

# The Future of Masters Athletics

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**S**ince its earliest days in the 1970's and 1980's, the Masters athletics movement has been growing and gaining strength around the world. The various aspects and dimensions of this development include the numbers of participants, the size and economic impact of competition events, and public interest in the phenomenon of Masters athletics.

As in other parts of the sport, there are issues and challenges to be faced starting with understanding the motivation for individuals to become and stay involved, the development of specific training methodologies, doping control and even the organisational structure of the sport.

For this Roundtable, London-based NSA contributor Jimson Lee, himself a Masters athlete but also a coach and the founder of the website [www.SpeedEndurance.com](http://www.SpeedEndurance.com), has asked five leading figures in the movement for their views on the key issues and where they think Masters athletics is headed in the future. Their responses provide an interesting cross-section of views within the movement.

The members of the panel are:

**Paul Osland**, the president of Canadian Masters Athletics. He took part in the 1988 Olympics in Seoul and in addition to coaching and continues to compete and has several Canadian Masters records to his credit.

**Prof. Jörn Rittweger**, an expert in human physiology who works as the Head of the

Space Physiology' Division at the Institute of Aerospace Medicine, German Aerospace Centre, DLR.

**Henk Kraaijenhof**, a top-flight coach whose well-known charges over the years have included Nelli Cooman (NED) and Merlene Ottey (JAM). His current interests include mental coaching, in particular stress and stress management, and he has a blog called [www.helpingthebesttogetbetter.com](http://www.helpingthebesttogetbetter.com).

**Kurt Kaschke**, the president of the European Masters Athletics Association.

**Ken Stone**, the founder of MastersTrack.com, a top news site for Masters athletics, who is also an active competitor in Masters events.

The interviews were conducted in early 2015. Some of the responses have been edited to improve clarity and remove repetitions.

**NSA** *What do you see as the main benefits of Masters athletics competition? In other words, why should someone take part and how can we get that message to more people?*



**Osland:** Physical and mental health. People these days are looking for a high quality of life, not just to live longer. Research shows that people who exercise into their 60's, 70's and beyond are able to maintain excellent muscle strength and endurance. On top of that, exercise is a proven stress reliever at all ages. Besides, do-

ing athletics is fun, regardless of the age and one of the keys to longevity is in having fun, in other words keeping that inner child alive for our entire lives. Getting the message out there requires more marketing and promotions at the club and local levels to let Masters-age athletes know that this opportunity exists. As well, we need to communicate more with the younger athletes that athletics can be for life and is not about hanging up the shoes when you have gotten to a certain age.

**Rittweger:** There are three ways in which people benefit. First, training has many known benefits for health and performance. Hence, older people can boost their independence and autonomy through training. Second, the brain is a clear target of training. Importantly, exercise and competition schedules give a structure to people's lives. This will be as important for the impact upon the brain as the direct physiological effects. Third, many older people who engage in Masters athletics benefit from the social inclusion that comes with training and competition. I see two effective ways to get this recognition across to more people, namely personal outreach, and also better coverage by the media.

**Kraaijenhof:** In my opinion exercise is the most versatile anti-aging measure, preventing chronic disease and disability at a later stage in life. In other words, it is the best investment you'll ever make, but most people only realise this when it is too late. The better health of Masters athletes compared to their sedentary peers is not only from the fact that they move and train, but also because they often adopt a health-conscious lifestyle like not smoking, having a proper diet, knowing about weight management, etc. These are ideas that should be brought forward on a wider scale.

**Kaschke:** One of the main reasons for being a Masters athlete and taking part in competitions is the social effect among the competitors. People of the age of 40/45+ have personal goals, one of which is "quality of life". Athletics gives them a family to share their passion for training, be together with during a competition,

and to share friendship and hospitality. The "burn out" syndrome for many professionals in this age group is getting higher and sport can help address this problem...through physical activity and camaraderie.

