

Original Article

Masters swimming at the adult age: contextual transformations of the notion of “competition”

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Abstract

Introduction

Starting from the main feature of sports-competition, the present paper considers the reasons for participation in masters swimming competitions for swimmers for who are at an adult age that feel the need to confront with opponents or with their own body limits.

Methods

Using the survey questionnaire, it has been applied to a number of 45 subjects (28 male and 17 female) aged between 18 and 84.

Results and discussion

Masters swimming practitioners are highly educated people, who practiced professional sports during childhood, adolescence or youth and returned to competitive sport in order to maintain their health.

Conclusions

If in professional sports competition is mainly practiced in order to overcome a record certified at a national or international level, the competition in masters sports is a form of socializing, fitness and travel.

Keywords: competition, social, tourism.

Introduction

Masters swimming is a "movement" that attracts worldwide increasingly more and more practitioners, which also happens in our country since 2007 when the first club of masters swimming was founded in Timișoara. Currently there are four masters swimming clubs (in Timișoara, Reșița, Cluj and Brașov) and the competitions encourage the return of former champions to performance, along with their former opponents. Since 2011, masters swimming has been recognized and affiliated to the Romanian Swimming Federation and Modern Pentathlon.

The term “masters sports” comes from English and its philosophy is symbolized by the motto "Sport for Life". The term "masters" means that there is a minimum age (McIntyre & Co, 1992), varying according to the branches of sports (Jones, 2009) so that if in masters swimming it is 18 (lowest), in rowing it is 23 and 40 in athletics.

M. Epuran (2001) states that, by definition, "sport is competition, a race against space, time, gravity, nature, others and the self" but approaching sports only in terms of competition and performance is a narrow point of view, because sport is practiced for other purposes, such as those of maintaining health or pleasure and maintenance of social relationships.

Competing masters athletes present a strong, vital and active self-image compared against the passive, dependent and disadvantaged self-image of inactive people (Dionigi, 2006). These competitions are also addressed to those who wish to exceed their limits and to fulfill their dream of competing. Besides the desire to take part in competitions (Ryan and Lockyer, 2002), the reasons why people practice masters swimming are diverse: for some socializing is the main reason (Cuskelly & Co, 1996), but also fitness and good condition are an important factor (McIntyre & Co., 1992, Cuskelly and Boag, 1996) and combating age stereotypes (Dionigi, 2002; Dionigi, 2006). Maintaining health (Shaw & Co, 2005) is another reason why athletes practice masters swimming, without ignoring the the improvement of sporting skills (Hastings & Co, 1995). Generally it appears that masters athletes involved in certain activities find it a pleasure to take part in training and competitions, which determines the sense of belonging to a social group, especially since the motivation is intrinsic (Hodge & Co, 2008).

Although in the past was known masters is used, sports, both in Romania and abroad under the name of sports for veterans, currently the term masters is used, as veterans, or those who are former athletes and the competitive activity continue at another level of performance represent only a category of masters, the rest being represented by a party of enthusiastic people, who practice sports as leisure activity at a competitive level and formed the

third category by people who practiced sports in the past and who resumed the sport after a long absence (Brown & Co, 2001). Another term used in English is the term “senior”. Senior Olympics competitions exist in America, but in Romanian such a term would create confusion, as “seniors” here are oldest age group participating in professional sports, being preceded by the junior category, cadets, etc. (depending on the branch of sport).

Within the concept of Sports for all there is the concept of Sports for the third age¹ (Dragnea & Teodorescu-Mate, 2002) but Sports for veterans, is a classification of sports, registers under Performance Sports, the difference between Sports for veterans (or masters) and Sports for the third age being the proposed objectives: performance versus health maintenance. The performances in the veterans category are limited by age and by the possibility of the organism to be stimulated to a maximum. By sportive veterans we mean those that compete at an amateur level in different sportive branches, respecting the rules imposed by sports federations relating to age and to limiting performances; because of age, they cannot take part in the senior category, but they continue to compete on a national or international level with opponents worthy of their level.

Until 2007, Romania was not on the masters swimming map, given that in most neighboring countries, the practice of adults swimming in organized forms has a history of over twenty years. However, by 2009 there were no campaigns to promote the practice of swimming to adults, no masters swimming clubs no training strategies, no organized competitions in the country and no participation in European Championships. Since 2009, competitions were held by each of the masters swimming clubs in Romania, which promote to a certain extent "the movement" of masters swimming. Over the next few years the swimmers of these clubs have participated in dozens of local contests with international participation (especially in Hungary and Serbia), in various national championships with international participation.

