



Training as a Master... Or the Art of Staying Fit at 50!

Written by Marie-Catherine Bruno, BScPT, Cped(C)



The idea of writing a chronicle about training and its specific challenges for Masters (typically 35 years of age and over) came to me after I gave a talk on training programs to a group of orienteers training for World Master's Games 2005 (although they are not training secretly, I will not divulge their identity!). After all, our orienteering population is aging in North America, so why not dedicate my column this month to them?

There are quite a few changes that happen in our bodies after the age of 20. Yes, that soon. And these changes may affect how you can safely train for orienteering (or any endurance sport). I am afraid that everything is pretty much downhill from there!

So we all know that with training our bodies develops systems and structures so that we can withhold bigger demands than just walking. Our bodies put in place new capillaries, new muscle cells, new nerve branches, new energy systems and much more. When we get older, those changes still take place, so we can still train and improve. So what is so different then?

Killing the myth

What I hear regularly is that people claim they get injured more often now that they are in their 30s or 40s than when they were in their 20s. There is a bit of truth to that, but it is mainly a wrong interpretation of what is really happening. The main difference is that your body does not recover as fast as it used to. So here is the scenario: you go out for a tough workout and you feel you have pulled your hamstring a bit.

At 20, you go home, shower, hit the pub with your friends, go to bed, and wake up just fine the next day. Your body has had time to heal overnight and you have already forgotten you pulled something the day before.

At 40, you go home, shower, have dinner with the kids, maybe have a glass of wine, and go to bed. You wake up the next morning, your hamstring feels so stiff you think you have aged 20 years overnight. Your body hasn't had time to heal overnight. It may take another night, maybe even some external help (ice, physio, drugs...) to get you back to normal. Bottom line, you will remember you pulled your hamstring.

At 20, you didn't need to because it didn't last long enough to be worth remembering. So my theory is: you don't get injured more

now – you create just as much damage as you did when you were 20 (maybe even less if you have been blessed with some wisdom!), but it takes much longer to recover from any damage that your body endures. So what can you do? Make sure you give yourself enough time to recover from hard workouts (space them out throughout the week), get plenty of sleep (that is mainly when your body repairs itself), eat lots of protein (repair material for your body), and don't let any new pain go without investigation. Oh, and stop complaining you are getting more injured now that you are 40, you know now that it is not true!!!

Loss of elasticity

I am sure you have noticed it with your skin, there is some evil sagging happening. What happens with age is that our tissues lose a bit of their recoiling capacity. Muscles don't sag, but they get less flexible with age. You are now more prone to strain muscles when you exercise than you were before. So, if you didn't stretch before, I strongly recommend you don't wait any longer and begin stretching, especially before hard workouts and orienteering where you can at any time go from a normal jog to an impossible split position! Think of your muscles being like Silly Putty: if you leave it out of the jar for too long, it becomes dry and breaks down when you go to stretch it. So don't be silly, stretch your putty!

Decreased maximum heart rate

As a general rule, your maximum heart rate (the fastest your heart can beat per minute) decreases with age. The average decrease is about one beat per year. So if you have always trained with a heart rate monitor and your easy jog used to be between 130 and 140 beats per minute at 30 years old, now that you are 50, you may have to review that and bring down your training zone a bit because there is a good chance you cannot go as high as you used to. See your trainer and ask to do a maximum heart rate test and redefine your training zones. If you do not exercise with a heart rate monitor, just disregard this piece of information.

Loss of muscle strength/mass

There is a rule that says: *use it or lose it*. This applies to Masters more than anybody else.

Muscles react to demand. When you train and overload them, they react by increasing the size of the muscle fibers (called hypertrophy) and by even creating new muscle cells. When you stop training and putting such a high demand on your muscles, the cells begin deflating and you lose strength. This holds true for everybody, even kids. But this phenomenon happens even faster with Masters. And since strength is important

to stay injury free and also a big factor of speed and power, I recommend that you do more and more strengthening as you get older. I suggest two to three sessions a week in the dead season, and one to two sessions a week during the orienteering season.

Decrease in speed

I am sure some of you have heard that your running speed maximizes at the age of 45. Pretty good excuse to still be shuffling around your course then huh?! Mother Nature won't let you run faster! Well I have some news for you: it is a fact that after 45 years of age it is almost impossible to increase your speed, but that is **only** if you have already reached your maximal potential in speed. So, in other words, if you are the record holder of the 1500m at the age of 45 (which we know one Canadian orienteer who is...), then yes, you may not improve anymore and your goal will now be to only maintain that great speed of yours. But if you have only started training later in life and have not done a whole lot of speed workouts, then there is hope and a lot of room for improvement. So swallow your excuses and hit the track for some interval training!

Decrease in motor skills

It is a known fact that the nervous system gets a bit slower with age. What it means in terms of orienteering is that your balance may be affected and also your coordination, making reading your map on the run a little more challenging. If you are hoping to become a better orienteer, make sure you include in your weekly training schedule a session of map reading on the run on an easy trail or paved path. It doesn't have to be a relevant map, it doesn't even have to be a map – it can be your favorite book. But if you get good at quickly glancing ahead to make sure the path is clear and learn how to stabilize your arm enough to read, you will save precious minutes in an orienteering race (and maybe even a few teeth!).

Balance training does not need to be done on fancy equipment. You can challenge yourself by trying some yoga poses, doing activities





like talking on the phone standing on one leg, and jumping around on one leg, trying to be really quick to stabilize upon landing. Improving your balance will greatly reduce the chances of getting injured in the forest.

Eyesight...

There isn't much that can be done about this one other than having to adapt to the new changes. Reading glasses will most likely become part of your orienteering gear, but if you tolerate bifocal contact lenses or different correction in each eye, contact lenses may be your best option on rainy or cold days.

The thumb magnifier can also help you read small detail on the map. And learning how to simplify the map and memorize legs will be a great skill to have. But you need to practice.

So overall, training for orienteering when you are older is not that big of a deal and is certainly realistic. As a matter of fact, better trained and fit orienteers don't get injured as much as their less fit counterparts, so there is an incentive to increasing the workout regimen!

See you in the woods, fast and smooth!



JP Ingbergrisen



Joel Thomson

Sharon Crawford and Peter Gagarin have perfected the art of staying fit at 50+. But, let's not jinx them now.

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