

# The disengagement and activity theories of ageing: some possible implications for future sports involvement of the aged

NSI © by IAAF  
7:4; 33-39, 1992

by Thomas D. Watts

“*The author defines two theories of ageing. He discusses the implications of each with respect to the involvement of the aged in sport and the interest of society as a whole in that involvement and concludes that modern sport should not be exclusive to the younger age groups.*”

## 1 Introduction

In this article I will discuss two major disengagement and activity theories of ageing, and the implications of each in respect to a) the involvement of the aged themselves in sport and b) the interest of society as a whole in the involvement of the aged in sports. There has been a shift in emphasis from an earlier theory, which incorporated a more conservative, restricted view of both the intellectual and the physical potential of the aged, to a later theory which stresses a more active, dynamic involvement of aged persons in society. This shift has had a notable impact on the involvement of the aged in sports activities.

I will not attempt to canvas the entire spectrum of thinking about these two theories of ageing, nor pretend to carve a niche for a sociology of 'sport and the aged,' for we have barely begun to consider all the implications of this new area. Instead, the intention here is briefly to outline two major theories of ageing and their respective possible impact and contributions to our understanding of the aged and their participation in sports activities. A major conclusion of this paper is that the participation of the aged in sports must be viewed as a category in its own right. Aged athletes have to be considered in terms of their own unique potential (in a somewhat parallel way to women athletes and handicapped athletes), a potential that is just now being formally recognized by themselves and by society, and that can and will be further researched, studied, and developed.

*Professor Thomas Watts lectures at the School of Social Work, University of Texas, Arlington. He has published several books and articles on the sociology of sport*

Nomenclature is such a problem in the social sciences that it is hardly surprising to find it a problem in this area as well. There are many different conceptions of 'sport', as distinguished from 'play' or 'game' (Leonard, 1980). Edwards (1973) defines sport as institutionalized, comprising activities that have 'formally recorded histories and traditions, stressing physical exertion through competition within limits set in explicit and formal rules governing role and position relationships'. He goes on to say that these activities are 'carried out by actors who represent or who are part of formally organized associations having the goal of achieving valued tangibles or intangibles through defeating opposing groups'. In this paper I will employ the definition of sport used by Edwards.

## 2 Age distribution

The dawn of the modern era has seen the age make-up of most societies reflecting a significant increase in the aged population (Hendricks and Hendricks, 1977). The aged population in America is growing at a faster rate than any other age group within the population. Data from the 1980 census report that 6.9% of the American population are aged 65-74 years; 3.4% are between 75 and 84 years; and 1% are 85 years and over (a total of 11.3% of the population are over 65 - US Bureau of the Census, 1981). By the year 2030, it is projected that approximately two out of 11 Americans will be over 65 years of age (Lowy, 1980). By the year 2035, it is estimated that 18% of the population will be over age 65 and 23% of the population over the age of 60 (Fowles, 1978).

Clearly, the demographic picture in respect to the aged has resulted in an increased 'presence' of the aged in all aspects of life. American society is becoming increasingly aware it has a larger aged population. This changing consciousness concerning the numbers of the aged has to some extent developed parallel to a changing consciousness of the aged themselves -

sociology and psychology, health and status, capabilities and potential.

## 3 Disengagement - societal and individual

The theory of disengagement is both the oldest and probably the best known theory of ageing. Cumming and Henry (1961) employed the term 'disengagement' to refer to a process whereby the individual aged person responds to growing older by withdrawing from the various roles he or she had occupied in middle age. The older person is said here to 'disengage', to move towards an ever-increasing concern with self and away from involvement with others. Basing their findings on their study of an aged population in Kansas City, Cumming and Henry further argued that the aged person, by disengaging, was following his self-interests and (if the disengaged behaviour was compatible with the values and edicts of society) that the basic feeling of satisfaction on the part of the aged would be high (Botwinick, 1973).

The disengagement theory of ageing might be said to have two facets, societal and individual. The societal disengagement theory 'represents a strong evolutionary train of thought which at times resembles strands of the thinking of sociobiologists' (Watts, 1980). Societal disengagement is that process whereby society 'withdraws from or no longer seeks the individual's effort or involvement' (Atchley, 1980). In effect, mandatory retirement is a kind of societal effort forcibly to 'disengage' the aged person. Societal disengagement may be either intended or unintended, and at times it may be difficult to determine which is the case. The concept may sound harsh and unyielding (some of the same arguments are made about sociobiological perspectives in general) but its proponents argue that there must be some way of dealing with the mortality of society's members. Of course, it is now argued by many of the critics of societal disengagement that the aged have been falsely accused on a number of fronts: that



they are just as productive as their younger counterparts, for example. Societal perceptions and attitudes influence and direct societal disengagement. In other words, societal attitudes have generally been somewhat negative about the continued productivity of the aged in a job. This has resulted in policies, mandatory retirement, for example, that lead to the societal 'disengagement' of the aged, which, in turn, may possibly have created negative attitudes in the aged towards themselves (and towards society). It is easy to see a self-fulfilling prophecy here. Clearly, public policies related to other people 'reflect prevailing cultural values' (Morgan, 1979).

