Master Class

Older athletes are setting records — and toppling clichés about aging.

HOLLY LAKE
You might find Christa Bortignon in any number of places on any given day. A rocking chair isn’t one of them.

You’d have better luck looking well beyond her West Vancouver porch, as she travels a dozen times a year to compete in track and field meets all over the world. She’s just back from competing in South Korea — in the World Masters Athletics Indoor Championships.

“It beats sitting at home watching TV or playing bingo,” says the great-grandmother and Federal Retirees member.

Competing at the international level at age 80 is impressive on its own — more so when you consider Bortignon only took up track and field when she was 72, after arthritis in her wrists had put an end to her competitive tennis game. Her interest was piqued after seeing an article in a local newspaper about Olga Kotelko, the Canadian woman who became famous around the world as a record-holding track and field athlete, competing well into her 90s.

“I just called her up and asked her how to get into this,” Bortignon recalls. “Olga said, ‘I’ll be at the high school track in half an hour, meet me there.’”

A few weeks later, Kotelko was urging Bortignon to head to the Canadian championships in Kamloops. Although she’d been active growing up in Germany, Bortignon hadn’t done track and field in 55 years. “So I said I’d think about it.”

Kotelko wouldn’t let up and, before long, Bortignon found herself on the starting line, next to the guy with the starter pistol.

“I asked him how far we had to go,” she recalls with a laugh. “He looked at me as if I were crazy. Then he put his two hands apart and said, ‘This is one metre. You have to do 100 of them.’”

By the time the competition was over she had a medal for the 100m race and another for the long jump.

“From there I was hooked.”

Today, nearly 450 medals hang in Bortignon’s front hall. She’s set 15 world records in the years since and still holds eight of those in indoor hurdles, indoor pentathlon, the outdoor 400m, triple jump, short hurdles, long hurdles, pentathlon and heptathlon. In 2013 she was named the World Masters Athletics Female Athlete of the Year.

“I’m the only Canadian woman to ever do that,” she says proudly.

Joe Baker, a sport scientist at York University whose research focuses on masters athletes, says super-seniors like Bortignon are challenging the prevailing thinking on how we age.

One aspect of his team’s work is studying what older people are capable of — and how much of their performance and decline is being driven by stereotypes.

“We know our beliefs about aging are predominately negative,” Baker says, noting many older adults — convinced their bodies can’t handle what they once could — feel they should slow down.

“If you believe that’s true, it probably becomes your experience.”

There’s been much debate about whether aging or lifestyle drives decline as we age. More and more researchers point to lifestyle as the root of age-linked health problems such as high blood pressure, diabetes and heart disease.

In 2009, Baker and his team worked with colleagues at the University of Windsor to pull together all the research on athletic seniors from across disciplines. The key finding of their book — The Masters Athlete: Understanding the Role of Sport and Exercise in Optimizing Aging — is that these super-seniors aren’t ‘super’ at all. Rather, they represent a new normal — an ideal that can be attained by almost everyone.

“The overwhelming conclusion of the last three decades of research is that we are more powerful determiners of our fate than we thought we were when it comes to controlling decline,” Baker says. “One of the big things we’ve learned is that if we can change people’s attitudes as they age, we can see tangible results in how they function and perform.”

The evidence is in the growing number of participants in the world masters games.

“It’s the largest sporting event in the world — five times bigger than the Olympics,” says Baker. “What we’re seeing is that the quality of participation is increasing as well.”

Ottawa’s Serge Faucher loves defying the stereotype. “I love being 52 and having a six pack,” he says. “I’ve always been fit, but now I’m fitter than most 20-year-olds out there.”

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Faucher retired from the Canadian military last year after 34 years as an aerospace engineer and avionics technician; he now works as a reservist in the same role. He’s always been active, but it wasn’t until he was 45 that he started competing as a masters athlete in track and field.

His younger brother Claude, also in the military, is a sprinter. They’ve competed (and medalled) all over the world and were the only two members of the military competing in South Korea recently.

Ever the engineer, Serge Faucher is methodical and analytical with his training, writing everything down. He thrives on the structure and treats his body as a machine, always looking at what it needs to boost performance. Everything is built around a goal; every workout has a purpose.

Faucher’s been getting faster every year, inching closer to other racers at the top of their game. Highly competitive, he gets great satisfaction from improving, but knows a plateau is coming soon. When he reaches it, he says, he’ll focus on strength and maintenance. He has no plans to stop.

“I’ll go straight from the track to six feet under,” he says, laughing.

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A growing body of research is showing the relationship between activity and better health outcomes for older people, says Clara Fitzgerald, director of the Canadian Centre for Activity and Aging at Western University, which translates its own research and the work of others into meaningful, outcome-based activity programs for older people. The centre certifies instructors to deliver those programs across Canada and also does individual fitness appraisals.

