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9 Coaching Older Adults (Aged 55+)

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Introduction

This chapter highlights that, despite growth in opportunities for older adults to participate in sport, sport coaching for older adults (55 years +) is rarely a key priority at the political, organisational, and administrative levels of community sport. This reality poses challenges for the community sport coach when working with older adults. The purpose of this chapter is to critically examine sport policy, sport programming, and coach education as it relates to older participants in community sport, particularly Masters sport. Masters sport, also known as Veteran’s or Senior sport, can refer to local (community), regional, state/province, national (e.g. the Australian Masters Games, the US Senior Games), and international (World Masters Games) sporting competitions. These competitions are held for those who are competing in individual events (e.g. Masters swimming clubs), paired sports (e.g. tennis), or team games (e.g. Masters rugby and Veteran’s hockey) above the typical age of peak performance for that sport, which is usually 35 years and over, depending on the sport (Dionigi, 2006a, 2016; Dionigi and Gard, 2018; Stone et al., 2018). Within the Masters sport context, individual sports (such as track and field and swimming) are typically organised in five-year age bands (e.g. 55–59 or 80–84) and team games, such as soccer/football, hockey, and basketball, in 10-year age groups (Dionigi, 2016). Where available, many older athletes are members of a community sports club located nearby their area of residence.

Older adults who participate in Masters sport can range from the recreational player or local community sports club participant to a competitor at a multi-sports carnival such as the World Masters Games. The philosophies underlying the Masters sport and Masters Games movements, which began in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s across the Western world, are ‘friendship, fun, and fitness’ and ‘sport for all,’ which has resulted in some older adults playing sport ‘for fun’ and/or for health reasons, while others also train ‘to win’ (Dionigi, 2006a; Dionigi et al., 2011). With an ageing population around the globe, the participation of older adults in sport is growing, especially in developed nations (Dionigi and Gard, 2018; Stone et al., 2018), and many older adults have, require, or are seeking a sport coach (Callary et al., 2015; Ferrari et al., 2016). The first World Masters Games in Toronto, Canada in 1985 had 8,305 athletes, whereas an
average of approximately 25,000 athletes have participated in the games held in 2009 (Sydney, Australia), 2013 (Torino, Italy), and 2017 (Auckland, New Zealand), with participants observed representing their local community Masters (or equivalent) sporting club at such events (see https://imga.ch). Alongside these growth in numbers of older athletes, sporting organisations, exercise scientists, and government agencies now advocate for sport (through policy and programming) as an effective means to promote ‘healthy lifestyles’ and ‘active ageing’ across the lifespan (van Uffelen et al., 2015; Gard and Dionigi, 2016; Gard et al., 2018; see Smith et al., Chapter 1 in this volume). However, a focus on youth and performance still tends to dominate sport policy.

Our chapter focuses on the coaching needs of athletes aged 55 years and over who train and compete in their chosen sport (whether it be at their local club on a weekly basis and/or at major multi-sports events), has sport-specific skills and knowledge, and has the fiscal and social means to regularly participate in sport. In light of the growth in Masters sport participation rates and the unique needs and sporting goals of older adults when compared to youth athletes or other sporting populations (Dionigi, 2006a, 2006b, 2016; Baker et al., 2010; Eime et al., 2013; Horton et al., 2018, 2019), the case has been made that specific coaching for older athletes is important (Young et al., 2014; Callary et al., 2015, 2018a, 2018b; MacLellan et al., 2018, 2019). To aid in the development of community sport coaches, the chapter provides some coaching strategies (e.g. hints and tips) that practitioners can use to ensure continued participation, fun, and meaningful engagement among older adults in sport. Ultimately, this chapter argues that sport policy changes at all levels of sport are needed, as well as more research, initiatives, and coach education programmes, to assist in building the personal and social skills required to adapt coaching sessions and manage participant needs when working with older adults in community sport.

In terms of structure, the next section below shows that, in the main, national and international sporting policies remain focused on young age groups in terms of participation and elite performance, which forces community sports to align their strategic goals with these policies. Therefore, as discussed subsequently, there are limited (yet emerging) community sport coaching initiatives specific to older adults, including a lack of access to formal sport coaching and coach education opportunities in countries such as Australia, England, New Zealand, and Canada. To shed light on the complexities of coaching older adults, we next focus on findings from Canadian research on coaching Masters athletes aged 55 years and over. This section includes a discussion on the extent to which coach education prepares and supports practitioners for working with older athletes. It demonstrates that coaching older adults requires the skills of understanding, negotiating, and meeting athlete needs for competition, health and/or fun, overcoming barriers to older adult sport participation, developing personal relationships between coach(es) and athlete(s), accounting for age-related changes, and applying adult learning principles to the coaching context. The chapter concludes by offering some strategies and critical thinking questions to assist those embarking on community sport coaching with older adults.
National and International Policy Landscapes