Individual disengagement is a more voluntary kind of action (although certainly not completely so when considered in the context of societal disengagement). In the case of individual disengagement, the aged begin to limit their own activities and literally to disengage themselves from the mainstream of life in preparation for death, the 'ultimate disengagement' (Kastenbaum, 1977). Individual disengagement is above all a voluntary process: the aged deliberately choose to disengage, and proceed to do so as time goes on in various stages, aspects and components of their life. It is more of a psychological theory than is societal disengagement, and in some ways is the more controversial, mainly because of the voluntary nature of the process.

#### 4 Activity theory

Activity theory, developed by Robert Havighurst, maintains that active middle age roles and norms are still appropriate in the older years, although to a lesser degree (Bengtson and Haber, 1975). The assertion here is that 'even though some reduction in levels of activity is to be expected in old age, the most successful agers are those who maintain the highest possible degree of involvement and activity, particularly physical activity' (Schwartz and Peterson, 1979). There is an emphasis here on the positive benefits of remaining 'engaged', and on

finding substitutes for roles lost through retirement or widowhood (Hess and Markson, 1980).

Activity theories of ageing often argue that the actions of some aged persons in supposedly disengaging are often misinterpreted. Matthews (1977), in an analysis of the actions of the aged attending a senior centre, argues that the decision of some of the aged to withdraw from the centre was a strategy employed by them in their own interest, so that they might feel more autonomous. With activity theory the theme is not disengagement but 'engagement'. Activity theory centres on middle age, holding that maintenance of the activity level of middle age is the best way to cope with ageing (Havighurst, 1963). The norms for old age are in some ways not very different from that of middle age.

Activity theory states that the thirst of the aged for activity and involvement is perhaps much greater than society has ever been willing to allow. There is a possible comparison to be made here between the aged and women. Both have been expected to behave and act in certain prescribed ways; a departure from those ways, even in seemingly innocuous behaviour, has often been very critically regarded. Until relatively recently it was not acceptable for women to 'sweat', to engage in many of the sports activities pursued by men. Yet there have always been women who have wanted such options. There is a comparison with the aged here that is instructive.

#### 5 Implications for sport of the disengagement and activity theories

The implications for sport of the disengagement theory may be seen in two areas:

- the involvement of the aged themselves in sports;
- interest in the involvement of the aged in sports by society as a whole.

With regards the involvement of the aged themselves in sports, it might be argued that

the disengagement theory emphasizes the physiological (and other) limitations of aged persons in respect to participation. Disengagement theory holds an ultimately more conservative view of the aged, implying that a physical decline is taking place, as a result of which both the aged person and society will benefit from the withdrawal of the aged into an increased preoccupation with self (Schrock, 1980).

In relation to the interest in the involvement of the aged in sports by the larger society, the disengagement perspective puts a basic damper on any interest in involvement. Weiner, Brok and Snadowsky (1978) argue that the disengagement perspective 'encourages those who work with the aged to believe that much interest and involvement in the outside world should not be expected from old people. This sort of thinking can subtly influence policy and programme goals to de-emphasize remotivation-type programmes that encourage continued exploration and interest in the environment'. Sports, especially competitive, demanding sports, are viewed here as existing for the young, not for the old. With this perspective, only low-key, low intensity recreation services could be considered.

The activity theory of ageing would encourage the aged to develop their involvement in sports and to view themselves as having considerably more physiological and other capacities than they had perhaps ever imagined. The influences of the activity theory of ageing in this area has been more pronounced in recent years. The publication of books on fitness for older adults and the aged (Harris and Frankel, 1977) is significant here. The First National Conference on Fitness and Ageing was held in Washington, DC, on 10-11 September 1981.