Worldwide the masters swimming movement gathers hundreds of thousands of women and men aged at least 18 years and sometimes up to 80-90 years old for whom swimming is a passion for sport and health, whether practiced in order to obtain important titles or to maintain health at the highest level. Age variety determines that their sportive skills are very different and the major interest that can be linked to strengthening muscle tone (swimming fitness), participation in competitions, social need, the pleasure of swimming and more, but more often, it is a combination of these interests. The first masters competitions were held since the 70s in the United States, Germany, Italy, Japan, UK and New Zealand. Masters swimming became an official member of the International Federation of Amateur Swimming (FINA) sports family at the Congress of Madrid in 1986. The amateur sports law had to be considered and an amendment be made to the rules to make it possible for older swimmers to compete as masters without being obliged to renounce the right to compete at the elite level.

The object of the research is the competitive practice by adults in the masters swimming activity. This research aims to establish the reasons for which those swimmers take part in this activity and the benefits that they gain.

The purpose of this paper is to determine the profile of the masters swimming practitioner in Romania to analyze the reasons for taking part in masters swimming competitions and to emphasize the link between playing a sport in youth and returning to masters swimming practice.

Hypotheses

Competition is a milestone in the life of athletes, regardless of age and it takes different connotations: in youth the notion of performance, or approved personal record defined the competitive practice, in adulthood it turns into fitness, socializing and travel.

Material and method

The questionnaire survey method was applied to competitors in the masters swimming competition held in Timisoara on the 6th June 2011. The questionnaire includes thirty-one questions put to find out personal information about masters athletes (age, sex, level of education, marital status, etc.) and data on the involvement in masters swimming (participation in competitions, the reasons for participation, etc.). A number of 45 athletes (28 men and 17 women) aged between 18 and 84 years answered the questionnaire. Most swimmers have higher education (83%), are employed (74%) or retired (16%) and are from Timisoara, Brasov, Cluj, Resita and Bucharest.

Results

a. Taking part in the activities organized by the masters swimming club

Out of those questioned, 67% say they are members of a masters swimming club. Along with of former swimmers the desire to continue the work done in the past, in which the competition is the main target, appeared the masters swimming movement as expected. For this activity to be conducted in an organized environment came into being masters swimming clubs which allow the organization of activities, conduct training, prepare for

¹ The term “third age” is used in Romanian to refer to the category represented by the senior citizens.

competitions, club competitions represent the scheduled and planned. To become a member of a club, it is necessary to participate as a supporter of the actions of the club for 6 months, then that person will become a member. But there are situations where people that are not part of a masters swimming club and are not supporters of such a club, decide to participate in such a competition. Such people are individuals that know how to swim but practice other leisure activities, who after reading a poster or an ad about a swimming masters competition, decide to participate.

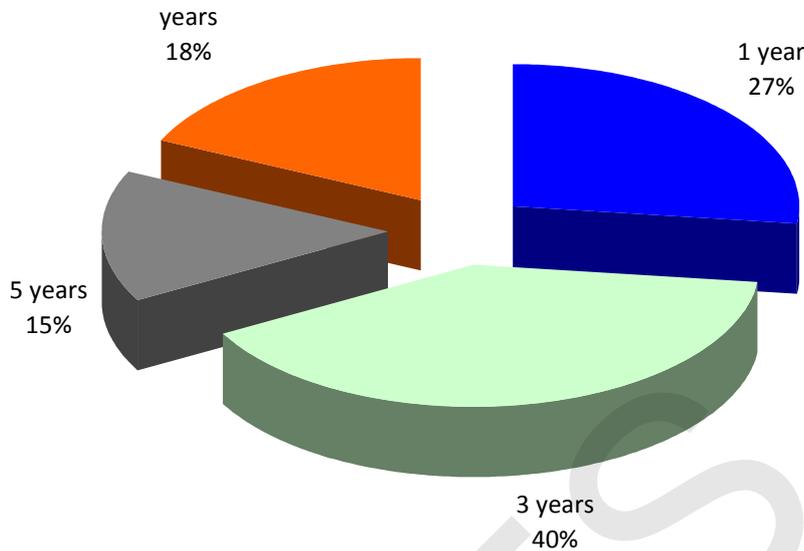


Fig. 1 Athletes' membership in the masters sports club

Given that in Romania this activity has been developing for a short period of time (only a few years), we would categorise the group of participating subjects, as they have been registered in figure 1, altogether differently, if we take into account countries such as the USA, Germany, Italy, Japan, the UK and New Zealand that have been undergoing such activities since the 70s. Related to the time period since one has become member of a masters swimming club, this is relative, varying from under 3 years (40%) to over 5 years (18%). Given the fact that in Romania the first masters swimming club was established in 2007, it is important that from one year to another the number of members is rising, on a global level.

