is not a factor in leading an active healthy life.” The Participants’ Pledge was then read by a 93 year old competitor.

The speech was followed by a choral performance and shows of Aboriginal, Indian, and Chinese dancers. A young woman then announced:

The theme song for the 2012 BCSG is “I Hope You Dance.” Its dedicated to all the athletes and competitors, for the example that they lead is truly inspirational. Get out there, take chances, and stay active. Live your life to its fullest no matter what. You can! (field notes).

Barbara Howard, the 92-year old torch bearer, was driven into the stadium on the back of a motorcycle to a standing ovation. She was introduced as a member of the BC Sports Hall of Fame, a competitor in the 1938 British Empire Games, and the first black woman to represent Canada at an international athletic event. Assisted by two volunteers, she met a smiling Ida Chong (former Minister of the Ministry of Community, Sports, and Cultural Development) and they posed for photographs. Minister Chong took the torch, climbed stairs, ignited the flame and declared: “Let the 2012, anniversary celebrations of the Burnaby BC Seniors Games begin!” The

crowd cheered loudly. The final performance was a choreographed dance by a group of high school students to Kool and the Gang's "Celebration Song," complete with smoke shooting out from the stage. The crowd dispersed, with many competitors stopping to pose for photos in front of the flame before exiting.

### Camaraderie, competitiveness and the lure of medals

This section provides an account of the 2012 BCSG that is rooted in my participants' experiences. These experiences are summarized under three themes: camaraderie, competitiveness and the lure of medals. Camaraderie was a salient theme in the interviews. Several participants described the warm and friendly feelings among competitors as an appealing feature of the BCSG. A sense of connection was forged through seeing one another repeatedly at various competitions. As Hillary stated: "It's fun! The camaraderie is very good too. You meet other people from all over BC and that's nice. And you get to see them again." Norma said she enjoyed reconnecting with friends from her youth at Masters swimming events and took great pleasure in renewing these friendships. Similarly, when I asked Katy what competing in the BCSG meant to her, she replied: "First of all, I'm part of it. And the camaraderie among each other is wonderful, because we meet people once a year and its 'Oh Hi!' It's a big family." Katy searched for the words to describe what she felt before adding: "You feel it inside but it's hard to say it exactly in words. It's a big part of everything there."

I also observed camaraderie in the interactions among senior athletes at the 2012 BCSG. They would often greet each other with comments such as: "Good to see you!," "You're looking

well,” “We didn’t see you at the last one,” and “Are you going to be at the next one?” There was much hugging, smiling, hand shaking, back patting, and friendly banter. “It’s like a gang that travels around from one event to the next,” one of my fellow volunteers remarked. Tom found the most enjoyable aspect of the BCSG was the friendly atmosphere, which was in contrast to his previous experiences in elite athletic competitions:

Thirty five or forty years ago, you didn’t talk to anybody. It was all just focus, focus, focus, and you did your thing and it was all over. You were so spent and exhausted and you didn’t want to see anybody. Here it’s just totally different. Everybody arrives. You do maybe a five/ten minute warm up, you talk to all your buddies, they talk to you. It’s more like a big party.

Competitors would frequently encourage other athletes to join them for their warm-up prior to an event, and exchange friendly handshakes and playful comments at the start of a race. For example, at the start of the men’s 5000m event, one competitor turned to the others and jokingly questioned, “All right, who’s going to come second?” Similarly, in the women’s heat of the same event, one competitor jokingly questioned, “Why are we doing this? When do we go shopping?”

Although these interactions suggest a light-hearted attitude towards events, they belie the competitive attitude of athletes at the BCSG. Although the intensity of competitiveness varied among my participants, most indicated they sought to distinguish themselves from their competitors to some degree, be it by winning a gold medal or simply by not finishing last. Several participants considered themselves to be highly competitive and cited winning, rather than enjoyment and effort, as their main objective. These participants considered competitiveness an essential aspect of their identity as athlete. For instance, Arron jokingly attributed his competitiveness to his DNA and said: “I just wouldn’t be me if I didn’t go out there

and try to come first in my age group.” He added his sole purpose in running a race was to win: “If I wasn’t fit enough to do that, then there’s really no point in going.” Likewise, Ned cited winning as his main motivation: “As long as I’m knocking off the gold medals and I’m winning I’ll continue doing it, but I won’t do it when I start to loose [...] I win. That’s it.” When I asked Ned to elaborate he responded by saying his ability to promote physical activity among older adults was tied to his athletic success: “I won’t do it when I start to lose [...] I don’t feel it’s credible. Let somebody else do it [...] I win.”

These participants relished the competitive atmosphere of some of the events at the BCSG. They spoke candidly about the enjoyment of breaking records, winning medals, and the recognition and status gained from competition. For example, Derreck spoke enthusiastically of the competitiveness among the runners in his age group: “When we’re racing against each other there’s always that eye contact as we’re trying to outdo one other. They’re all competitive too, but we always wish each other well. It’s a very friendly rivalry.” Likewise, Harold enjoyed competitive rivalry which was not always friendly. He decried the “mind games” runners would play with one another like downplaying one’s athletic form to falsely reassure adversaries (e.g., “I’ve got a sore back. I think I’ll take it easy today”) or tactics such as “accidentally” spitting to the side as a faster runner is attempting to pass.

Several highly competitive participants spoke of their disappointment at not winning or performing poorly. For instance, Katy recounted when she was disqualified meters away from “easy gold” at a previous BCSG: “I was mad at myself! Oh, you dummy! They told me, ‘You have to let go. Don’t dwell on it,’ because I was really mad, not at the people but inside.” At the 2012 BCSG, I observed a similar incident where a competitor was disqualified. Two male race walkers had been fighting for the lead the entire race. The event drew many cheers from the

crowd. As the competitors headed down the straightaway towards the finish, one started to run. A BC Athletics official flashed the man a red card indicating his disqualification. The man's posture collapsed. Shaking his head, eyes down, he walked off the track and wandered into the stands to sit next to his wife.

Several participants spoke with pride of winning a medal during competition. Frances felt the drive to win a medal significantly motivated older athletes to compete in multiple events: "Senior athletes love to compete and they love medals!" She explained laughingly that older athletes sometime participated in events with few competitors just to win a medal. Nonetheless, this passion was not shared by all. Specifically, Ned felt this drive for medals was foolhardy and needlessly increased the risk of injury:

As I'm concerned, break one record, win a medal, come back and break it again, good for you. That's it. And then go on to something else. But to gamble with the high jump and the long jump...The muscles, you're pushing 'em! And that's stupid because who the hell cares if you're a long jumper and you've jumped 3 or 4 meters. Who cares? Nobody cares!

Medals at the BCSG are awarded to the top three competitors in each age category in a formal medal ceremony occurring at the end of the day. The Medal Ceremony proceedings were highly formalized and structured. The three winners in each age category lined up in a marked area on the infield. When introduced, they filed out and took their place on the podium where they were presented their medals by uniformed members of the Salvation Army. Following the announcer's exclamation, "Congratulations medal winners on a job well done!," they stepped off the podium and proceeded towards a second podium where they shook hands, congratulated one other and



had their pictures taken by photographers, family and friends. One event photographer even encouraged the medal winners to pose biting their medals like Olympians.

Many participants described winning a medal as a powerful experience. For example, Byron had never won a medal before participating in the BCSG, and had been unaware that participants competed according to 5-year age categories. Having finished last in the 10km road race, he recounted being overwhelmed when awarded a gold medal for his age group: “I couldn’t believe it! [...] Tears came to my eyes and I was so emotional.” During interviews, several participants showed me the room where they displayed their athletic awards and other memorabilia. Byron had several racing photos, trophies, and medals on display in his office. Harold’s medals (easily over a hundred), along with several race numbers, hung on the walls of his garage above the Cervélo<sup>2</sup> bicycle he rides for cross training. Ned had several rows of medals strung along his office wall, which he said was only a portion of his awards. Hillary via email, answered: “I suggest that you come to our home where I have all of my many medals. In the aggregate they are too heavy to carry around.” At the beginning of our interview, Hillary produced a sheet detailing the number of medals she won at each of the twenty BCSG she attended. Halfway in the interview, she went to the basement and retrieved all the medals she had won at Masters events in Europe before she immigrated. She spoke about these medals (pinned to a velvet backed display board) for approximately ten minutes, going over dates, locations, and events of each.