Despite the meaningful outcomes that sport participation can bring to older adults, including social connectedness and psychological, emotional, self-actualisation, lifestyle development, and physical health benefits (Eime et al., 2013; Dionigi, 2016; Stone et al., 2018; Young, 2018), national sporting policies across North America, Europe, New Zealand, and Australia tend to focus on the participation and elite performance of young age groups. Furthermore, there is a clear absence of international policy agendas for the advancement of coaching and older adult sport programming from leading enterprises such as the International Masters Games Association and the World Health Organization (WHO). For instance, WHO’s ageing and health strategy (World Health Organization, 2018) does not discuss the use of sport. And, although the WHO’s Regional Office for Europe is implementing a Sports Club for Health (SCforH) programme in collaboration with TAFISA, the Association for International Sport for All (www.tafisa.org), this programme is more about increasing the participation of people of all ages in sport (including the ‘elderly’). Thus, there is no mention of coaching older adults in club sport (see World Health Organization, no date). This notable gap means that national sport policy drives the strategic focus of national and state sporting organisations, which filters through to community sport. This process results in a lack of political, organisational, administrative, and personnel (e.g. coaches) support for community sport, including coaching older adults.

Although national and state/provincial sporting organisations are required to align their strategic focus with existing policies, high performance (or elite) programming generally does not happen at a local/community level of sport, but adult sport programming typically does. Therefore, older adults become a much more important cohort at a community sport level than high performance cohorts. Participation in sport for older adults, which often begins at the community level, is on the rise, especially within the broader context of the commodification of competitive Masters sport and the growth of mega, multi-sports event (e.g. World Masters Games) registration numbers (e.g. Young et al., 2015; Dionigi and Litchfield, 2018). Therefore, the growth of the adult sport community, in spite of national sport policy foci and lack of international policies, provides a great opportunity to examine the need for and experiences of coaching older adults.

Sport Policy’s Focus on Youth and Performance

Participation in sport is driven by policies and strategies developed and implemented from national and/or state/provincial governments through to local sports clubs. Before sharing some policy examples, it is worth keeping in mind that:

Sport and physical activity cannot be clearly defined because how we understand them is always changing depending upon cultural norms, leisure
trends, and policy directions. Different countries use different terms, such as physical culture in the United Kingdom … or exercise in the United States. Often ‘sport’ and ‘physical activity’ … are conflated in policy, everyday language, and academic writing.

(Dionigi and Gard, 2018, p. 2)

The following examples from across the globe provide insight into government attempts to increase sport and physical activity participation, through a focus on youth and high performance/elite sport. In New Zealand (NZ), the 2020–2024 strategic plan of Sport New Zealand (2019, 2020) states that:

Our role and core purpose is within the active leisure domain. It is here where we seek to improve physical activity levels through Play, Active Recreation, and Sport to ensure the greatest impact on wellbeing of all those living within Aotearoa New Zealand.

(Sport New Zealand, 2019, p. 18)

[Sport New Zealand] believe that growing the quality of participation opportunities helps to maximise wellbeing and feeds the pathway to elite sport, and our success on the world stage in turn helps to inspire participation.

(Sport New Zealand, 2020, p. 6)

Likewise, the European Sports Charter sets ‘the framework for sports policy to which all European countries have to put their name… Sport must be: accessible to everybody [and] available for children and young people in particular’ (see Council of Europe Portal, no date).

The vision for Canadian sport policy is ‘a dynamic and innovative culture that promotes and celebrates participation and excellence in sport’ (Canadian Sport Policy, 2012, p. 5). While current Canadian sport policy does not explicitly define ‘sport’ as such, it does reference organised and unorganised activities and recreation, as well as high performance and non-competitive leisure-time physical activity (Canadian Sport Policy, 2012; Sport for Life, 2019). The Canadian sport policy goals include the introduction to sport through development of fundamental skills, knowledge, and attitudes to participate in sport, as well as participation in recreational sport for fun, social interaction, and relaxation. Further, it highlights competitive sport and high performance sport in addition to ‘sport for development,’ the latter being where sport is used as a tool for social and economic development, and the promotion of positive personal values, such as those related to physical literacy (motivation, physical competence, responsibility) and positive organisational environments in communities, especially inclusive sport, the opening of sport experiences to underserved populations, and developmentally/age-appropriate programming. The Canadian Sport for Life (2019) framework, Long-Term Development in Sport and Physical Activity 3.0, sets a template to integrate local recreation and sport centres/organisations into the delivery of Sport for Life experiences. It aims to achieve sporting excellence, activity for life, and physical literacy.
Similarly, Sport Australia’s vision is for Australia to be ‘the world’s most active and healthy nation, known for our integrity and sporting success’ (Commonwealth of Australia, 2018, p. 1). In Australia, until most recently, ‘sport’ was defined as very much an activity governed with rules and largely competitive club-based activities from the community level to elite. In the current Australian sport policy, the definition has been widened to ‘include a broad range of physical activities including informal, unstructured activity such as walking, riding, swimming, and running as well as traditional, structured sport and new and evolving sport and physical activity offerings such as mixed martial arts, “ninja” style obstacle courses, and stand-up-paddle boarding’ (Commonwealth of Australia, 2018, p. 6). The four strategic priorities are: building a more active Australia, achieving sporting excellence, safeguarding the integrity of sport, and strengthening Australia’s sport industry.