**Stone:** Masters athletics allows experienced and first-time athletes to discover and improve their current fitness and potential in a safe, supportive environment. Unlike open or youth athletics, where coaches and schools dictate events and training, age-groupers experience complete freedom. Why do they call us Masters? Because we're not slaves anymore! Athletics is among the most strenuous of sports, but the benefits from high-intensity training are great. The competition is lower key and allows more people to dip a toe into the water. But the national and world circuits provide a taste of high-level competition. It's like in the olden days but with more friendship at the post-meeting parties. How to promote this? Word-of-mouth works best, and in the USA by exposing collegiate athletes to Masters competition by encouraging the older athletes to enter collegiate and other open meetings.

**NSA** *Masters athletics benefits from elite athletes competing into their late 30's and early 40s as open athletes. Kim Collins, Bernard Lagat and Merlene Ottey come to mind as role models. What can we do to encourage this more?*



**Rittweger:** I am quite convinced that more people would continue to compete beyond their fourth decade if they received the recognition they deserve for it. Broader media coverage, again, could be a key issue.

**Osland:** This is a tough one as many of the older elite athletes are likely competing at a high level because they are able to continue making money. But at some point they are just not going to be able to compete at the level required to support themselves financially. Unless we somehow find a way to get people and corporations interested in Masters athletics enough

that they will pay, it will be difficult for elite athletes to continue into their Masters years. I think it is even harder for the elite athletes who have competed into their late 30's and early 40's as they probably have not focused on another career like someone who retires in their late 20's and starts up a career and is then able to start competing again in their mid to late 40's. If we could get corporations that are involved in athletics to understand that their biggest market comes from Masters-age athletes, who have money, as compared to young athletes with very little disposable income, then perhaps we could find a way to sponsor elite Masters-age runners and make athletics a viable life-long career rather than just a temporary career. A good example of this is Rosey Edeh, who was a top 400m runner for Canada and came out with my group for almost a year. However she was just getting going in her new TV personality career and her schedule, getting up at 4 a.m. to get to the studio for 5 a.m. to prepare for the early morning show and then again at noon, made it too hard for her to train at night.

**Kraaijenhof:** Fortunately these athletes don't need another incentive than the intrinsic pleasure of sport itself. They are passionate about their sport far beyond the prospect of medals and records. Unfortunately, others might need sources of external motivation like winning, breaking records or monetary rewards. I think an important role of coaches is to educate athletes, even at an early age, not only about winning and breaking records but also teach them that their bodies are the best instruments they'll ever possess and worth taking care of, long after their peak performance age. We, as coaches and educators, have the best ability to do that! Whereas your parents and your doctors come second place.

**Stone:** Olympians and other former elites have shown courage by continuing their careers as Masters. Their motivations vary. They no longer have financial inducements. And they bravely expose their reduced performances to public review (and ridicule). But many have learned that it's a return to pure

joy. It's more fun now! Egos still rule, however. Olympic champions have been heard to say: "I won't enter Masters events unless I'm sure I can always win." To encourage these folks to compete, they'll need a kick in the butt from fellow elites. We also can encourage more elites to re-join the sport by improving our records ratification system, so that they can be assured their efforts will get proper recognition. That's not the case today.

**Kaschke:** It is - from our point of view - the slogan that is keeping us on track "Athletics for Life". Give young people the possibility to be together with a different generation ... they all will benefit from being active, competitive, and integrated in the "Athletics Family". We had some positive examples during the IAAF World Championships, such as Kids' Athletics. If there are competitions for young athletes during IAAF Meetings ... why shouldn't it be possible to integrate the Masters into IAAF events as well? Top athletes should recognise that athletics doesn't end after 30 ... we have to show them that it is possible to keep fit "for ages" (See the movie "Autumn Gold").