b. Masters swimmers' competitive experience

The questionnaire shows that most swimmers (96%) practiced sports in childhood or adolescence, 75% of them practiced sports performance sports recreational 20% and 4% said they did not practice at all sports and physical education in school as they were medically exempted. Out of the sports practiced, some of them were swimmers (40%) who practiced swimming at the junior level and 13% competed until the senior level. Currently, as shown in Figure 2, they masters swimming practice to maintain the state of health (39%), to meet the need of movement (19%) or because the doctor has therapeutic swimming prescribed (14%). For some swimmers, the need to took them back to swimming compete (10%) as well as the need to socialize (10%) and relax (8%).

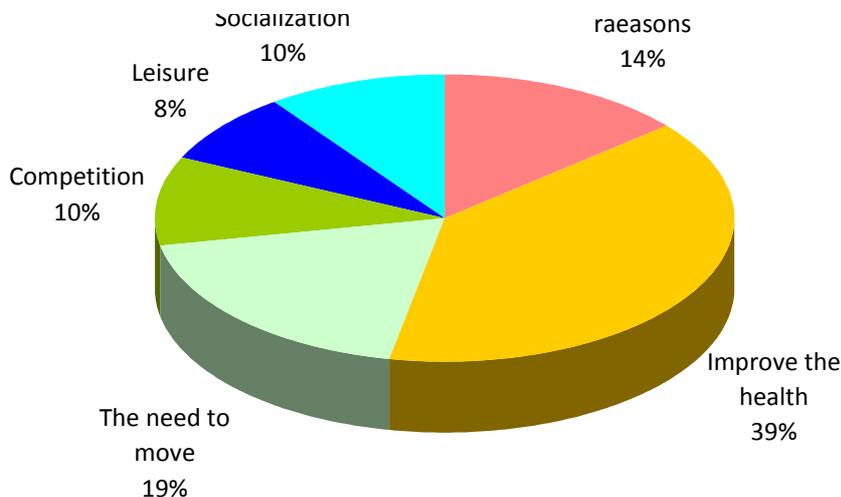


Fig. 2 Reasons for practicing masters swimming

c. Characteristics of masters swimming competitions and competitors

According to the answers given by the subjects interviewed, maintaining and improving health is the primary benefit of having this hand from masters swimming practice, a claim made by a group of subjects representing 37% of the entire sample. Socializing (18%) and relaxation (17%) or recovering from some injuries occupy the following places in the benefits obtained (12%). Testing limits is a feature of 10% of the subjects concerned, the desire to overcome is present in 6% of masters swimmers. Given that the questionnaire was applied to a sample of subjects who largely participated in masters swimming competitions both at a national and at a European level, all of them know the fever for competition. Moments before the contest have their "charm", because the participants meet each other by coming from different parts of the country or from different continents of the globe, moments in which they tell stories special to them had and so socializing takes on new dimensions. Equally important are the moments after the competition, starting after awarding the medals, the participants enjoy the results or some pleasant stages of the competition.

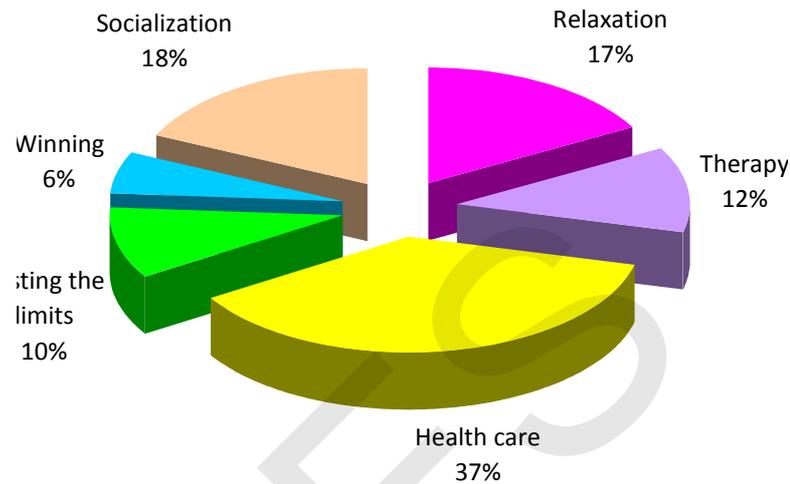


Fig. 3 Effects of practicing masters swimming

Out of the 45 competitors, only 71% are willing to travel to other cities and countries to participate in masters swimming competitions, the rest preferring to compete in local competitions only. Reasons for not participating in competitions vary from the lack of physical time (14.31%) for those that are still working to small health problems inherent of age that can occur at any time and prevent participation (9.2%) to material problems (6.145). Sometimes the lack of fitness, fear of failure and the fear of not living up to the other competitors determine non-participation.