Other sporting policies that simultaneously focus on sport performance and mass participation exist in Europe, such as their Sport for All Charter mentioned earlier (see Scheerder et al., 2018), and the United Kingdom (UK). ‘UK Sport is the nation’s high-performance sports agency [who] work in partnership to lead Olympic and Paralympic sport in the UK to world class success’ (see UK Sport, 2020), while Sport England adopts a ‘sport for all’ vision (see Sport England, 2021). That is, Sport England’s mission is to ‘invest in sport and physical activity to make it a normal part of life for everyone in England, regardless of who you are’ (Sport England, 2021, p. 8).

These national policies and frameworks demonstrate that sport is many things to many people, yet organised sport remains primarily targeted towards children and youth. The sport policies mentioned above include a focus on physical literacy, which is discussed as a need for development at childhood. These policies generally assume that early life physical literacy effectively tracks and facilitates continued participation across later life stages. Firstly, this assumption contradicts physical activity tracking research, which shows poor evidence of continuous participation over time, meaning people disengage and re-engage across the life-span (Young, 2018). Secondly, there are key questions not yet addressed within these national policies (e.g. what happens to the people who do not gain the necessary physical literacy when they are young? how do they lead active lifestyles?). Arguably, it would be extremely difficult for an individual to enter even recreationally competitive sport in their adulthood at a local/community club level if they do not have necessary physical literacy and sport-specific skills. Thirdly, the continuing assumption of policy makers that early life physical literacy tracks and supports sport activity across middle aged and older stages of life is misguided when considering recent dialogue on the topic. For example, work by a pan Canadian collaborative group (Jones et al., 2018), which advocates for a developmentally appropriate and evolving definition of physical literacy among older adults, has received scant attention by policy makers. Interestingly, this group recommended that older adult physical literacy and quality physical activity experiences depend on tailoring instructional leadership, resources, and other supports to older adults’ preferences. Their work underscored the importance of
organisational investment and policy attentiveness to the realities of older cohorts, including the importance of trained leaders and coaches in older adult sport.

While the sport policies mentioned above reference ‘sport for all’ and ‘participation for life,’ they primarily highlight competitive sport and high-performance sport, which are inherently centred around children, youth, and young adults. These policies are largely void of specific strategies aimed at coaching older adults in community sport. For example, Sport Australia makes reference to movement for life including early childhood, childhood, all ages, and older Australians 65+, however without direct strategies on coaching older adults (Commonwealth of Australia, 2018). Within the Australian sport policy landscape, it does highlight that as people age, the barriers to being physically active change and that Sport Australia will need to partner with other organisations, such as community groups, to consider the needs of those least active. Likewise, in Canada, the updated Sport for Life (2019) framework recognises that ‘aging adults’ are among the groups which ‘continue to be marginalised and ignored’ within the Canadian ‘sport and physical activity ecosystem’ (p. 6). It also acknowledges the significant role of coaching and programme design in facilitating good sport experiences and calls for alignment across multiple sectors (health, education, recreation, sport).

Similarly, Sport England’s mission is to ‘unlock the advantages of sport and physical activity for everyone,’ including through community sport coaching, which is regarded as an important component of ‘providing opportunities to people and communities that have traditionally been left behind, and helping to remove the barriers to activity’ (Sport England, 2021, pp. 8–9). For instance, Coaching in an Active Nation: The Coaching Plan for England outlines strategies to make it easier for people to become coaches and for participants to receive productive coaching. Notably, however, there is limited information on coaching older adults in this plan (Sport England, 2016). Moreover, the lack of international policy agendas on coaching and sport programming for older adults from leading bodies such as the International Masters Games Association and the World Health Organization means that national sport policy drives the strategies of national sporting organisations through to local community sport.