These findings suggest that medals constituted an enormous source of pride for participants. Many recalled the year, location, event, and time of each medal they won over the course of their athletics career. Although participants mentioned fitness, enjoyment and

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<sup>2</sup> Cervélo is a Canadian manufacturer of state-of-the-art (i.e., ultra light, carbon fiber) racing bikes. Frames alone for Cervélo bikes begin around two thousand dollars. Built bikes can cost upwards of four thousand dollars.

socializing as motivations for participating in the BCSG, medals were repeatedly mentioned as a highlight. As Hillary stated, “the cream at the top” of all the hard training was winning a medal at the BCSG: “I never saw somebody that didn’t like that [...] Of course you are proud.” Katy similarly enjoyed the recognition medals provided: “I’m a medal freak. I like to get medals, but you have to work for it. Hey, now you can show, not to everybody, yeah, I’ve worked for it [sic].”

#### Media coverage

The 2012 BCSG received some media coverage, primarily from local newspapers (i.e., smaller circulation). In the months leading up to the games, several articles in municipal newspapers reported on BCSG preparations and other specific aspects that included the games’ funding, site selection, the recruitment of volunteers, the history of the games, and information on eligibility to compete (see Burnaby News Leader, 2012; Chow, 2012a, 2012b; Killen, 2012; Pound, 2012). Several articles featured BCSG playoff events such as golf, darts, baseball, and tennis (see Clarke, 2012; Comox Valley Record, 2012a, 2012b; Thompson, 2012).

In contrast, articles appearing in larger-scale news media publications featured examples of senior athleticism with greater frequency and intensity. For instance, an article in *The Vancouver Sun* featured an eighty-two year-old sprinter – described by the author as the up-and-coming “Usain Bolt of the octogenarian set” (see Zacharias, 2012, para. 2). This article was accompanied by a picture of the senior athlete sprinting down the track, face focused in effort. Similarly, a *Global BC TV* segment (2012) featured ninety-three year old track and field athlete

Olga Kotelko practising jumps, throws, and sprints, and discussing her plans to compete in the Burnaby games. Standing next to her medals, she offers the following advice on physical activity to other older adults: “Just do it for yourself. Just keep at it. And you will soon enjoy it, and you will say to yourself, why did not I do this earlier?” *Global News* (2012) also released an article featuring Kotelko titled “A nonagenarian to compete at the B.C. Senior Games.”

Following data analysis, Kotelko was the most frequently discussed BCSG athlete. For instance, she is also mentioned in an article in *The Burnaby News Leader* (Chow, 2012) in which she is described by the President of the Burnaby Games as a “striking example” of senior athleticism: “She looks like she’s about 70. [...] She’s quite amazing. It’s truly remarkable” (para. 14). In a *BC Government Online News Source* (2012) article discussing new funding for the games, Kotelko is pictured next to former Minister of Community, Sport and Cultural Development Ida Chong. Kotelko is also featured in an article in *The North Shore News* (2012) along with a swimmer in his early nineties who “keeps his competitive fires burning by trying to break his own records” (para. 4). The photograph accompanying the article shows Kotelko launching a javelin into the air. Based on the preceding examples, it would appear Kotelko is frequently framed as an exceptional example of older adult athleticism.

Titles of articles during and preceding the Games frequently mentioned the “medals haul” of local athletes. For example: “Badminton and track rake in seniors’ medals” (Berridge, 2012), “19 local medals won at 2012 BC Seniors Games” (Zaharia, 2012), and “Prince Rupert seniors bring back 15 medals from Seniors Games” (Thomas, 2012). Several articles were accompanied by pictures of senior athletes posing with their medals. Two articles appeared in the *Agassiz-Harrison Observer*, the first picturing a seventy-four year-old cyclist holding his gold medal up to his chest (Peters, 2012a), and the second picturing four local carpet bowlers standing on the

podium at the Games with their medals around their necks (Peters, 2012b). Similarly, an article in *The Courtenay Comox Valley Record* (Staton, 2012) pictured local swimmers posing by the pool in swimsuits displaying their medals. The Burnaby BC Seniors Games Facebook page (2012, <https://www.facebook.com/2012BurnabyBCSeniorGames/info>), which regularly posted updates and photographs throughout the games, is replete with photos of senior medal winners.

Other articles concerning the BCSG were accompanied by action shots of senior athletes. For instance, an article appearing in *The Courtenay Comox Valley Record* (Couper, 2012) detailing the accomplishments of local athletes features a picture of a cyclist in her late seventies dressed in spandex racing down the road on her bicycle. Similarly, an online article appearing in *The Burnaby News Leader* (Chow, 2012) is accompanied by a slideshow of images featuring senior athletes engaging in track and field, tennis, swimming, dragon boating, archery and ping pong. An article in *Senior Living Magazine* (Ellsworth, 2012) included photographs of Men's 1500m runners taking off, while an article in *Burnaby Now* (Lau, 2012) concerning a couple that competes together at the Games pictures a senior sprinter racing down the track. Although the preceding summary is by no means an exhaustive review of BCSG related news media, the selection of articles included in this research would appear to indicate the following trends: the more striking examples of senior athleticism receive attention from larger media outlets; medals are frequently emphasized in newspaper articles; and photographs accompanying articles tend to picture athletes engaged in more familiar "Olympic" events.

This section argues that the 2012 BCSG has come to represent an expression of elite athleticism despite its framing in promotional material and official speeches as an event emphasizing inclusiveness and health. This is evidenced by the competitive motivations of participants, the framing of the BCSG in the media along the familiar ‘Olympic’ tropes of record performances, winning and medals, and the introduction of professional standards of officiating and time keeping.

Based on interview findings, it appears that participants who competed at the 2012 BCSG did so with intensity comparable to that of younger athletes in high-level amateur events. They were in it to win and they expressed a sense of pride at performing well against peers or beating a personal best. Not surprisingly, participants expressed some ambivalence about the inclusive nature of the BCSG. They felt the spirit of inclusiveness made for a more pleasant experience compared to regular athletic events. Tom commented that the atmosphere at the BCSG was more encouraging of participation than competitions he attended in his youth: “It’s like, just take a crack at it! If you don’t do anything it doesn’t matter. If you do something, fantastic!” Frances said the focus on inclusiveness was helpful to encourage less competitive athletes to partake in multiple events: “They were so excited! I mean, they did everything. They’re going, ‘Yeah. I’m doing the 10,000m this morning. I’m doing the long jump. I’m doing a 200m.’ Just going for it and having so much fun.”

However, several participants felt the spirit of inclusiveness resulted in a downplaying of the element of competition. For instance, Peter, who also competed at national and international Masters meets, criticized BCSG organizers for failing to acknowledge the competitive spirit of older athletes. He dismissed the BCSG as “weird,” “lame,” and “fun run-ey” and added: “The people that run them have that attitude too. They say, ‘Oh well, we didn’t bother to put the times

up because we figure people don't care what their times are.' It's like, *what!?!'* Several participants singled out the lack of attention paid to time keeping and officiating as amateurish. Connor noted this was particularly problematic in the cycling events, whereas Norma reported error-prone time keeping at previous swimming events.

Participants felt the BCSG needed to adopt more rigorous and standardized officiating and time keeping in keeping with the passion, dedication and competitive spirit of older athletes. Frances stated that failure to respect the competitive nature of the events was disrespectful to the hard work and training senior athletes invested:

If they're going to call this a Seniors' Games and they promote it as a competition for fifty-five plus, then treat it as a competition. Don't treat these seniors as, 'Oh come on out and have some fun and we'll have tea later.' That's an insult to the athlete at whatever level, 'cause everyone is doing their absolute best, whatever that is. So to treat it as a play day in the park for seniors I think is just a mistake.

In response to these issues, BCSG organizers arranged for BC Athletics to provide the same kind of sanctioning and timing expertise for the 2012 BCSG as found in high-level amateur events. BC Athletics personnel officiated effectively and recorded and released results efficiently. Electronic equipment was used for timing races, multiple measurements were recorded for throwing and jumping events, and multiple observers helped ensure competitors did not infringe upon the rules (e.g., running during a race walking event). Results, when ready, were displayed on a board on the infield, announced over the PA system, and displayed on the score board at the back of the stadium. One of the participants, Frances, remarked that while officiating and time-keeping had been questionable in the past, the 2012 Games was "like a *real* track meet." She added:

When we first started getting the results up, people would come and say, ‘What are the times?’ ‘Well they’re posted.’ ‘No they’re not.’ Like, on the website that night I guess. It’s first, second, third. No times. No performances. Just who got a medal... Someone needs to let them know that they’re actually concerned about performances. So that was sort of an indication of where this committee was at – not really worried about performance. They’re just kind of worried about participation, and so they needed to step it up.