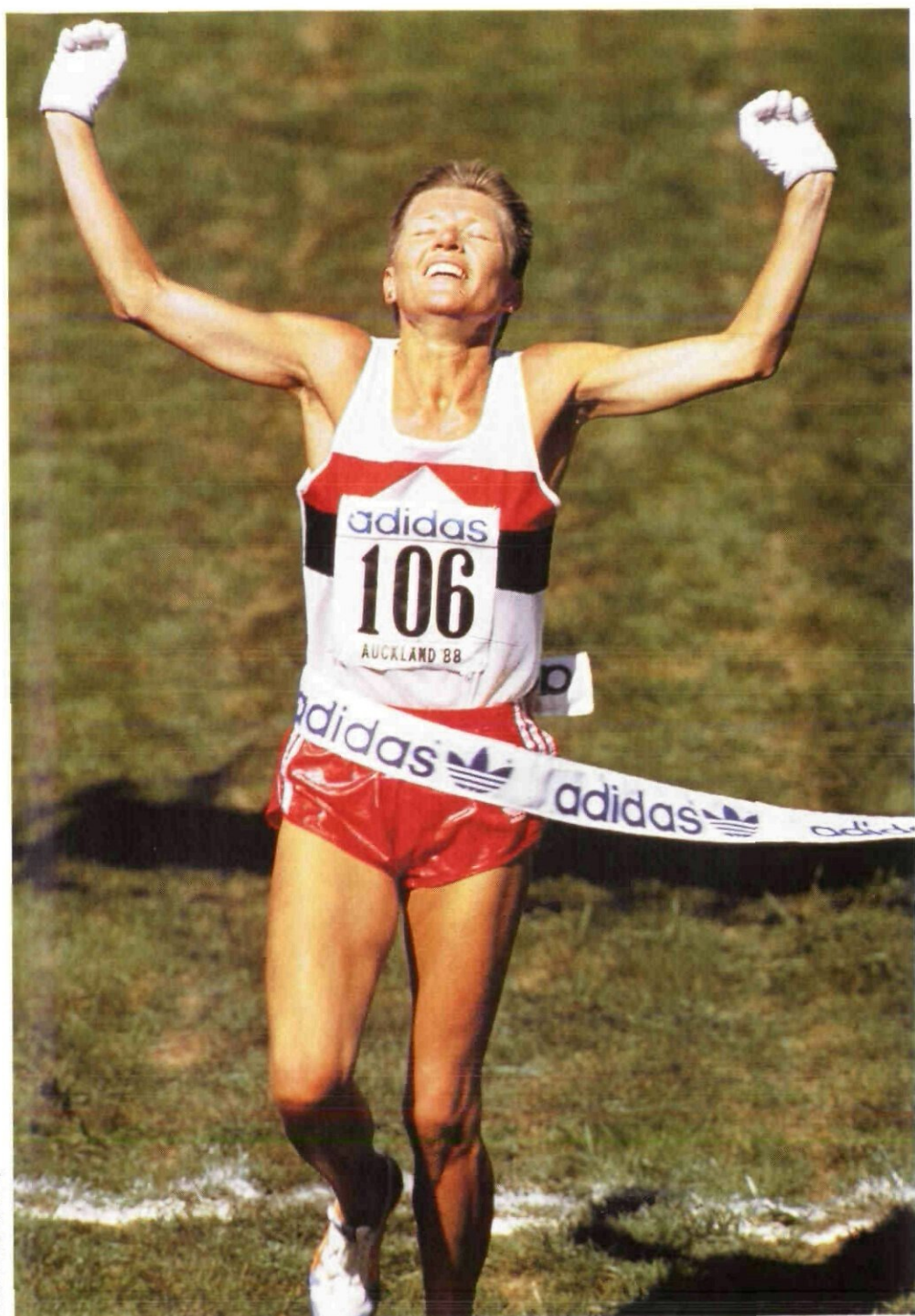
The activity theory of ageing has been influential in respect to how society itself views the aged and their potential sporting involvement. The Senior Sports International, founded by Warren Blaney in 1969, has sponsored an annual International Senior Olympics (held in and around Los

Angeles, California). Moran (1979) notes that the Senior Olympics 'was developed with the goals of promoting healthier, happier, and more productive lives for adults through sports. It recognizes the adult athlete by giving him or her the opportunity to experience the excitement of international championship competition'. The activity theory of ageing would put forward the view that senior athletes do not have to quit once they reach their senior years. Nor is there any reason why the aged person who has not been a sports enthusiast in young or middle years should not become one in their senior years. The Senior Olympics does provide a more serious sports involvement for many senior citizens.