**Sporting Organisations and Lack of Opportunity for Older Adults**

At a national sporting organisational level, it has been acknowledged that a main barrier to participation in sport for older adults was their lack of organisational priorities, in addition to perceived societal expectations. National sporting organisations (NSOs) align to national policies, through which many receive significant funding and investments. As such, NSOs strategically focus on children and youth because they are seen as a more economically viable target group when compared to older adults. Sports organisation are also concerned about risk management and there is an ageist perception that additional resources, such as first aid, will be required to accommodate older adults, which leads to concerns about participant insurance (Jenkin et al., 2018b). Consistently, Young et al. (2015) commented that ageist beliefs perpetuate the notion that competitive sport is
predominantly a playground for the young, further stating (p. 156), ‘traditionally stereotyped perceptions are likely a barrier that limits how the possibilities associated with Masters sport are received by stakeholders (e.g. government organisations, sport federations) and sponsors.’ Correspondingly, Jenkin et al. (2018b) discussed a societal expectation of who does and should play sport, which often does not include older adults. They attributed this stereotype to the predominant sport policy and strategies’ focus on children and youth. In this study, a national sporting organisation representative articulated that the media, sports marketing, and general public influenced their organisational priorities, such as club-based volunteers prioritising the sports programming and coaching of children and youth, not older adults (Jenkin et al., 2018b).

The heavy focus of sports organisations on children and youth can result in a lack of capacity for community groups to actively engage other age groups in sport, such as older adults. This structural disadvantage contributes to organisational barriers for older adults participating in sport such as a lack of available age-appropriate teams or competitions, inappropriate or lack of facilities (because they are being prioritised for children’s sport), or few opportunities within close geographical proximity (Jenkin et al., 2018b). In addition, older adults have reported a lack of available organisations that provide suitable training, coaching, and competitive opportunities, and the feeling that their family cannot participate with them (Young, 2011). Other common barriers to community older adult sport include a perceived lack of time, a lack of motivation, poor health, negative attitudes related to aging, lack of sport-specific skills, or knowledge, or a perceived lack of encouragement from others (Cardenas et al., 2009; Jenkin et al., 2018b; Littlejohn and Young, 2019). All of these barriers are understandable given that sport policy tends to prioritise participation for children and youth and, therefore, clubs also prioritise children and youth over any other group (Jenkin et al., 2018b).

At the same time, the growth in Masters sport participation mentioned in our introduction means that many older adults are choosing to play sport, rather than volunteer their services as coaches or otherwise, which raises more challenges for community sport. However, there is emerging research, evidence, and tools available on coaching older adults in sport. The following section summarises promising efforts by collaborators in the Canadian context on evidence-based initiatives in coach education knowledge, practices, and delivery in community sporting clubs for older adults (see Coaching Masters Athletes, no date).

**Community Sport Coaching Initiatives**

**Illustrative Example of Coach Education Development and Resources for Community Sport Coaches**

Research into the context of coached Masters sport within community clubs has shown that Masters athletes perceive benefits in being coached (Callary et al., 2015; Ferrari et al., 2016) and that coaches know that Masters athletes have
unique needs and preferences in being coached, but that they do not always know
how to cater to their adult athletes (Callary et al., 2017a). Further, in exploring
how coaches have learned to interact with this cohort, these studies have found
that coaches are typically learning from their experiences as a Masters coach and,
in some cases, as a Masters athlete themselves. These dual roles (older sports
participant and sport coach of older adults) are not necessarily dependable
approaches to building coaching effectiveness. While these coaches take weekend
community level and/or competition-introduction level coach education courses
in order to meet the minimum criteria to coach, they typically do not find much
value in these courses that are geared towards working with youth (Callary et al.,
2018a).

There is a lack of accessible coach education content tailored to addressing
older adults. In a scoping review of international websites for coaching Masters
sport and coach education programming, Belalcazar and Callary (2018) found
scant resources and no coach education courses specifically targeting coaching
adult populations, especially with regards to understanding psychosocial needs
and instructionally-appropriate approaches. The limited resources that were
found, such as the Coaching Association of Canada’s booklet on Coaching Masters
Athletes (Coaching Association of Canada, 2013), focused on biophysical aspects of
ageing bodies, and did not include evidence-based instructional approaches spe-
cific to coaching older athletes. This is understandable, as such research did not
exist at the time of the booklet’s publication. Furthermore, the information that
was available was based in biophysical sport sciences, and it was oriented heavily
to the most competitive and serious-minded of Masters athletes (i.e. typically
higher-performing or ‘elite’ older athletes), rather than towards recreational sport
activities for older adults, such as walking football leagues, that are often coached
by employees of senior centres or community sporting clubs.