These findings suggest a gradual evolution of the BCSG to accommodate the more elite athletic performances of senior athletes like the ones participating in this study. As the Games’ profile increases and attracts more competitive older athletes, there has also been an attempt at emulating professionalized ceremonies like the ones at the Olympics. This was evidenced in the opening ceremonies with the parades of regions, the arrival of a famous torch bearer, and the lighting up of the BCSG flame. More emphasis was placed on reporting winners of events and their times. As a result, less attention was given to more inclusive but less competitive events such as bridge, five pin bowling, and darts. These events also received little if any media coverage which positioned them unfavourably in relation to higher profile events such as track and field, swimming, or cycling.

The BCSG Society Strategic Plan reflects the dilemma posed by the increased involvement of elite older athletes such as the ones participating in this study. Organizers are in a sense at crossroads – on the one hand, they are faced with having to reconcile the desire of these competitive athletes for more serious Games with the objective of keeping the Games inclusive and volunteer-based. The Plan discusses pairing with provincial sporting bodies to ensure quality in the ‘product’ that is the Games but also cites a concern that the introduction of more

professional standards could project an image of “elitism” that runs contrary to the initial spirit of the Games to encourage involvement from a broad spectrum of the aging population.

### Summary

In this chapter, I explored the experiences of my participants within the contexts of 2012 BCSG. I triangulated field notes, media stories, BCSG promotional material, and participant interviews in order to provide a multifaceted account of events. Based on this analysis, it would appear that camaraderie, competitiveness and the lure of medals were significance features of the experiences of my participants. It is interesting to consider this finding in light of the growth of the BCSG over the last twenty-five years; the Games have expanded in the number of events and participants, organizational and funding structure, and have increased their public profile. While inclusiveness, participation, and athletic camaraderie are still central to the mandate of the Games – and to the experiences of participants themselves – my findings indicate that the BCSG has increasingly emphasized exceptional senior athleticism (e.g., the inclusion of sophisticated timing and officiating techniques). In conclusion, the 2012 BCSG would appear to reflect a gradual evolution toward elite athleticism and away from its original ideal of fostering inclusive participation of all seniors into sporting events. I discuss the implications of these findings at length in the following chapter.



## CHAPTER SIX: DISCUSSION

### Introduction

The overall intent of this case study has been to explore the phenomenon of Masters athleticism in relation to neoliberal discourse on healthy (and successful) aging. By triangulating my findings from 15 semi-structured, in-depth interviews with older Masters athletes, fieldwork observations at the 2012 BCSG, and by analyzing media discourse and official publications related to the Games, I have attempted to explore how the deployment of these personal and political discourses appears to intersect within these contexts. I have argued that such an investigation is both timely and important because of the following background factors: the increased popularity of Masters athletics; and concerns surrounding population aging and the strain this might place on the health care system. I further emphasized the importance of this study by situating these factors within the rising trend of responsabilization within Canadian health policy. I argued that health and aging are becoming particularly responsabilized, evidenced by state-sponsored health initiatives promoting the concept of active aging by encouraging older adults to self-manage their health and avoid becoming burdens on society. To reiterate, the two

central research questions guiding my investigation were:

- What meanings do older Masters athletes attribute to their involvement in competitive sport; and to what extent could such meanings be influenced by the deployment of neoliberal discourses on successful aging and physical exercise in the Canadian context?
- How do older Masters athletes come to serve as exemplars of successful aging; and in what way does this process responsabilize health and aging as personal endeavors rather than as a consequences of social determinants largely outside of the control of any one individual?

This study built on Dionigi's (2002a, 2002b, 2004, 2006a, 2006b, 2010) investigation of the growing engagement of older adults in physical activity and elite sports events. Specifically, the study considered the vocabularies of motive that older athletes use to justify their involvement in competitive sport. My intent was to document how their personal stories and views of aging and physical activity have come to embody (and reflect) the discourses of successful aging and the responsabilization of health. Research in this area has become more important given the rise of successful aging discourse in which exercise is a central component for warding off the ill-effects that are thought to accompany advanced age. It is therefore important to understand the extent to which older athletes internalize and act upon these messages. Guided by this first research question, I aimed to explore how discourses of successful aging have become embedded within the production and uptake of discourse at the individual-level, reflected in vocabularies of motives of my research participants.

Guided by the second research question, I then situated the experiences of my participants within the social and political contexts of the 2012 BCSG in order to examine how notions of successful aging proliferate within these contexts. Guided by Foucault's concepts of

governmentality and discourse, my aim was to explore the processes through which Masters athleticism has come to serve as an exemplar of successful aging under neoliberal regimes. I argued that framing senior athletes as the embodiment of successful aging ideals inherently responsabilizes health and aging as a personal achievement, thus obscuring the effects of social determinants largely outside of the control of any one individual.

### Masters exceptionalism

The participants in this study engaged in athleticism at a level that can be characterized as “intense” in comparison with average senior Canadians. To make this comparison, I will begin with a description of my participants. On average, they dedicated one to two hours per day, five days a week, to their athletic pursuits. In addition, the majority of participants augmented their training with a combination of cross training, stretching, and strengthening exercises. They stressed the importance of these activities in helping them achieve their athletic goals by keeping them in peak physical condition, preventing sport-related injuries, and providing them with the mental fortitude for intense competition. Participants prioritized their training and expressed enjoyment in making competitive sport a central part of their lives.

As noted in the literature review, participants’ current level of athletic engagement is atypical among seniors. According to Statistics Canada (2013), Canadian adults aged sixty-five

to seventy engage in approximately eleven minutes of moderate physical activity per week.<sup>3</sup> In contrast, participants approximated a level of physical activity that is more characteristic of elite-level athletes than of average older adults in Canada (see Statistics Canada, 2013). Given participants' intensive level of involvement and the increased prominence of successful aging discourse, it is important to consider the extent to which their current motivations to be physically active may be influenced by neoliberal notions of what it means to "age well." As successful aging discourses promote physical activity as a strategy for managing the "deleterious" effects of aging, it is important to consider the extent to which participants were motivated to be athletes as a preventative health strategy.

As revealed in interview data, participants' current level of athletic engagement was largely based upon a longstanding history of athletic engagement. From a life course perspective, we can see that the majority of participants have been on a trajectory of athletic involvement that began in childhood and continued throughout adolescence, early adulthood, and middle age. Along these trajectories, numerous factors fostered their athleticism such as parental and peer support, athletic scholarships, coaching, and the general availability of resources that are necessary for participating in athletics.

Concerns about warding off age-related declines and ill-health appear to be only secondary motives for the majority of participants. Although participants felt that the health benefits of exercise were important, their passion and enjoyment of competitive sport was of greater personal significance. Participants were much more passionate in describing their delight in being able to set specific athletic goals and achieve them. The more significant motives for their athletic engagement reflected a competitive sports mentality rather than those of health-

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<sup>3</sup> This is an intensity that has been reported to give preventative health benefits among seniors (Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 2011)

promotion, illness-prevention, and other motives related to responsible and successful aging. Simply stated, participants were competitive athletes, first and foremost; only secondarily were they responsible and healthy subjects.

If enjoyment of competitive sport appeared to be the main motive among participants, it would also appear that participants subscribed to neoliberal ideas regarding aging and physical fitness. Case in point, they communicated their belief that physical activity was an important strategy for warding off the effects of old age. For instance, Frances felt that a growing number of older adults engaged in physical activity in order to help manage the aging process. She also suggested that government initiatives to address “lifestyle choice related” issues such as low physical activity rates among older adults would help alleviate the strain on an overburdened health care system. Similarly, Ned firmly believed that improving physical activity rates among seniors was imperative in order to prevent baby boomers from “swamping” the health care system as, “an athlete on the track is not in the hospital!” It is difficult to ignore that these statements appear to be taken from the neoliberal notions of health that appeared in my literature review, specifically those associated with apocalyptic demography concerns. I argue that these comments, in addition to reflecting successful aging discourse, also reveal notions of the senior athlete as a responsible citizen, and, as part of civic engagement as a Canadian (e.g., under the welfare state), the idea that individuals have a duty to remain active.