“More and more we’re seeing the value of physical activity and exercise,” she says, noting that after the age of 25, inactive men and women lose one per cent of their cardio, strength, balance and flexibility every year.

“It doesn’t take long to do the math and see that as we get closer to middle age, we’re functioning at half the potential we had when we were younger.”

The only way to curb that is through exercise. “Activity is not going to reverse the clock, but it will help the body function at a much younger age,” Fitzgerald says.

She points to people like Ed Whitlock, the first person over age 70 to run a marathon in under three hours. He was 86 when he died in March — with the body of a 50-year-old.

“Age is just a number. It tells us less and less,” she says.

“The good news is that if your functional age is older than your chronological age, we can get you on a program to get you to a better level of fitness. It’s never too late to start.”

In Kingston, Steve Boyd has seen that work first-hand. A masters athlete who has been running and competing for more than 30 years, he’s also the head coach at Queen’s University and coaches nearly a dozen masters runners. Every day he’s surprised by how well they do and by their ability to get better — even well past the point when he thought they’d start to decline.
“I’ve learned that you’re capable of more than you think you are. They’ve taught me not to concede much to your age. It’s incredible what you can maintain,” he says.

Fitness (coupled with a desire to fit into a bikini on her trips to Hawaii) was Carol LaFayette-Boy’d initial motivation to get moving in her late 40s. She and her husband started by trying to run a mile. Then in 1991, when she was 50, she heard the Canadian Masters Games were going to be held in her hometown of Regina. She’d always loved track and field, so she contacted her high school teacher for training advice.

LaFayette-Boyd feared looking like a fool at the games. She needn’t have worried; she’s been breaking records and collecting medals ever since — so many that she doesn’t even count them anymore. She’s also been inducted into the Canadian Masters’ Hall of Fame and the Regina Sports Hall of Fame.

“I feel better now than I did when I was 35,” she says. “This keeps me healthy and it keeps me strong, so I’m sticking with it. I tell people I’m in until I’m 100, but now I think I have to go to 104 because I’ve seen people that age competing.”

Fitzgerald knows many older people who are fitter now than they’ve ever been. She says she couldn’t even guess the ages of some of her clients at the centre.

On the flip side, she’s seeing a growing number of younger people coming through her door with inactivity-related chronic conditions. Research shows people can realize a 30 to 60 per cent reduction in the risk of developing chronic diseases simply by incorporating cardio and strength training into their lives. But far too many people aren’t doing that; the average Canadian age 85 and over spends about 85 per cent of the average day sitting.

“When we’re not moving, we don’t even realize how much muscle wasting is happening. That, coupled with the physiological, functional decline, presents challenges for seniors.”

In 2011, her centre reviewed existing literature while revising the national physical activity guidelines for older adults for the Public Health Agency of Canada. Those guidelines say that people over 65 should do 150 minutes of cardio weekly, in 10-minute bursts if need be. To glean the benefits, the intensity must be moderate to vigorous. Strength training twice a week is also key.

The most recent stats show that among those aged 60-79, only 12 per cent of men and women meet those guidelines. Many don’t value physical activity for its health benefits — they see it as a leisure activity. The centre wants to push the message that doing something is always better than doing nothing.

“It has to become a habit,” Fitzgerald says. “How many days can you go without eating? Sleep? You either need to make time for your health or you need to make time for illness.”

And the benefits of staying active late in life go well beyond the body alone. There’s a cognitive component to physical training that helps the mind as well. And taking part in amateur sport means being part of a community — which can reduce the sense of isolation that can lead to depression.

For Jack Judge, that sense of community is a big part of what’s been drawing him back to compete in the Haliburton Forest 100 every fall since 2005. The 66-year-old Kingston-based ultra-marathoner spends a good part of the run talking to other runners and says his life would be emptier without that experience.

“I keep going because I like the feeling of going out and running through the woods. And the people at the races and in the running community, they’re absolutely wonderful.”

For him, running is a meditative act — a way of cutting himself off from the stresses and strains of daily life.

“It’s very nice to enter a state where you don’t have a lot of thoughts popping into your head. I just cruise along and enjoy my surroundings,” he says.

“Instead of being tied to a chair in extended care, why not go out and enjoy yourself?”
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A former federal public servant, Bortignon managed public housing for seniors when she retired.

“A lot of those people were younger than I was and they didn’t do anything. They were lonely and I could see that took a toll.”

She knows that when many people hit a certain age, they convince themselves that they’re over the hill and have nothing left to do but wait to die.

“You can’t sit at home. I think it’s like anything else — you lose it if you don’t use it. I love to run because it makes me feel good and keeps me young.

“Most people don’t think I’m 80,” she says, pointing out her lack of grey hair. “I always told my husband I didn’t want to be a little old lady.”

To find a certified activity program, become a trainer or have a fitness appraisal, contact The Canadian Centre for Activity and Aging at www.uwo.ca/ccaa

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