An exception that shows one organisation’s attempts to improve the tailoring of
coach education in an age-appropriate manner is Canada’s High Five pro-
gramme, which ‘builds on High Five’s quality assurance standard for children
[through] its principles [of] Mastery, Play, Participation, Friendship, and having
A Caring Leader’ (see High Five, 2019). In 2019, High Five launched a daylong
workshop in Principles of Healthy Aging, which focuses on the unique needs of older
adults participating in, but not limited to, sport and physical activity (High Five,
2019). The workshop promisingly begins by dealing with understanding ageism,
an age-specific topic that applies to leading a group of older adults. However, a
well-intentioned subsequent topic on physical literacy and fundamental move-
ment skills disappointingly and awkwardly borrows on research from youth
populations, instead of grounding dialogue in models of physical literacy speci-
cifically for older adults (e.g. Jones et al., 2018). Callary and Young (2020) urge
coach education programming for Masters and adult coaching contexts to not
simply superimpose research from youth sport onto older adult sport. Rather,
adult-oriented programming is more effectively designed using evidence-based
findings from adult and older adult participants. Further, lumping together find-
ings from research and practice on any and all older adults to understand
programming, coach education, and policy needs for this age bracket is not advisable because of the vast heterogeneity of motives, interests, abilities, and experiences of these individuals (Rathwell et al., 2015).

Coach education offered by national sporting organisations and thereby community sport centres or clubs tend to focus on youth, athlete development, or high-performance contexts. Thus, these have not sufficiently prepared practitioners for working with older adults or Masters athletes (Callary et al., 2018a). Based on the research with and for coaches in the Masters context, bespoke coach education workshops have had some success in supporting coaches who work with Masters athletes from various Masters sports communities (e.g. rowing, golf, fitness, biathlon, soccer, swimming). For example, Callary and Gearity (2021) developed a professional development course for Masters fitness coaches that covered five psychosocial topics that were prominent themes in the Masters coaching literature. These themes were adult learning in sport, communicating with adults, the psychology of coaching adults, social issues in coaching adults, and a Masters coaching philosophy (Callary and Gearity, 2021). In addition, Belalcazar and Callary (under review) conducted workshops with Masters soccer coaches in Colombia to provide individualised and context specific development opportunities for coaching older players. Such coach education initiatives, when building from research-based findings in the Masters sport context, and grounded in a culturally relevant and sport-specific way, have been well received by participants. For instance, Belalcazar and Callary found that the soccer coaches could implement adult-oriented coaching practices into their training and games. More research and programmes on these adult-oriented coaching practices are discussed in section three. Below are some examples of how the sport environment can be modified to enhance the potential for meaningful engagement in sport in later life, as well as help coaches in adult sport programming.

**Adaptations and Programme Modifications when Coaching Older Adults**

At a practical level, literature is beginning to address various schemes for coaches and programme facilitators to adapt and modify the environment for older sportspersons. In Australia, Jenkin et al. (2018a) describe how sport programmes for older adults have been successful when there are programme or product modifications made to the sport so that the sport is appropriate for older adults’ capability and enjoyment. These modifications might be considered a form of adaptive coaching, for example, for walking-basketball reducing the height of the basketball hoops (Jenkin et al., 2018a). Other considerations to attract older adult sport participants were venue suitability, improved marketing, education, and training of programme facilitators/coaches (Jenkin et al., 2018a). These findings highlight the need for the sport activity/programme/competition to be age appropriate, and therefore sport programmers require different strategies compared to other age groups. For older adults, it is recommended that sport is modified to suit participants’ preference for participation, ability, pace and
intensity, and developmental level (i.e. declining vision, neuromotor and cognitive capacity) associated with age (Jenkin et al., 2018a). The next section takes a three-fold approach to consider how this emergent research might translate into differences in dialogue, personnel training, and outcomes relating to policies on coaching and programming for older adults in community sport.

Facilitating Policy Outcomes Related to Community Sport Coaching and Programming of Older Adults

There is a clear need for policy outcomes associated with better (i.e. more frequent, widespread, more local) access to quality coaching approaches tailored to older adults than currently exists, and such outcomes will result in quality sport experiences for older adults. This section first discusses extracts from the transcripts of interviews with Masters coaches (derived from interviews with community swim coaches in Callary et al., 2015) to portray how coaches feel about their roles and their interactions with this target population. Second, it addresses academic research and theory among Canadian collaborators, which has potential in catalysing change in coach education through the development of tools, strategies, and approaches for Masters coaches based in adult learning principles. Third, it reflects on what this body of scholarly work means for policy and programming related to older adults in community sports organisations.