Secondly, participants endorsed successful aging discourse in indicating their firm belief that older adults can remain physically fit and athletic until their old age if they have the motivation and the desire to be active. For instance, Murray described his resolve to balance the demands of a stressful job with the demands of training for Masters athletics competition: “Training was exhausting, but I wanted to do it.” Similarly, several participants shared stories of

how they had continued to exercise despite injury and illness. Peter expressed his determination to remain physical active despite extensive health issues: “After my second pulmonary embolism, I was really depressed about that until I said, ‘Right. I’m going to go back out onto the track and I’m going to do well anyway.’ And I did. So I learned that illness wasn’t going to stop me.” Mary described how she continues to run despite difficulties with her knee: “I don’t think there’s anything that would stop me,” she stated, “There’ll always be something I can do.” Likewise, Byron expressed his desire to train and compete despite health problems in describing his transition from middle distance running to pole-vaulting following a diagnosis of heart problems in his early eighties.

In addition to demonstrating the determination of participants to remain physically active, the foregoing comments also suggest that participants appeared to normalize their ability to overcome challenges to physical activity. For instance, exercising while ill, or while dealing with the pressures of a stressful job, were simply framed as a matter of motivation and dedication. As Mary stated: “Its not I don’t have the time. You make the time!” Although the majority of participants expressed an awareness of how factors such as social support and coaching had helped foster their development as athletes, they appeared to lack a deeper level of reflexivity and insight regarding how broader social and structural factors, specifically class-based structural determinants of health, had contributed towards their abilities and attitudes as senior athletes.

As emphasized in my literature review, the ability to engage in physical activity is largely influenced by the social and structural conditions in which people find themselves embedded. Specifically, participation in physical exercise tends to be associated higher socio-economic status (Beaglehole, 1990; Link & Phelan, 1995). Indeed, my study participants represented exclusively the middle and upper-middle classes. In expressing the idea that a physically active

old age was equally achievable to all, participants appeared to lack insight into how their unique socioeconomic circumstances facilitated their ability to engage in athletics. Almost nowhere in their responses were concerns for the explicit (and implicit) costs associated with athletic engagement – for example, their ability to pay for athletic fees and coaching, purchase expensive equipment (e.g., running shoes cost approximately \$130.00 and last 5 months with regular use), travel to (inter)national competitions, and afford treatment for sports injuries (e.g., physiotherapy costs approximately \$60.00 for an hour long treatment) was largely taken for granted. Arguably, engagement in physical activity is not limited by one’s personal economic resources, such as doing sit-ups or push-ups at home; however, such an example is a minimal part of population health discourse, nor does it approximate the extensive physical training described by my participants.

Furthermore, participants did not appear to reflect that elite athleticism at advanced age carries a high ‘price tag.’ Specifically, engaging in physical activity at the frequency and intensity they described carries the potential of joint and muscle damage that individuals of lower socioeconomic status cannot afford to rectify. It is interesting to note that while participants indicated they considered senior athletes to be healthy individuals, the majority of participants had extensive histories of injuries, frequently as a direct result of their rigorous engagement in physical activity. I argue that this demonstrates (somewhat ironically) that senior athletes still use the health care system (including services not covered by Medicare), but in different ways – for example, knee and hip replacements, surgery to repair torn shoulders, physiotherapy and massage therapy for pulled hamstrings, and orthotics for foot problems. While participants spoke of the burden that “less active” Canadians place on the public health care system, it is clear that elite senior athletes also make use of the health care system as a result of their sports injuries. My

point here is not to evaluate which “cost” to the health system is greater, or which lifestyle is more desirable. Instead, I wish to highlight an often overlooked framework for the consumption of health care services generated by the very system of athleticism that the state enthusiastically promotes.

In interpreting these findings, Foucault’s notions of governmentality and discourse elucidate the processes by which participants come to reflect neoliberal notions of successful aging in justifying their participation in athletics. To briefly reiterate, governmentality – the “techniques and strategies by which a society is rendered governable” (Jones, Jones, & Wood, 2004, p. 173) – is enacted through discourse. Discourses operate by delineating and ordering what is considered to be true about any given social phenomenon or social problem. Successful aging discourse, in defining the “legitimate” perspective of what constitutes a healthy old age, emphasizes the following ideas: exercise is important in improving the health of older adults; and a physically active old age is equally achievable to all. In this regard, the promotion of physical activity for older adult populations can be understood as a governmental technology deployed by the state in order to modify the conduct of a perceived “problematic” population.

The motives of participants to be physically active, their views on aging and physical activity, and their often well-mediatised involvement in Masters athletic culture and events such as the BCSG all constitute localized aspects of the state discourse on successful aging that frames how aging is understood as a personal responsibility and endeavour. Neoliberal notions of successful aging are reflected in the vocabularies of motives of participants but also further vehiculated as these participants lend themselves to efforts to promote athletic pursuit among older adults. Understanding the dynamics of this governmentality process helps clarify how the discourse of successful aging becomes embedded in culture as a normalizing force on



populations. It shows how discourses shape individual subjectivities and coordinate social practices by influencing popular perception and, therefore, knowledge of the social world.

### Masters athletes as neo-liberal exemplars

In this section, I discuss my findings in relation to the second question guiding this research: How do older Masters' athletes become exemplars of health and how does this reflect the neoliberal discourse of successful aging? Since the early 1970's, Masters athletics has grown significantly in popularity among older adults but remains a largely elite event that does not appeal to the general public nor does it receive media wide-coverage. Furthermore, Masters competitions tend to attract fewer older athletes (i.e., over the age of sixty). According to the 6 participants who had competed in Masters competitions in North America and Europe, these events tend to draw a highly competitive and elite pool of competitors, many of whom are ex-Olympians. Competing against such elite athletes is often an intimidating experience, which they contrasted against the more inclusive atmosphere of the BCSG. Secondly, as individuals become eligible for Masters level competition at the age of thirty-five, the pool of younger athletes makes Masters competitions a less appropriate event through which to promote successful aging discourse to a distinctly older age group. As a result, Masters competitions do not readily lend themselves to be used by the state to promote the ideas that older adults can be healthy and avoid the effects of old age by being involved in sports.

In comparison, the BCSG boasts the following central values that make it an appealing candidate for provincial funding: the Games target participants who are fifty-five years and

older, champion the idea of life-long activity and friendly competition, and celebrate participants as valuable role models of a healthy, active lifestyle (BC Seniors Games Society, 2007). The BCSG thus readily align with the priority given to population health promotion efforts in BC and serve as a fitting event for promoting successful aging.

There has been a significant change in the BCSG over the years. As detailed in Chapter 5, the BCSG Society was founded as a grassroots, non-profit, volunteer-driven organization with the objective of promoting an annual sport and recreational event for adults over the age of fifty-five. Central to the Game's mandate was the goal of encouraging the participation of older adults of all levels of physical ability and competitiveness. This was accomplished by offering an array of events, from darts and lawn bowling, to cycling and track and field. Since the inaugural Games were held in Vernon, BC, in 1988 (six hundred and fifty participants, fifteen events), the list of events, number of participants, and organizational and funding structure of the Games has grown significantly. The Games now boast over twenty-five events and approximately three thousand, seven hundred participants, are supported by a multi zone/municipality organizational structure, and receive approximately \$85,000.00 in funding from the Provincial Government (BC Seniors Games Society, 2012).

There has been a significant shift in emphasis, over time, with the BCSG increasingly appealing to a discourse of athletic performance and exceptionalism in order to generate a higher profile as a sporting event and promote the BCSG to a broader audience. Participants reported how the level of organization and officiating at the BCSG had improved over the years. Much of this improvement can be attributed to the decision of the BCSG Society to partner with BC Athletics in order to ensure an equivalent level of sanctioning and timing expertise as found in high-level amateur events. As Frances stated, the 2012 Games was run "like a *real* track meet."

My findings therefore suggest that the introduction of professional standards of officiating and time-keeping demonstrate increased efforts on the part of BCSG organizers to accommodate the performances of elite and highly competitive senior athletes.

