

# The Running Life: Master Class

## Lessons for Older Runners

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**This month *Running Times* celebrates the accomplishments of the top runners over 40.** As inspirational as these runners are, however, there are lessons to be learned from masters of all abilities. It is axiomatic that as we age, a certain amount of wisdom must surely follow. Not only does aging teach us about ourselves, it also illuminates and clarifies the world around us.

The inescapable truth is that, in addition to conferring valuable life lessons, age also robs us of the physical blessings of youth. This is a process that, at first, manifests itself in subtle ways. With the passing of each year the aging process accelerates and before you know it, subtlety is lost forever.

Fortunately, for many endurance athletes, there is an exquisite time between youth and old age that combines the rewards of both worlds. It is during this amazing window of performance opportunity that significant physical decline is largely in the future and mental acuity is reaching its peak. For some runners, this time lasts only a few years. For others, gifted with resilience, determination, or enviable genetic material, this golden age can span decades.

Cultural and technological advances have changed the dynamics of aging and athletics. No longer are 50-, 60-, or even 70-year-olds expected to stop running or competing. As the population ages, more attention is paid to the concerns and interests of older runners. A new magazine called *Geezerjock*, aimed at masters-level amateur athletes, could not have existed 10 or probably even five years ago.

There are ways to prolong this golden age of running, ways in which we can extend our ability to excel and achieve well into middle and old age. Here are a few reminders to those runners who have reached masters status—as well as a heads-up for younger runners.

**Understand the process:** More than 2,000 years ago, in *The Art of War*, Sun Tzu said, "Know your enemy, know yourself, and your victory will not be threatened." In many ways aging is an enemy that can be vanquished with knowledge. Inform yourself about the aging process and its effect on training. Question dated information and keep abreast of new developments. A quick Internet search or a trip to the library will yield a bounty of information. Publications and web sites like *National Masters News*, *Masters Athlete Physiology & Performance (the MAPP)*, *Masters Track & Field*, and the abovementioned *Geezerjock* all contain information useful to masters runners. Remember that knowledge is power.

**Rest and recover:** As you age, rest and recovery become an increasingly important part of your training routine. After a particularly hard workout you may require two rest days rather than one. If massage is part of your recovery program, plan to get it on a rest day. Some of your days off can include active rest. The key to active rest is not to stress your body, but to increase circulation and relaxation. Take a long walk, go to a yoga class, or enjoy a leisurely bike ride. Psychological recovery is another important tool for the masters runner. Reducing stress with activities like meditation, yoga, or simply curling up with a good book will enhance your recovery on days off.

**Stay strong:** It is a fact that as people age, they lose muscle mass. One way of slowing down the aging process is to incorporate strength training into your schedule. Working with weights as few as two times a week for a half hour will help maintain or even increase your muscle mass. Including a program to promote core strength—whether with a stability ball, Pilates, or an abdominal routine—will also help keep the effects of aging at bay.

**Stay focused:** Planning is key to running past mid-life and into old age. A well-researched, thoughtful training regimen can help avoid injury and burnout, the two-pronged enemy of older runners. Make each mile count. Junk miles, like junk food, are much more detrimental to us as we age. Carefully schedule each speed workout, long run, easy day, and rest day. And to keep things fresh, be sure to leave time for purely social runs.

**Embrace change:** There is no getting around the fact that aging produces change, both mental and physical. Rather than mourning lost abilities and declining PRs, try to accept the natural progression of age. Stop measuring success by the standards of your youth. Instead, age-grade your notion of accomplishment. Re-examine your goals every year or two in order to bring them into line with your changing abilities. Keep in mind that aging does not always follow a strict downward progression. Lifestyle and circumstances also affect performance. There will be years that you have more time and energy to devote to training. Take advantage of these times to attempt new challenges.

There is a Yiddish saying that if you carry your childhood with you, you will never grow old. As we age, running allows us to stay connected to that carefree, limitless feeling of childhood. It gives us the opportunity to be ageless, briefly abandoning the demands of life and embracing the here and now. With luck, planning, and determination, we should be able to continue for a very long time.

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