From the Voices of Community Sport Coaches: Insights on their Roles and Lived Experiences

When understanding the roles and lived experiences of adult sport coaches, it is important to acknowledge that two streams appear to exist: (a) coaches of serious/competitive-minded Masters athletes, and (b) coaches of less-serious/competitive recreational athletes. Most of what we know about coaching adults originates from the competitive Masters context (e.g. Callary et al., 2015), where the value of the coach is closely, but not solely, attached to performance enhancement. As the coach of one of Canada’s most competitive Masters triathlon club programmes described:

My goal is to give my adults all the benefits younger competitive athletes get. Because, they do everything conceivable to get to the highest possible level, their version of the Olympics. That encompasses proper nutrition, time management, and helping adapt their environment. So making sure their work life, workout life, and family life align to be successful. I call it the WOW factor. I educate them how to Work it, Own it, and Will it to happen. So, my value comes from educating them on all aspects of their sport, so they can take ownership of what they're doing.

On the other end of the spectrum are community-based coaches, of whom we know much less. These coaches appear to recognise the importance of their
technical and tactical knowledge, but attach more value to personal and motivational components of coaching. As one community coach described:

It is not just a health and fitness thing, adult athletes come for the coach. I am the reason they come because they like my attitude; I am funny, I am relaxed, and you know, I also do have the expertise.

Community coaches have even expressed some dissonance when discussing competitive programmes. One coach said:

A few clubs operate like a high-end business. They are purely performance based and I would say a lot less fun happens there than at our club. Some people are drawn to that and don’t want the social stuff and don’t want to joke around. They want to get in, work their butts off, and perform well at competitions. Here, we are more like ‘let’s have fun, get fit, and have some social stuff.’ You know, let’s still improve, but let’s focus on getting to 80 with a high quality of life.

The aforementioned examples highlight the two extremes of the competitive spectrum. However, the reality is most adult coaches’ work with heterogeneous teams of athletes. As such, the value coaches provide is different for individuals depending on the older athletes’ skill levels and personal goals, which may also change over time for each individual. One coach of a heterogeneous group elaborated the importance of addressing individual needs and goals:

There is a big range on my team and the value I provide for each type of swimmer is different. The beginners need a lot of technical help, they need guidance and encouragement. They need to feel good about their progress. So for them, it is mostly skill and motivation. For the most advanced athletes, they need the training. They need help making sure they are working hard enough and that they are peaking at the right time for their competitions. So we keep track of that. And they need someone standing over them saying, ‘Your rest is over, you were supposed to leave ten seconds ago.’

Taken together, coaches see themselves as responsible for promoting outcomes that align with current Canadian Sport for Life policy or other similar policies noted above from Australia, Europe, New Zealand, and the UK. That is, although they recognise the need to adapt to individual adults’ preferences, overall, the community coaches articulate values that align with promoting physical literacy (i.e. fundamental skills and physical competence, knowledge and attitudes to participate in sport, confidence) and creating a positive sporting environment that balances fun, social interactions, and meaningful competition.
Emergent Research on Coaching and Programming for Older Adults in Sport

Calling for innovative inquiry, Young et al. (2014) opined the need to understand differences in coaching older athletes compared to youth and young adults. They noted a void of coaching research and developed an early roadmap to guide coaches and sport programmers. This map suggested good practice was to programme for diverse motives, to consider the coach’s role in helping older adults negotiate time constraints and concerns about age-related decline, and adopting approaches that foster self-determined and engaged learners.

Canadian studies have since elaborated upon these early considerations. Rathwell et al. (2015) documented the lived experiences of older athletes in a coached context. They revealed different typologies of older swimmers (socially oriented; controlling and demanding; striving and competitive), with each having different needs and perspectives on being coached. Callary et al. (2015) used qualitative interviews with older swimmers to detail their wants and needs from a coach. What resulted was a seminal catalogue of older adults’ preferences for: personal attributes and experiential aspects of coaches; coaching behaviours that held them accountable; instructional approaches; planning and structural facets related to practices and the programme, and; coaching interactions in preparation for and at competition. The authors first noted the viability of andragogy (i.e. principles related to the art and science of coaching adults) to explain why older swimmers benefited from age tailored coaching. Therefore, we recommend that community sport coaches working with older adults apply andragogy in their delivery of information or instruction and adaptation of sessions to ensure continued participation, fun, and meaningful engagement among this population group, as elaborated next.