This emphasis on athletic performance served to increase the profile of the BCGS in the media, thus enhancing its value as a vehicle for the state to promote older-adult engagement in physical activity. Drawing on Dionigi's (2002a, 2002b, 2004, 2006a, 2006b, 2010) arguments, Masters athletes played a central role in this process by virtue of their vigorous and competitive performance in the BCGS and by their apparent defiance of cultural stereotypes of old age (i.e., ageist discourse). As I detail in Chapter 5, the majority of participants competed to win medals, break records, and expressed a sense of pride at performing well against their peers or beating a personal best. For many, enjoyment was secondary to winning. Participants who described themselves as highly competitive (e.g., Ned and Arron) stated they would not attend the Games if they did not feel fit enough to win. Participants spoke with candor of their enjoyment of the competitive aspect of the Games and the recognition and status gained from competition – specifically through medals, which they readily displayed during interviews. Furthermore, these participants criticized what they perceived to be a failure of organizers to recognize the competitive spirit of older athletes. As noted in Chapter 4, the majority of participants had competed in national and international Masters competitions prior to their involvement with the BCSG. It stands to reason that these experiences provided them with a point of comparison against which to gauge the competitive standards of the BCSG. These participants related incidents concerning inconsistencies with timing, officiating, and the reporting of results and termed these oversights amateurish and disrespectful to the passion, dedication and competitive spirit of older athletes.

These athletes' age-defying performances made it attractive for the news media to report on the 2012 BCSG. There were profiles of athletes in local newspapers and news channels, press releases, and in the BCSG's own social media outlets (e.g., Facebook and Twitter). Analysis of this material revealed that the discourse of athletic performance framed the BCSG along familiar 'Olympic' tropes – specifically, through an emphasis on record performances, winning, medals and familiar Olympic events and ceremonies.

As with media coverage of the Olympics, media articles concerning the 2012 BCSG made frequent mention of the record performances and 'medal haul' of senior athletes. Articles detailed the age group records broken and set, and the number of gold, silver, and bronze medals won by exceptional athletes. Pictures of athletes posing with their medals often accompanied these articles. Similarly, the discourse of athletic performance appeared to be embedded within BCSG related media through an emphasis on events similar to Olympic events and ceremonies. For instance, media analysis revealed that while the BCSG offers over twenty-five different events, those similar to events found at the Olympics were featured most frequently. Events such as carpet bowling, cribbage, and darts received minimal media attention, perhaps due to their alignment with cultural stereotypes of the recreational pursuits of older adults. In contrast, the media predominantly featured older athletes engaging in familiar and popular "Olympic" events such as track and field, swimming, and cycling. Images of older athletes sprinting down the track, speeding down the road on bicycles, and diving into the pool presented striking examples of vigorous and visibly athletic seniors engaging in activities not commonly associated with their age. These images, in addition to their appeal to a broader audience through visual reference to the Olympics, defy the idea that old bodies are sick, feeble and burdensome (i.e., ageist discourse). This would perhaps explain the popularity in the media of ninety-three-year-old

competitor Olga Kotelko, who regularly appears in the media discussing her involvement in the BCSG and the benefits of physical activity. Tom, in expressing his admiration for Kotelko, captures this apparent contradiction in his statement: “Most ninety year olds are either dead or on a stick and here she is sailing through the air in her spandex!”

Secondly, a discourse of athletic performance was reflected in the modeling of BCSG opening ceremonies according to the Olympic opening ceremony. Many of the same elements were present including the parade of participants, the speeches, the music (e.g., an event theme song), a torchbearer, and the narration of events. Throughout the ceremonies, senior athletes were presented as inspirational, valiant, enthusiastic, socially engaged and healthy. Similarly, the highly photographed medal ceremony following the track and field events of each day also made reference to the Olympics. For instance, the official photographer I observed covering the ceremony encouraged participants to bite their medals in emulation of Olympic medalists. Many of these photographs later appeared in the Vancouver Sun, presenting an image of senior champions to the broader public. From this, I argue that media concerning the BCSG appears to reinforce the idea of exceptional athleticism through reference to the Olympics, and by highlighting the performances of top competitors.

Further evidence of this shift toward exceptionalism are found in concerns that have been raised in the BC Seniors Games Society Strategic Plan: 2007-2012 (2007). The authors of this document argue that extremes in the abilities of Masters participants could threaten the Games’ mandate of inclusivity. The authors also acknowledge that through the involvement of provincial sporting organizations such as BC Athletics, the Games risk turning into an elite sporting event.

In summary, I argue that the 2012 BCSG reflect a gradual evolution of the Games toward elite athleticism and away from its original ideal of fostering the inclusive participation of

seniors of all levels of athletic ability. In interpreting this finding, I return again to Foucault's concept of discourse and how it shapes and coordinates our understandings and social reality. From this perspective, it appears that athletes and organizers alike contribute to the proliferation of a discourse of athletic performance. BCSG organizers, by introducing sophisticated officiating and time-keeping techniques, accommodate the competitive interests of elite athletes such as the participants in this study. In turn, these athletes are able to enjoy a standard of organization and officiating similar to national and international Masters events. Organizers subsequently emphasize the athletic performances of these individuals in order to give the BCSG a higher profile as a sporting event and promote the Games to a broader audience of older adults. Through this dynamic, the BCSG reinforce a discourse of athletic performance in which competition, record performances, athletic prowess, and the defiantly healthy senior athlete become center stage. Based these findings, I conclude that older Masters athletes serve as exemplars within the neoliberal discourse on aging through the higher profile in the media they receive as a result of the actions of the BCSG.

#### Seniors' athletic performance and the responsabilization of aging

In my literature review, I detailed how notions of personal agency (individualization) and responsibility (responsibilization) are central to neoliberalism as it pertains to health and aging. In this section, I demonstrate how these discourses, implicit within discourses of successful aging and athletic performance deployed at the BCSG, function to further the responsabilization

of health and aging while drawing attention away from class-based structural determinants to healthy aging. I begin this discussion by contrasting the idealized version of old age successful aging discourse promotes (e.g., optimal health and social engagement) to the physical and social realities of aging faced by many older individuals.

Social and medical understandings of aging have changed dramatically over the course of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Developments in public health and medicine have increased the number of disease and disability free years, while research into the responses of the aging body to physical activity have helped demonstrate that regular physical activity can mitigate age related declines to mobility and functioning (Warburton, Nicol, & Bredin, 2006). As a result, many older adults are living healthier longer lives, redefining medical and cultural understandings of what is possible in later life. Given the exceptional physical feats of senior athletes such as the participants in this study, it might appear that with the proper care and effort, one can “defy” aging and live an indefinitely prolonged middle age. However, it is important to remember that aging, at the biological level, is a natural and inevitable state of decline. For many individuals, despite of their best efforts to remain healthy, it is a process marked by ill health and disease.

It is well established in medical literature that as age increases, the likelihood of morbidity (i.e., chronic and acute illness) and functional limitations also increases (see House, Kessler, & Herzog, 1990). Common health issues faced by older adults include mobility problems, chronic pain, agility limitations, and hearing problems (Statistics Canada, 2002). Many older adults tend to develop debilitating chronic conditions (e.g., rheumatoid arthritis, Parkinson’s disease, multiple sclerosis) that require care and infringe upon activities of daily living. For older adults dealing with such health issues, physical activity can sometimes be a difficult and unpleasant activity.

In discussing the incidence of morbidity among older adults, it is important to acknowledge the impact of the social determinants of health – specifically, socioeconomic status (SES) and social class – in influencing an individual’s capacity to be healthy. As detailed in my literature review, social class and the socioeconomic factors associated with it are strongly and consistently related to health (Chappell & Penning, 2009). It has become increasingly well established that individuals who experience advantages due to factors such as occupational status, education, and income generally live longer than those who are disadvantaged regarding these factors (see Pampel, Kruger, & Denney, 2010). For instance, education level is significantly associated with maintaining good health from middle to older age (Martel, Bélanger, Berthelot, & Carrière, 2005), while an inverse relationship exists between SES and unhealthy behaviours such as smoking and physical inactivity (Pampel, Krueger and Denney, 2010). Research also indicates that those reporting higher SES spend a greater proportion of their overall lives healthy (Chappell & Penning, 2009).