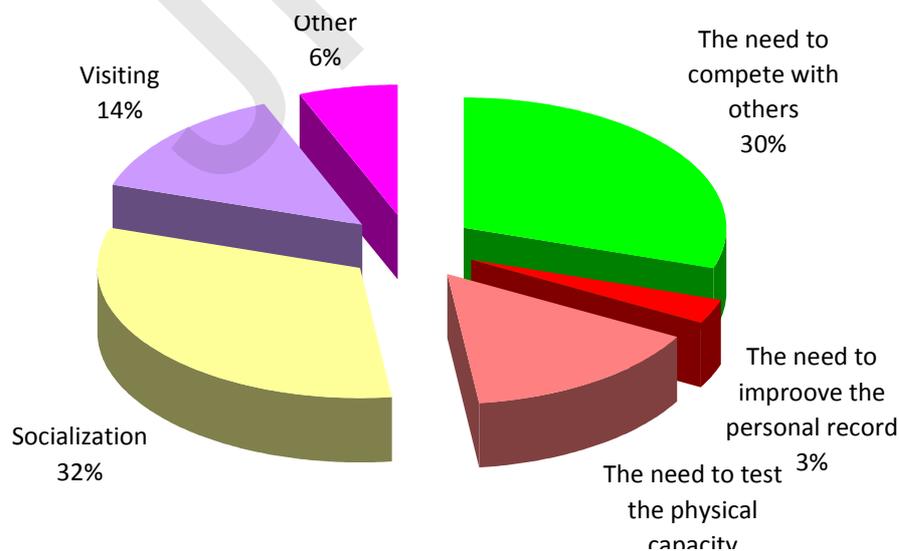


Fig. 4 Reasons for taking part in masters swimming contests

As shown in Fig.4, socializing and the desire to compete with others are the main reasons that lead most participants to travel to the venue of that competition. The desire to visit that location (14%) brings sport a new value, in addition to competition, visiting the premises (museums, cathedrals, art, landscapes, sights) allows the athlete to meet the need of knowledge of places and people transforming holidays or weekends into dynamic activities, organized around sports. In general, one can travel together with the family, so that its members can also take advantage of the trip, of the educational activities and cultural transmission. Masters swimming tries to

promote sports within the family – besides competition and transmitting of sportive values, parents spend leisure time with their children. 19% of competitors take part in national competitions, while 7% take part in international competitions, but the majority prefer both types of competitions.

The positive influences brought by practicing masters swimming in this sample group are represented especially by: a positive attitude (25%), health improvement (21%), opportunities to socialize (19%) and eliminating stress (17%), these representing 82% out of the whole percentage. The rest is represented by increase of self confidence (10%) and loss of weight (8%).

For 70% of subjects, masters swimming represents an activity that occupies an important part in their lives, while the rest thinks otherwise.

Conclusions

The fact that the majority of those that answered the questionnaire have practiced performance sports during childhood and adolescence allows us to consider that they are sportive veterans that find practicing sports at this certain age a form of self motivation that has positive effect on their professional and personal life, regardless of age. The fact that masters swimming allows those that were medically exempted from sports to test their limits in competitions at an age when they should have already been lived or, if this is would not have been the case, would have remained unexplored, proves the importance of practicing sports at any age, regardless of physical abilities.

Besides maintaining the physical condition in the case of those who practice masters swimming, long time practitioners benefit from an improved posture, agility, mobility and, last but not least, a body that reflects their work. Masters athletes' physique, despite all the effects of aging, supports the idea that youth and age is a state of mind and that the third stage of life can be lived actively. Many people have improved and maintained their health and made new friends, visited some cities in the country and abroad, have removed the stress accumulated from work and made many other positive changes, all based on masters swimming activities conducted within the club membership.

Masters swimming in our country is still at the beginning, with good prospects for the future, this concept being promoted almost every month in Romania by conducting masters competitions more and more new people with long-term goals taking up memberships to the club. According to the questionnaire, most of the subjects interviewed were educated, practiced sports in childhood, adolescence and youth, this opportunity representing a good indicator before taking the decision to participate in the activity of masters swimming.

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