Ensuing research investigated the alignment of andragogic (or adult tailored) principles with coaching practices among Masters athletes. Callary et al. (2017a) analysed whether swim coaches’ common approaches aligned with six key adult learning principles espoused in non-sport, educational domains from Knowles et al. (2012). Indeed, they were aligned – coaches were aware of their adult athletes’ matured self-concept and prior experiences, used bidirectional communication patterns (rather than top down or hierarchical approaches, wherein both the coach and adult athletes confidently questioned one another and were open to critique and opposing views), and employed personalised goal-oriented approaches. Importantly, when coaches effectively accommodated their swimmers’ interests with andragogic principles, they enriched these adults’ sporting experiences. Additional evidence illustrated coaches’ effective use of andragogic coaching in dragon boat (e.g. Young and Callary, 2018) and canoe/kayak (MacLellan et al., 2018) racing. MacLellan et al.’s (2018) case study of a canoe/kayak coach showed that she often used different strategies with teenage versus older athlete cohorts, and rationalised differential approaches in accordance with andragogic principles. For example, while the coach provided both cohorts with the weekly plan, this was to ensure the youth would organise their schedules around her
plan, while, with the older athletes, her plan acted as a means by which they could choose whether or not to attend practice and/or organise their own practice if they could not attend a coach-led session.

Altogether, these works showed the importance of adult coaches’ understanding of adult learning principles. MacLellan et al. (2019) deductively interpreted one canoe/kayak coach’s approaches with her older athletes according to andragogic principles. Informed by coach interviews and field observations, what resulted was an Andragogy in Sport Practice Model, which was further elaborated in Callary and Young (2020). This model features six central adult-oriented principles that have been advanced as important considerations when addressing older adults in sport:

1. satisfying the athlete’s need to know;
2. respecting the athlete’s self-concept;
3. leveraging prior experiences of the athlete;
4. orienting the athlete to learning to use problem solving;
5. optimising an adult’s readiness to learn and train; and
6. tailoring to the athlete’s motives for learning.

These six principles are differentially applied according to individual learning differences, situational circumstances, the extent to which learning is for competitive goals/purposes, and as a function of age-related coaching expectancies for older athletes.

With an eye towards coach education and content for applied workshops with Masters coaches, Callary, Young, and colleagues developed a coach self-assessment tool regarding adult-oriented coaching principles. Development of the survey occurred along two parallel lines of investigation. On one hand, Callary et al. (2017b) created a pool of survey items based on themes catalogued in Callary et al.’s (2015) qualitative study of what older athletes preferred from their coaches. These items were vetted for face validity with Masters coaches and refined, and then the survey was distributed to a large sample of Canadian coaches of adults (Callary et al., 2018b). This survey was also rephrased and disseminated to a large sample of older athletes who reported on their experiences of adult-oriented coaching principles from their Masters coaches (Rathwell et al., 2019). On the other hand, the researchers developed another pool of survey items based on Callary et al.’s (2017a) qualitative deductive analysis of andragogic principles. These items were vetted for face validity and refined with the help of coaches so they were more sensitive to the sport coaching context (Rathwell et al., 2017), and then distributed in survey format to a large sample of Canadian Masters coaches. A series of psychometric analyses ensued involving exploratory structural equation modelling and confirmatory factor analyses, to test for factorial validity, convergent and divergent validity, and internal consistency reliability, for each of the pools of survey items. The testing helped the researchers delete problematic items, with subsequent retesting.

In the end, the best solution for a coach self-report survey involved merging valid factors derived from the two separate pools of survey items. The resultant
survey demonstrated acceptable validity, with a measurement model that fit the data well (Rathwell et al., 2020). It was called the Adult Oriented Sport Coaching Survey (AOSCS), and its 22 items assessed five dimensions of adult-oriented coaching practice in older adults:

1. considering the individuality of athletes;
2. framing learning situations;
3. imparting coaching knowledge;
4. respecting athletes’ preferences for effort, accountability, and feedback; and
5. creating personalised programming.

The AOSCS has shown good criterion validity, with scores on the majority of the specific dimensions associated in theoretically consistent ways with athletes’ reports of basic needs satisfaction and thwarting, coach-athlete relationship quality, liking the coach, sport commitment, and enjoyment (Motz et al., 2019). As further longitudinal testing for predictive validity proceeds, along with tests of invariance to ensure validity of assessment across different sub-cohorts, the AOSCS is being integrated as an essential self-diagnostic instrument and a tool for encouraging dialogue in Masters coach education workshops (Callary and Young, 2020).