Studies examining the impact of socioeconomic status on health behaviour emphasize that the decision to adopt an active lifestyle is not simply a personal choice, but one affected by many interconnecting social determinants. Given the significant barriers low SES can present to health (e.g., poor nutrition, lack of access to health services), it is necessary to acknowledge how the realities of individuals of lower SES affect their ability to take up contemporary population health promotion messages. For instance, individuals of working class background may be subjected to life and work conditions that make it more likely for them to develop later-life conditions (e.g., emphysema due to poorly ventilated working conditions). Therefore, in considering the ability of older adults to take up successful aging discourse, it is necessary to



contextualize personal agency within the social structure and in light of the factors that either facilitate or constrain health behaviour.

Having established the contributions of class-based structural determinants to healthy aging, I will now discuss the implications of the discourses of successful aging and athletic performance deployed at the BCSG. I argue that the notions of individual agency and personal responsibility implicit within these discourses function to divert attention away from class-based structural determinants to healthy aging while furthering the trend of responsabilization within Canadian public health policy and population health discourse. I begin by briefly reiterating these concepts as outlined in my literature review.

As my review of literature on neoliberalism revealed, the dominant approach promoted at the state-level through population health discourse is prefaced upon assumptions that individuals are able to act autonomously, rationally, and with self-interest (e.g., Ericson, Barry, & Doyle, 2000; Rose, 1999). I highlighted that these assumptions are evidenced in the individualistic focus of health messages, and detailed the criticisms directed at this model for its failure to consider the influence of social, environmental, and structural factors in limiting the ability of individuals to assume autonomous control and engage in physical activity.

The second dominant theme under the rubric of neoliberalism is the “responsibilization” of health and aging. There is indeed overlap between responsabilization and individualization, as both concepts are prefaced on assumptions of an autonomous agent. However, while individualization emphasizes the agent’s ability to make rational, self-interested choices, responsabilization emphasizes the duty – indeed, the moral imperative – of the agent to act responsibly as a citizen in order to improve personal health (e.g., reduce their risk of heart disease) and the wellbeing of society (e.g., through reduced health care spending).

As discussed, the process of responsabilization within Canadian public health policy demarcates an ideological shift in which responsibility for matters previously cared for or provided by the state are placed solely on the individual. Responsibilization discourse emphasize notions of self-reliance, independence, and minimal state involvement to promote the idea that individuals are solely responsible for their circumstances and actions, as well as for meeting their own needs (Weiner, 1995, Crawford, 2006, Galvin, 2002). I detailed how the ‘responsibilizing ethos’ described by Ilcan (2009) is evidenced in Canadian health promotion initiatives targeting older adults by encouraging physical activity as an imperative, focused on the individual rather than social and structural factors. I also detailed how health promotion and population health fosters responsabilization by advancing a specific lifestyle, which intends to construct responsible, health conscious citizens who are expected to follow suit (Ayo, 2012).

To begin, individualization discourse appeared to be embedded in many of the Olympic tropes employed by Games organizers. For instance, notions of personal agency, in conjunction with discourses of successful aging and athletic performance, were implicit at the opening ceremony through the lionization of two individuals in particular: track and field athlete Olga Kotelko, and torch bearer (and BC Sports Hall of Fame inductee) Barbara Howard. Both women were ninety-three years old. As discussed, Ms. Kotelko is regularly featured in the news media as a striking example of active aging (see Global News, 2012). As remarkable as Kotelko’s athletic accomplishments are (e.g., seventeen world records), at the ceremony there was little mention of the factors fostering her athleticism (e.g., coaching, availability of fitness facilities, good genetics). Furthermore, it is difficult to imagine that spectators and seniors athletes would be oblivious to the racialized body of torch-bearer Barbara Howard, a woman whose athletic achievements were likely mediated through adversities at the intersection of, at the very least,

race and gender throughout her life. While the featured athletes can easily be understood as outliers in the current demographic data on senior athletics, they are championed as examples of what can be achieved if one has determination, strength, and ambition.

Individualization discourse was also demonstrated in the emphasis placed on medals. As detailed in Chapter 4, the majority of participants cited the support of coaches and fellow members of their athletic club(s) as instrumental in fostering their involvement in Masters' athletics. In this sense, the "medal" represents the singular and lauded artefact of this athletic achievement. For instance, the medal ceremony presents the senior as the sole agent responsible for their athletic success. From the pronouncement, "Congratulations medal winners on a job well done!" and the click of photos snapped by an adoring crowd, I argue that while the medal ceremony celebrated the outstanding performances of senior athletes, it also represents a celebration of individualism, effacing the notion that athletic excellence is a collective, team, and social process.

In Chapter 5, my data analysis clearly revealed notions of successful aging embedded within official publications from the BCSG Society. For instance, in *The BC Seniors' Games Society: Strategic Plan, 2007-2012* (2007), the authors emphasize the BCSGS's role in redefining the image and reality of BC seniors. They state: "Tomorrow's senior is physically fit, active for life and socially engaged" (p. 3). This redefinition of old age is accomplished by championing older athletes for their exemplification of a healthy active lifestyle. I wish to emphasize that the Society's "contemporary image of seniors" (p. 8) reflects not only notions of successful aging, but also notions of individual responsibility prominent under the neoliberal state apparatus by redefining "acceptable" old age according to specific criteria, specifically the physically fit, socially engaged, and "successfully aged" senior. This is important because it is

yet another explicit instance of how the BCSG disseminates the problematic responsabilization discourse that reflects neoliberal state interests.

Examples of responsabilization discourse were also prominent at the opening ceremony of the BCSG, in which spectacle and symbolism were central in presenting senior athletes. It is apparent to me that, for the state, represented by the various dignitaries present, the opening ceremony is an opportunity to emphasize notions of successful aging and individual responsibility while reinforcing its commitment to the health and welfare of older adults. I described in Chapter 5 how the opening ceremony, with pageantry and officialdom (e.g., the presence of political actors and RCMP officers), celebrated seniors' sportsmanship, applauding the athletic achievements of participants while framing them discursively as the embodiment of successful aging ideals. Although the overall effect is the promotion of a positive and ostensibly inclusive understanding of old age, it is important to highlight how the discourse of responsabilization implicit within this spectacle is problematic. Through inspirational narration and imagery, the social, physical, and structural actualities of older adult athleticism are effaced. A physically active and socially engaged lifestyle for older adults has been framed as easily achievable through the application of the will. Furthermore, as the opening ceremony is recorded and televised, the implicit doctrines and beliefs underpinning successful aging and individual responsibility are deployed to an audience far beyond those seated in the stadium.

In highlighting the foregoing examples of individualization and responsabilization discourse, I wish to demonstrate my fundamental point, which is that while structural, occupational, environmental, cultural, financial, genetic, and other factors may foster or hinder athletic pursuits, they were effaced through the emphasis of individual agency and personal responsibility deployed through the 2012 BCSG. Indeed, neoliberal assumptions of the agentic

actor cannot account for the ways in which such factors – specifically class-based structural determinant of health – can mediate (if not exacerbate) the “healthy lifestyle” choices of older adults. Emphasizing free-will and hiding the exceptional circumstances of athletes participating in the BCSG only serves to minimize the contributions of class-based structural determinants to healthy aging. Indeed, framing senior athletes as autonomous subjects further promotes the idea that responsible engagement in physical activity later in life can be explained by an individual’s personal choice – alone. Discourse linking the senior athlete to the ideal neoliberal citizen must therefore be critically assessed as a political tactic through which to pressure older individuals to embody the needs of neoliberal government (i.e., exercising to mitigate projected health care costs). Indeed, by encouraging older adults to bring their lifestyles in accordance with those modeled by the senior athlete, specific notions of health and wellness are advanced at the expense of others.

It is also imperative to discuss the moral implications discourses of responsabilization and individualization present. As discussed in my literature review, notions of personal responsibility and choice, particularly when advanced through neoliberal discourse, can lead to a tendency – at both the institutional and individual levels – to blame individuals for lack of adherence to regimes of physical activity. I emphasized how within this framework, far less attention is given to the structural barriers which mediate access to, and uptake of, these health promotion and population health discourses (Bercovitz, 1998, p. 323; Crawford, 1980; Labonte & Penfold, 1981). Specifically, by promoting the idea that “responsible” senior citizens engage, by choice, in the pursuit of a healthy, active lifestyle, the state risks (re)producing an official moral imperative that is problematic in many ways: those who take up the dominant health promotion and population health discourses are virtuous; those who do not (or cannot) are blameworthy

(Crawford, 2006; Galvin, 2002; Lupton, 1995). And as Dionigi (2010) noted, failure to adhere to dominant health messages is closely entangled with a lowered sense of self-value, self-empowerment, and an ostensible capitulation to the processes of aging.