Recent research on the physiological and aerobic capacities of the aged has provided research which buttresses activity theory perspectives. Some research tends to indicate that the aerobic capacity of the aged can be improved from 10 to 30%, even in those who have led sedentary lives (Stamford, 1972; Adams and Devries, 1973). Aerobic capacity does decline relatively rapidly after the age of 60, but research has demonstrated that the 'decline in aerobic capacity can be slowed markedly by participation in aerobic activities, i.e. ones that cause the heart to beat at a substantially higher than rest rate. Furthermore, in most cases, a low level of aerobic fitness in an aged person can be improved regardless of the number of years a low level has persisted'. (Shivers and Fait, 1980).

Both the disengagement and activity perspectives on ageing have some drawbacks. There is some evidence that 'if either orientation became accepted to the exclusion of the other, there might be deleterious effects on many older people' (Bengtson and Haber, 1975). While disengagement theory seemingly expects too little of the aged and may reinforce negative stereotypes, Clark (1967) cautions that the aged person who maintains a strong activity-orientation in middle age and into old age in the face of increasing infirmities may experience emo-





ALLSPORT/Simon Bruffy

tional problems. The disengagement perspective would remind us that there are some important differences in old age, and that many of these differences centre on increased limitations. The human body is not infinitely regenerative and non-destructive.

Activity theory, 'which is essentially a classless and universal prescription for continued activity in old age, supports policies that assist in the social integration of the aged' (Estes, 1979). This very integration may itself push the pendulum too far in the other direction, seeing as the aged have some limitations that the younger population, into which they are being integrated, do not share. If the disengagement perspective errs by overstressing the differences of the aged (in respect to limitations, for example), then the activity perspective errs by overstressing the 'sameness' of the aged (to other age groups) and the lack of any limitations. The activity theory might be viewed as a 'middle age' theory for the old, stressing that the most successful way to move into old age is by emulating the active middle-aged.

## 6 The future of the aged in sport

What is needed is a view of the aged and their participation in both competitive and non-competitive sports as a category in its own right. Numerous contemporary theories of ageing represent continuing efforts to 'discover and retard the mysterious decline of the body over a span of years' (Butler and Lewis, 1977). A new theory of ageing is needed that examines the aged in a comprehensive, holistic light. Aged athletes have a unique potential that is only now being formally recognized by themselves and by society; a potential that can and will be further researched, studied, and developed.

A possible objection is that we already place too much stress in sports on 'winning at any cost', on competition and all the unhealthy things that accompany it. Perhaps we could say here that the aged need to

make these decisions themselves rather than have anyone else make those decisions for them. The aged have every right to expect that sporting structures and organizations are established so that they have the same opportunities as younger athletes. What the aged choose to do with those sporting structures and organizations is, again, up to them to decide.

A healthy development in recent years is the emergence of age classification competition in tennis, and in some other sports as well. We may see the eventual development of formally established, widely recognized semi-professional and professional leagues for the aged. There is no reason why the media and fan-consciousness should be dominated by the presence of only certain age group competitors in sports.

The movement from a disengagement perspective on the aged to an activity perspective has helped to raise consciousness levels and open more doors for the aged in the arena of sport. We are just seeing the emergence of a sociology or social science of sport (Eitzen, 1979; Melnick, 1975; Zeigler, 1977) subdiscipline. Hopefully too, we will also one day see the emergence of an offshoot subspeciality in sports gerontology, or the sociology or social science of aged involvement in sports.

It was Santayana (1894) who observed that 'in this phenomenon of athletics there is an underlying force, a power of human nature that commonly escapes us'. This underlying force is not the exclusive preserve of one age group. The drive for records and the concern with records (Weiss, 1973) that is so characteristic of modern sports (Guttmann, 1978) should not be under the exclusive hegemony of certain age groups.

We are still awaiting the arrival of the aged here. We await their discovery and understanding of this underlying force which will encourage them to demonstrate to themselves, and to society as well, their own uniqueness and capacity for further conquests.