**NSA** *Are there any emerging trends in training or preparation of Masters athletes that are likely to have a major impact?*

**Osland:** There is a lot more research starting at the Masters level. There have been numerous studies on the physical impacts of training in older ages and I have even heard about one that is starting up to look at the impact of physical training on brain function. There are many health issues like obesity, cardiovascular disease, dementia and Alzheimers that are linked to poor physical and nutritional states in the elderly. There are also more and more studies that help Masters athletes to understand how to train smarter to avoid injuries and reach their optimum levels of fitness.

**Rittweger:** High intensity training has become very popular in general. We are lacking the knowledge whether it is attractive for older people, or whether it is deleterious.

**Kaschke:** Training in Masters athletics is one of the most important impacts for the future. There should be special coaches who get to know about the specialty of training in different age groups. Body checks and health passes should be required.

**Stone:** Every new development in elite training finds its way into Masters athletics - from plyometrics and "core training" to yoga and high-intensity training. YouTube videos showing methods and equipment are common. Facebook and other social media share tips and techniques as well. We're in a Golden Age of mentoring. Many Masters athletes fall back on their old-school training patterns, but websites and message boards abound with helpful advice and, most important, encouragement.



**Kraaijenhof:** Master athletes do not differ that much from their younger colleagues. Or they do exactly what they did when they were younger (that made them successful) or they try to copy the programmes, methods and techniques of the elite athletes. Of course nutrition and supplementation plays a larger role than before. Ideally Master athletes should pay even more attention to optimal individual recovery means and methods that work for them.

**NSA** *What do you see as the next stage in the development of Masters athletics, how does the sport grow or improve from where it is now?*

**Osland:** I see Masters athletics issues as very similar to the issues at the younger levels; it's all about grassroots awareness. That to me is where the clubs come into play. While the national and provincial sport bodies can do much more in terms of providing awareness and potential funding support, the clubs are the ones that can do the most good through the addition of Masters to their other age group programmes. Masters athletes need direction and coaching to help them achieve better performances, avoid injuries and to provide a com-

munity for connecting with other like minded individuals. Five years ago, Chris Lemassif, Mike Sherar and myself started the Masters group within the University of Toronto Track Club. Today we have approximately 70 Masters-age athletes competing in sprints, middle-distance, long-distance and even some triathletes who train with the group to help their running. This growth has been great for Masters athletics in Toronto, there is quite a friendly rivalry going on between a few clubs that also have Masters athletes. The growth has also been good for the younger age groups as they get an influx of money, through club fees, from the Masters that help fund much of the younger groups programmes. Masters have money, so this is a good thing for the sport! Get more clubs to start Masters groups and Masters athletics will grow.

**Kraaijenhof:** Masters athletics is a part of the sport as a whole. Unfortunately athletics is a dying sport in some places, for multiple reasons. It hurts me to say this since athletics is my roots, but reality will show that athletics no longer attracts the audience and participants that it did in, say, the 1980s and 1990s. I am afraid Masters athletics might suffer from the same fate. A positive point is the exploding attraction of long-distance running, road races and marathon running. Just look at the number of participants.

**Kaschke:** Until now there have been countries/federations that ignore the Masters. Masters athletics has to be recognised by the IAAF Member Federations all over in the world. We also have to convince the governments that Masters athletics should be recognised by society - it keeps the people fit for life!

**Stone:** Showcasing Masters athletics at the 2015 IAAF World Championships in Athletics will be a great way to expose many people to the sport (we'll have a 50-plus women's 400 and men's 800 at Beijing). But the best way to grow age-group athletics is via the grassroots - where local clubs and associations recruit members where they live and play. Media attention is nice as well. Many American Masters

athletes weren't aware of the USATF circuit of Masters events until they saw coverage in their local newspapers or TV.

**Rittweger:** Difficult to say. I guess that Masters athletics federations need to get onto the radar of politicians. The federations already have an important role, but too little attention is paid to older athletes by the policy makers and funding bodies. In Germany, for example, the home office talks directly to the athletics federation (DLV), but not to the Masters athletics organisations. This needs to be changed.