For older adults with the means, ability, and desire to engage in competitive sport, taking some responsibility for health in old age can be a potentially empowering experience. This would appear to be the case with my participants, as they expressed enjoyment in physical activity and the physical, social and mental benefits it provided them. However, the understandings of aging promoted by such “successful aging” attitudes and behaviours are problematic in their exclusivity; they promote a narrow and restrictive understanding of aging unachievable to many older Canadians, specifically those adversely affected by class-based structural determinant of health. For older adults who fail to measure up to these ideas of ‘aging well’ – for instance, those dealing with health and mobility issues or lacking financial and educational resources – the implications of discourses surrounding the responsabilization of health and aging suggest that the poor lifestyle choices of these individuals make them responsible for aging unsuccessfully. Such ideas, when combined with concerns over population aging, can contribute to the idea that unfit seniors will strain an already overburdened healthcare system. I therefore conclude, as per Dionigi’s (2010) argument, that the trend of conflating athleticism with successful aging “ignores individual and social determinant of health and produces a marginalizing context in which inactivity, inability, decline, and ill-health in old age are seen as representing immorality, laziness, and/or deviance” (p. 141).

Lastly, it is important to mention that although the promotion and uptake of physical activity can be of great value for seniors (e.g., improved health, meeting new friends), efforts to advance the physically fit, successfully aged senior as a possible standard to which older adults

“should” aspire have been criticized for their role in (re)producing advanced age as simultaneously undesirable, fearsome, and something worth denying (Dionigi, 2010; Andrews, 1999). Specifically, the proliferation of a value-system that is balanced upon optimum levels of physical activity, competition, independence, social engagement, and heightened performance will simultaneously “de-value” the opposite traits.

The majority of participants reflected this value system in their endorsement of successful aging discourse. They viewed athletic involvement as a way of minimizing and managing age related declines, remaining independent, and avoiding the stigma of old age. In expressing their admiration of other senior athletes, participants also indicated that it was *their* health behaviours, not those of sedentary older adults, that should serve as an example to others. Advancement of this attitude through population health discourse would in many ways serve to stigmatize those seniors who are unable (or unwilling) to conform to this dominant ideal while contributing to the fear and undesirability of aging.

Consequently, as successful aging, embodied and epitomized by the senior athlete, becomes the frame through which aging is understood, a reiteration of ageist discourse is produced. Rather than devaluing older adults due to the inherent undesirability (to the self and others) of their aging bodies, they are increasingly judged according to their ability to mitigate and manage the aging process. Aging “successfully” becomes to not age at all, an indefinitely prolonged middle age available mainly to those who can afford it.

## CHAPTER SEVEN: CONCLUSION

In summary, I am confident I have answered the two questions guiding my research. In exploring the meanings that Masters athletes attribute to their involvement in sport and physical activity, it became apparent that the majority of the participants in this study were highly competitive. They were motivated to train and compete in Masters athletics events because they wanted to perform well, beat their peers, break records, and win medals. Participants were also motivated to be senior athletes due to their life-long history of involvement in athletics sports. Second to these motives, participants appeared to subscribe to neoliberal ideals of aging and physical fitness. They firmly believed that older adults can remain athletic and physically fit until their old age if they have the motivation and desire to be active. It is important to emphasize that participants did not appear to reflect upon how broader social and structural determinants had facilitated their athletic involvement – specifically their unique socioeconomic status. With reference to Foucault’s concepts of governmentality and discourse, I argued that these findings illustrate the processes through which the discourse of successful aging is reflected in the participants’ vocabularies of motives concerning their participation in Masters athletics events. Such discourse structured the way my research participants spoke and acted, and promoted a perspective of old age wherein successful aging was equated with a physically active lifestyle. I argued that once this perception of old age becomes normalized through events like the BCGS, it is likely to operate as technique for governing older populations by encouraging them to bring their lifestyles into accord with those modeled by senior athletes and contemporary population health discourse.

Secondly, I explored how older Masters athletes become exemplars in the context of the neoliberal discourse of successful aging. I demonstrated that although the BCSG started out encompassing the participation of older adults with varying levels of abilities in a range of



activities, the need to accommodate the competitive spirit and athletic performances of elite Masters athletes (i.e., the participants in this study) and promote the BCSG to a broader audience has resulted in a shift in emphasis in the central discourse deployed through the Games. I argued that the BCSG now emphasizes athletic exceptionalism despite a superficial discourse of inclusivity. I illustrated how this discourse of athletic performance was evidenced in the introduction of sophisticated officiating and time-keeping techniques, and through an emphasis on record performances, winning, medals and familiar Olympic events and ceremonies. Based on these findings, I concluded that elite Masters athletes have become exemplars of the neoliberal discourse on aging by becoming integrated into and influencing the BCSG and helping them to generate a higher profile in the media.

Situating these findings within the contemporary political contexts, elite-level older adult athleticism can be conceptualized as being part of increasing efforts to represent aging as an individual responsibility, thus obscuring the role played by broader social determinants. Based on the findings of this case study, it would appear that the 2012 BC Seniors Games served as a site through which to further the responsabilization of aging by enticing older adults into adopting “an ethic of self-government” (King, 2003, p 306). Through the generation of a higher media profile for the BCSG, older adults are encouraged to become physically active, thus bringing their lifestyles in accordance with those advocated by contemporary population health discourse in which notions of successful aging are dominant.

I wish to emphasize that it is not my intent in this research to criticize the BCSG. Overall, I think the Games play an important role in encouraging physical activity in the older adult population, a valuable shift considering the predominance of biomedical and ageist discourses for much of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. However, from a sociological perspective, I feel the ideals

promoted through the Games need to be examined critically. While older adults athleticism can be undoubtedly beneficial to individual participants, it obscures the fact that this type of activity is the purview of a comparatively small group of healthy individuals privileged by socio-economic status and other social determinants. This technique of governing implicitly stigmatizes the many older adults whose ill-health and inability to partake in strenuous physical activity is the result of disadvantageous circumstances over which they have no control. Furthermore, it promotes a reiteration of ageist discourse whereby notions of aging as a debilitating degenerative process are reinforced through emphasis and valuation on the opposite traits.

In summary, I argue that the neoliberal discourse of successful aging promoted through the vehicle of the 2012 BCSG is problematic for advancing idealized and largely unrealistic notions of old age which contribute to the responsabilization of health and aging by idealizing the defiance of aging through individual effort. Emphasizing free-will and hiding the exceptional circumstances of athletes participating in the BCSG only serves to minimize the contributions of class-based structural determinants to healthy aging.

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## Appendix I: Invitation to participate

Are you a competitive Masters athlete over the age of sixty?

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### Seeking Participants for a Study on Masters Athletics

My name is Bridget McGowan and I am a graduate student in the Department of Sociology at the University of Victoria. I am looking for older Masters athletes to participate in a study exploring their experiences of competitive sport. As a graduate student, I am required to conduct this study as part of the requirements for a Masters of Arts degree in Sociology.

#### Purpose of Study

This study explores the experiences of competitive athletes aged 60 years and over. The aim is to understand the meaning that older athletes attach to their athletic endeavours. The findings from this study will help better understand athleticism and physical activity later in life and the motivations of older athletes to participate in high-level competitive pursuits.

#### What is involved?

Participation in the study consists of one interview at a convenient location. The interview will be no more than one and half hour in duration or shorter depending on the amount of information you are wanting to share. Involvement in this study is voluntary and all information will be kept strictly confidential.

If you have any questions, want further information about the study, or would like to participate, please contact Bridget McGowan at (250) 813-2257 or email her at [mcgowanb@uvic.ca](mailto:mcgowanb@uvic.ca).

*If you know of any older athletes who might be interested in participating in this study to please forward this poster or contact them.*

## Appendix II: Interview consent form



**University  
of Victoria**

Department of Sociology

PO Box 3050 STN CSC

Victoria British Columbia V8W 3P5 Canada

Tel (250) 721-7572, Fax (250) 721-6217

## *Participant Consent Form*

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### *The Responsibilization of Health and Aging: A Case Study of Masters Athletics*

Principal Investigator:

Bridget McGowan, M.A. Candidate

Department of Sociology,

University of Victoria

(250) 813-2257 or email [mcgowanb@uvic.ca](mailto:mcgowanb@uvic.ca).