## REFERENCES

- ADAMS, G.M.; DEVRIES, H.A. (1973): *Physiological effects of an exercise training regimen upon women aged 52-79*. Journal of Gerontology 28, pp. 50-55.
- ATCHLEY, R.C. (1980): *The social forces in later life: An introduction to social gerontology*. Wadsworth Publication, Belmont, California, p. 262.
- BENGTSON, V.L.; HABER, D.A. (1975): *Sociological approaches to aging*. In WOODRUFF, D.S.; BIRREN, J.E. (Eds.), *Aging: Scientific perspectives and social issues*. D. Van Nostrand Co., New York, pp. 71, 87.
- BOTWINICK, J. (1973): *Aging and behavior: A comprehensive integration of research findings*. Springer Publications, New York, p. 52.
- BUTLER, R.N.; LEWIS, M.I. (1977): *Aging and mental health: Positive psychosocial approaches*. 2nd ed., the C.V. Mosby Co., St. Louis, p. 312.
- CLARK, M. (1967): *The anthropology of aging, a new area for studies of culture and personality*. The Gerontologist, 7, pp. 55-64.
- CUMMING, E.; HENRY, W.E. (1961): *Growing old: The process of disengagement*. Basic Books, New York.
- EDWARDS, H. (1973): *Sociology of sport*. Dorsey Publ., Homewood, Ill., pp. 57-8.
- EITZEN, D.S. (1979): *Sport in contemporary society*. An Anthology, New York, St. Martin's Press.
- ESTES, C.L. (1979): *The aging enterprise: A critical examination of social policies and services for the aged*. Jossey Bass Publ., San Francisco, p. 225.
- FOWLES, D. (1978): *Some prospects for the future elderly population*. Administration on Aging, Washington, D.C.
- GUTTMANN, A. (1978): *From ritual to record: The nature of modern sports*. Columbia University Press, New York.
- HARRIS, R.; FRANKEL, L.J. (1977): *Guide to fitness after fifty*. Plenum Press, New York.
- HAVIGHURST, R.J. (1963): *Successful aging*. In WILLIAMS, R.H.; TIBBITTS, C.; DONAHUE, W. (Eds.), *Process of aging*. Atherton Press, New York.
- HENDRICKS, J.; HENDRICKS, C.D. (1977): *Aging in mass society: Myths - realities*. Winthrop Publ., Cambridge, Mass., p. 4.
- HESS, B.B.; MARKSON, E.W. (1980): *Aging and old age: An introduction to social gerontology*. Macmillan Publ., New York, p. 19.
- KASTENBAUM, R.J. (1977): *Death, society and human experience*. The C.V. Mosby Co., St. Louis, p. 147.
- LEONARD, W.M. (1980): *A sociological perspective of sport*. Burgess Publ., Minneapolis, pp. 9-14.
- LOWY, L. (1980): *Social policies and programs on aging: What is and what should be in the later years*. Lexington Books, Div. of D.C. Heath & Co. Lexington, Mass.
- MATTHEWS, S.H. (1977): *Negotiation by default: The social definition of old widows*. Paper presented at the Society for the Study of Social Problems, Chicago, Illinois.
- MELNICK, M.J. (1975): *A critical look at sociology of sport*. Quest, 24, pp. 34-47.
- MORAN, J.M. (1979): *Leisure activities for the mature adult*. Burgess Publ. Co., Minneapolis, p. 106.
- MORGAN, J.C. (1979): *Becoming old: an introduction to social gerontology*. Springer Publishing Co., New York, 41.
- SANTAYANA, G. (1984): *Philosophy on the bleachers*. Harvard Monthly 5, pp. 181-90.
- SCHROCK, M.M. (1980): *Holistic assessment of the healthy aged*. John Wiley & Sons, New York, p. 43.
- SCHWARTZ, A.N.; PETERSON, J.A. (1979): *Introduction to gerontology*. Holt, Rinehart & Winston, New York, p. 20.
- SHIVERS, J.S.; FAIT, H.F. (1980): *Recreational service for the aging*. Lea & Febiger Publ., Philadelphia, p. 258.
- STAMFORD, B.A. (1972): *Physiological effects of training upon institutionalized geriatric men*. Journal of Gerontology 27, pp. 451-5.
- U.S. BUREAU OF THE CENSUS (1981): *Current Population Reports: Population Profile of the United States 1980*. U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington, D.C., 363, p. 20.
- WATTS, T.D. (1980): *Theories of aging: The difference in orientations*. Journal of Music Therapy 17, pp. 84-9.
- WEINER, M.B.; BROK, A.J.; SNADOWSKY, A.M. (1978): *Working with the aged: Practical approaches in the institution and community*. Prentice-Hall Inc., Englewood Cliffs, N.J., p. 15.
- WEISS, P. (1973): *Records and the man*. In OSTERHOUDT, R.G. (Ed.): *The philosophy of sport*, Charles C. Thomas Publ., Springfield, Ill. Also in the same book: SCHUCT, R.L.: *On Weiss on records, athletic activity and the athlete*, pp. 23-9.; FRALEIGH, W.P.: *On Weiss on records and on the significance of athletic records*, pp. 29-38. ZEIGLER, E.F. (1977): *Physical education and sport philosophy*. Prentice-Hall, Inc., Englewood, Cliffs, N.J.