**NSA** *What are the main threats or issues that the Masters movement must address?*



**Kaschke:** Masters athletics is a high-class performance. Competitors must be well prepared to take part in competitions. The most difficult problem we have with the older generations (65+) is that these athletes are not always well prepared or they do not have the skills to do certain events (pole vault, triple jump, hurdles, steeplechase). There are people 90+ who are not able to run ... they walk the distances. The image that might be transferred through the media is 'why do these people like to die on the track?'

**Osland:** The Masters movement needs younger people to get involved in managing and directing things. Most of the administrators and volunteers working on the Masters movement are in their late 60's, 70's and 80's. Doug Smith in Canada has been involved since he was in his mid 30's and has been a tremendous force for growing Masters athletics in the Province of Ontario. He has been instrumental at bringing in younger blood to help drive Masters in Canada. He convinced me to become the Canadian Masters Athletics president and he has brought in a number of other younger athletes in their early 40's to help out on the Ontario Masters Athletics board. We need more energetic individuals like Doug to promote Masters athletics to inspire others to also get involved in growing the sport.

**Kraaijenhof:** The main threat to the movement is being dragged down in the negative sentiment around athletics in general that I've already mentioned. For individuals it is the injuries that occur at an older age. One of the ideas is that older athletes want to train harder in order to compensate for their age, but in fact they can perform as well in absolute sense, they only need more time for recovery. Masters athletes should look more at age-specific training loads and methods, targeted towards the prevention of injuries which is the main limitation for good performances in most Master athletes.

**Rittweger:** Doping. Unclean sport is unfair at any age; it is a deadly game at an older age.

**Stone:** The doping control protocols must be revised (even though it's rare to face testing). Current rules cut both ways - discouraging some older athletes from taking part because of their need for medications on the banned list while weeding out only a tiny number of cheaters. A one-size-fits-all anti-doping system doesn't work for Masters athletics. In the same way that 60-year-olds aren't forced to run 42-inch hurdles, the rules for allowable substances could be reviewed and modified to take into consideration common elder age illnesses and conditions. We must also address the onerous rules for record ratification. The new records chair at USATF (the national federation in the USA) is carrying out reforms, but this needs to be done worldwide. No 90-year-old jumper should have to leap high hurdles to get paperwork filled out. Meeting organisers must be required to complete the paperwork on behalf of athletes and forward it to records authorities. It's a sad truth that dozens of national and world Masters records are in error - not reflecting true age-group bests. A third issue is the increasing difficulty of finding affordable venues for meetings. Many schools and colleges in the USA are charging higher rents for tracks, pricing some events out of the range of local organisers. Instead, they should see meetings as opportunities to publicise their role in community service.

**NSA** *What is your view on current organisation of Masters athletics and the relationship between Masters championships and the World Masters Games? How would you like to see the situation develop?*

**Osland:** To me the Masters athletics championships and the Masters Games are complementary, very similar to the IAAF World Championships in Athletics and the Olympic Games. The two organisations should be working together to help promote Masters athletics and Masters sport in general. Athletics is, and always will be the primary sport around the world. It is the most inclusive sport, as you only need a pair of shorts and running shoes to train and compete. Most sports require a lot more organisation and financial capital to participate.

**Kraaijenhof:** It is just too bad that Masters athletics never got the attention and support that Paralympic athletics has received. There is an affective difference of the general public in the perception of the performances of Masters athletes or Paralympic athletes. Personally I would like more attention at all levels for Masters athletes and their performances, being promoted as role models of the healthy lifestyle, examples of what is possible despite their age, examples of self-discipline and dedication, etc.

**Rittweger:** We probably need one playground for everybody, and another one for the elite of the older athletes. One could be more inspired by the fun and social element; the other could be more driven by achievement. The World Master Games could serve the former, and the Masters championships could be more suitable to the latter. Between the two playgrounds, there could be 'friendly' competition.