You are invited to participate in a study entitled “*The Responsibilization of Health and Aging: A Case Study of Masters Athletics*,” conducted by Bridget McGowan, a graduate student in the Department of Sociology at the University of Victoria. You may contact her if you have further questions by phoning (250) 813-2257 or by emailing [mcgowanb@uvic.ca](mailto:mcgowanb@uvic.ca). Bridget McGowan is conducting this study under the supervision of Dr. André Smith as a requirement for the Master of Arts in Sociology at the University of Victoria. You may contact Dr. Smith at (250) 721- 7583 or by emailing [apsmith@uvic.ca](mailto:apsmith@uvic.ca).

#### *Purpose and Objectives*

This study explores the experiences of older competitive athletes. The aim is to explore the meaning that older athletes attach to their athletic endeavours. The objective is to better understand the ways in which this meaning is embedded and framed by past and current athletic experiences and social notions of aging, health, gender, and exercise.

#### *Importance of this Research*

This study is important because more older adults are involved in competitive sports than ever before. Yet, little information is known about their motivations to compete and their experiences with athletic competition. It is thus essential to explore in-depth the experiences of older athletes in order to better understand athleticism in old age. The potential benefits of your participation include contributing to the wider knowledge about what motivates older adults to participate in high-level competitive sports, the benefits they derive from such participation, as well as the challenges they may encounter in the process. This knowledge will benefit other scholars in this field of research as well as, possibly, relevant government agencies and not-for-profit organizations seeking to improve the well-being of older adults.

#### *Participation*



You have been invited to participate in this study because you are 60 years of age or older and self-identify as a competitive athlete. If you are willing to participate, I will interview you about your experiences of athleticism and opinions regarding your individual sport. The interview will last no more than one and half hours and could be shorter depending on the amount information you will share. It will cover such topics as your athletics experiences, your motivation to engage in competitive sports, and your opinion about the involvement of older adults in competitive sports. A summary of the findings will be available to you upon request. I will ask your permission to audio record the interview. However, this is entirely optional and I will take written notes if you prefer not to be recorded.

### *Confidentiality*

Your identity will be kept strictly confidential in a number of ways. Only the Principal Investigator and his supervisor will have access to notes, transcripts and interview recordings. All recordings, transcripts and other documents will be stored in a locked filing cabinet and transcripts will not contain respondents' identifying information. All documents associated with your interview will be identified only by code number. The key to these numbers will be kept only by the principal investigator and will not be publicly released under any circumstances. You will never be identified by name in any reports or publications derived from the completed study. Only pseudonyms will be used in the reports and other materials that derived from the study. The transcripts, interview notes and electronic documents will be kept for a period of 5 years, after which time they will be destroyed. The results of this study will be shared with others in the following ways: a summary of the findings given to participants upon request; published articles in scholarly journals or newsletters; thesis; the internet; and presentations at scholarly meetings. Every effort will be made to disguise circumstances that could identify you in the reports and publications coming out of this study. However, it is still possible that you may be identified by individuals who are familiar with the particular circumstances surrounding your involvement with in athletic sports.

### *Remuneration*

No compensation, monetary or otherwise, is offered for your participation.

### *Your rights*

There are no known risks associated with your participation in this study. Your participation is entirely voluntary and you are free to refuse to answer any question or end the interview at any time. If you do decide to participate, you may withdraw at any time without any consequences or any explanation. If you do withdraw from the study your data will be destroyed via the shredding of the transcripts and any other evidence or relevant materials as well as the erasure the digital audio recordings.

If you have any questions or want further information about the study, please contact Bridget McGowan by phoning (250) 813-2257 or by emailing [mcgowanb@uvic.ca](mailto:mcgowanb@uvic.ca). You can also contact Dr. André Smith at (250) 721-7583 or by emailing [apsmith@uvic.ca](mailto:apsmith@uvic.ca). You may verify the ethical approval of this study, or raise any concerns you might have about your treatment or rights by contacting the Human Research Ethics Office at (250) 472-4545 or [ethics@uvic.ca](mailto:ethics@uvic.ca).

*Consent*

Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary and you may refuse to participate or withdraw from the study at any time without jeopardy to you. If you choose to withdraw from the study after being interviewed, the information collected in the interview will be used only with your permission or destroyed if you so wish. Your signature below indicates that you consent to participate in this study and that you have received a copy of this consent form for your own records. Your signature below indicates that you understand the above conditions of participation in this study, have had the opportunity to have your questions answered by the Principal Investigator, and have received a copy of this consent form for your own records.

_____	_____	_____
<i>Name of Participant</i>	<i>Signature</i>	<i>Date</i>
_____	_____	_____
<i>Name of Researcher</i>	<i>Signature</i>	<i>Date</i>

Follow-up interview and recording

- I consent to have this interview audio recorded.
- Please send a copy of the report by mail \_\_\_ or email \_\_\_ at (address): \_\_\_\_\_

A copy of this consent will be left with you, and a copy will be taken by the researcher.

### Appendix III: Interview Guide

- Tell me a about your athletic history.
  - Potential probes:
    - How did you get involved in sports?
    - What sports have you played?
    - How long have you been physically active?
- How did you get involved in Masters Athletics?
- What does participating in Masters Athletics events mean to you?

- Potential probes:
  - What are the other competitors like, the energy, what kinds of things do you see?
  - What kind of thoughts and feelings go through your head at these events?
- What are some of your motivations for training and competing at this point in your life?
  - Potential probes:
    - Possible physical, social, and mental motivation.
    - Have these motivations changed since you were younger?
- Are there any challenges to training and competing at this level?
  - Potential probes:
    - Possible physical, financial, and time constraints?
- What are your future goals in terms of competition?
- How do you feel older athletes are represented in the media?
- What should the role of the government be in promoting physical activity to older adults?

Appendix IV: Permission from BCSG organizers

> ----- Original Message -----

> Subject: permission

> From: ""June" <june.parsons@shaw.ca>

> Date: Fri, July 27, 2012 8:39 am

> To: mcgowanb@uvic.ca

> -----

>

> Hi Bridget,

> First of all, thank you for volunteering at the games, and as long as you follow the guidelines you mentioned in your email, you have permission to complete your field work observation of the Track and Field event

>

> I hope you enjoy the experience

>

> Regards June

> June Parsons

> President

> BC Seniors Games Society

>

> ... Come Play With Us ...

Dear \_\_\_\_\_,

My name is Bridget McGowan and I am a graduate student in the Department of Sociology at the University of Victoria. As part of the requirements for the Masters of Arts degree, I am conducting a study on seniors athletes competing in high-level athletic events such as the BC Seniors Games.

As part of my research, I would like to conduct fieldwork observations at the BC Seniors Games while I am attending the Games as a volunteer for the track and field events. This research activity would be restricted to taking notes about events and activities that are occurring in the public domain. Specifically, I would like to document the types of events in which seniors compete, where these take place within the stadium, the way these events are promoted during the games, and the kind of atmosphere that exists at the Games (e.g., what events are popular, cheering, etc.). I would also like to observe seniors who are competing in these events. This will be done unobtrusively and without the intent of identifying anyone in particular. I am more interested in seeing the type of athletic apparels competitors wear and the way in which they

express their competitive spirit. These field notes will not contain identifying information about any of the observed participants or any of the individuals associated with the games. In that sense, this research activity is akin to a journalistic account of the games. The data obtained from these observations will complement interviews which I will be conducting separately with seniors athletes on Vancouver Island.

I have applied for research ethics approval at the University of Victoria. This application requires that I obtain permission from the BC Seniors Games for conducting the above-mentioned research activities. Could you please let me how I could go about requesting such permission? If my request is agreeable, I would only require confirmation by email that I have permission to conduct these research activities. To reiterate, this will be done in an unobtrusive manner and will not involve interviewing or identifying athletes or staff and volunteer working at the games.

If you have any questions or want further information about this request, please contact me by phone at (250) 813-2257 or by email at [mcgowanb@uvic.ca](mailto:mcgowanb@uvic.ca). You can also contact my supervisor, Dr. André Smith, at (250) 721-7583 or by email at [apsmith@uvic.ca](mailto:apsmith@uvic.ca). Thank you for considering my request.

Kind regards,

Bridget McGowan, M.A. Candidate  
Department of Sociology  
University of British Columbia