The AOSCS (Rathwell et al., 2020) is an important instrument that community sport coaches can use to educate themselves and reflect on their adult-oriented coaching practices and interactions. For example, coaches can use their scores on a scale for ‘framing learning situations’ to introspect on best practices for how often they encourage their athletes to figure out challenges through self-discovery, rather than coach-directed recommendations, and how often they frame skill acquisition scenarios as a problem to be solved (e.g. a swimmer needs to improve her 50m fly time by two seconds – this is the problem posed to her, then the coach asks her to come up with solutions that will inform action planning). The scores on this scale also ask the coach to consider best practices for how they use athlete models (e.g. pointing out to novice Masters athletes how more experienced Masters athletes take steps to refine their training) and performance assessments (e.g. time trials) to contextualise learning opportunities for their adult athletes. Callary and Young (2020) discuss the importance of developing debriefing guides that coach educators can use with community coaches for them to understand their scores on all of the scales but, more importantly, for them to use the AOSCS diagnostic to prompt reflection on how they can pick up strategies and tips for coaching Masters athletes. This process is meant to be driven by a tool grounded in empirical research, but implemented in a personal and meaningful way for each coach.

Informing Policy on Coaching in Community Sporting Clubs

Insights generated from the research discussed in this chapter are now informing coach education programming for Canadian Masters coaches, particularly
helping Masters coaches learn by using adult-oriented principles adapted to the sporting context (Callary and Young, 2020). These empirically based principles of coach facilitation embody the heterogeneity of adult athletes’ experiences and interests, as well as the uniqueness of the mature adult self-concept. In particular, adapted coach education workshops seek to inculcate adult-oriented coaching approaches in Masters coaches, while demonstrating how the same principles can be applied to their own development as coaches. Further, bearing in mind that many coaches of older adults are volunteers or part-time coaches with busy lives and limited time for coaching and coach development, there are efforts to help Masters coaches develop context specific knowledge without going through lengthy programming (Callary and Young, 2020). The workshops and online programming discussed above (Callary and Gearity, 2021; Belalcazar and Callary, under review), as well as the self-assessment AOSCS (Rathwell et al., 2020), provide examples of how this might be effectively carried out in practice. Finally, reflecting on the disjoint between broader sport policy and community initiatives, much more of this type of research and educational workshops are needed to assist the community sport coach who aims to work with older adults. For policy outcomes related to sport for life, active for life, and the inclusion of marginalised groups in sport and physical activity to be realised, more resources and support for coaching a diversity of groups, especially older adults, at the community level is necessary.

Conclusion

This chapter has provided a policy context and some strategies to assist those embarking on community sport coaching with older adults. The participation of older adults in sport is on the rise and this cohort must be taken seriously by policymakers and sporting organisations at the political, administrative, and personnel levels of sport so that there is a balance of resources, education, and investment in sport across the lifespan. There also needs to be a shift away from the dominant sport policy focus on youth and elite performance across many Western nations, so that the trickle-down effect from (inter)national policy to community sport broadens its attention to other age groups in sport, such as participants aged 55 years and over. In terms of this cohort, we have highlighted the need for coaches to acknowledge the disjoint between sport policy and community sport programmes, barriers to older adult sport participation, and age-specific modifications to suit participants’ needs, abilities, pace intensities, and developmental levels (i.e. visual, neuromuscular, and cognitive capacity). We also showed the importance of meeting athlete individual needs for competition and/or fun, overcoming barriers to older adult sport participation, developing personal relationships with older athletes, and applying adult learning principles to the coaching context. Overall, this chapter has demonstrated that sport policy changes at all levels of sport are needed, as well as more research, initiatives, and coach education programmes, to assist in developing the personal, communication, leadership, and social skills required to adapt coaching sessions and meet the varying needs of older adults in sport.
Critical Questions

1. How can sport policy change to focus on older adults in a community sport context? Describe three policy recommendations and explain how they could be implemented as a community sport coach in your specific context.

2. How can andragogic/adult-oriented principles be leveraged to help shape future coach education programmes and/or sport policy for older adults? Discuss at least three ways relevant to your context/country.

3. Discuss how and why ageist biases among stakeholders and community organisers influence how sport policy outlines the sharing of resources among different age groups, and differential allocation of resources to athletes young and old?

4. Explain how/why ageist biases affect the ways in which resources for sport coaching and programming are implemented among age groups at the community level. In your answer, consider scenarios where sporting resources are scarce, for example in communities that need to leverage collaborative efforts between youth, high performance, and Masters sport (i.e. policy objectives for alignment), and discuss to what extent are resources actually shared in your context?

5. In cases where opportunities for coach education are limited, what are the conditions that constrain or encourage coach education efforts explicitly for adult community sport?

6. What capacity building activities are needed to support local sports clubs accommodating older adults as participants in your area?

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