**Kaschke:** Masters athletics has its autonomy and should be closely related to the "family" (IAAF - WMA and European Athletics - EMA). We don't need to have the Master Games for Masters Athletics - too many offers for Master athletes keep people away

from participating in the world, regional, and national championships. Masters athletes pay all their expenses themselves, so they choose where and when to go. The more offers, the fewer participants, the less money for the organisers and less benefit for the region, the country, and the federation.

**Stone:** Competition is good - even if it means diluting the importance of a World Masters Games or WMA medal. World Masters Athletics has moved to hold its outdoor championships in even-numbered years - to avoid overlapping with the quadrennial World Masters Games in odd-numbered years. But regional meetings (by WMA or the International Masters Games Association) will continue to siphon athletes away from each other. A profusion of opportunities gives athletes' choice. And as boomers age, more meets will vie for their attention (and tourist dollars). All Masters events (except the National Senior Games in America) are basically all-comers meetings. I'm against performance or other qualifying standards (which some seek as a way of elevating the status of world or national Masters meetings). But it would be nice if national and world bodies found a way to reward top age-group stars by subsidising their travel or lodging. Age-group gold medallists who meet certain performance standards should gain free entry to the next championships, and certainly national federations should give all team members free uniforms.

**NSA** *What is your opinion on the TUE (Therapeutic Use Exemption). Everybody is different with their use of medicines that may be illegal. How level do we really have to make the playing field?*

**Osland:** This is a tough one for Masters-aged athletes. There is no question that, as we age, our hormones are not what they once were. Women going through menopause can have a really difficult time balancing their hormone levels so they can lead a normal life. I'm not sure that what the medical community considers as normal levels of testosterone in men for instance is necessarily an accurate reflec-



tion for an individual person. A 50+ male could have significant reductions in testosterone levels that is causing him to feel very tired and may even cause other health issues that we may not even be aware of. However that same individual could be in the normal range for a person of their age. Does this mean that the person can't take testosterone supplements and get a TUE? What about someone else who falls below the normal range but is quite normal for themselves and feeling fine, should they be allowed to take testosterone even though their body does not really need it? There are so many unknowns when it comes to treating elderly athletes with very different problems based on heredity and life style issues that it becomes very difficult to say what is acceptable and what is not. I would love to leave it up to everyone's best judgement as to what is right and what is wrong, this will work for the majority of athletes, but there will always be a few that will do whatever it takes to win. For now most Masters are doing it to massage their egos, however if there was to become more funding for the sport with the chances of earning an income then it would become a much bigger problem than it is now.

**Kraaijenhof:** There is no level playing field; there never was (only in Utopia, Shangri-La or Atlantis) that is the real essence of sports. The TUE is a matter of taste only, there is not the slightest scientific proof of its value and the comparison amongst different medications becoming TUE or not.

**Rittweger:** TUE procedures are required both for reasons of health protection as well as for the sake of a level playing field. Health,

and the necessity to prescribe certain drugs, becomes more important, really, than the level playing field when you age. Guidance is required for doctors who sign TUEs as to what the upper limits should be, that can still be regarded as fair for competition.

**Kaschke:** We should keep to our decisions to have drug tests in every regional and world championships. It would be a great success if national federations were be able to have drug tests as well in their own countries. Information of "staying healthy without drugs" could be a possible slogan for the future in Masters athletics.



**Stone:** TUEs are sensible in theory, but in practice many Masters athletes have found them difficult to get. A fair number have learned to their dismay that a TUE is no guarantee against a suspension. This situation is unsustainable. Doping rules should be loosened. But since the WMA is overly influenced by German authorities who are still ashamed and haunted by the East German doping machine, the current draconian system is likely to stay. Even so, doping controls are rare in Masters athletics, and they tend to be targeted (random testing is expensive and ineffective; so many WMA tests appear to be of high-profile stars). A level playing field can never be achieved via drug rules. Serious cheaters will always find a way. But I don't believe the problem is that great. More of a concern is the lack of equal training facilities and coaching resources.