

Wisdom and drive: Older Olympians becoming the norm

February 14 2018, by Kristen Gelineau



Canadian curler Cheryl Bernard arranges her hair during training sessions for the women's curling matches at the 2018 Winter Olympics in Gangneung, South Korea, Monday, Feb. 12, 2018. Bernard, 51, is the oldest athlete competing at the Pyeongchang olympics. (AP Photo/Aaron Favila)

For her 50th birthday, Canadian curler Cheryl Bernard informed her husband that they would mark the occasion by hiking eight hours a day along Italy's rugged Amalfi coast. "Seriously?" he replied.

Seriously. Also unsurprising. After all, one year later, Bernard would become the oldest Olympian competing at the Pyeongchang Winter Games—an achievement that was not born of holidays spent knocking back margaritas poolside.

Bernard's story is a familiar one among this year's set of older Olympians, who credit consistency, better knowledge of nutrition and age-won wisdom for the longevity of their careers. And longer careers may soon become the norm for elite athletes, with huge advances in sports medicine helping Olympians stay competitive into middle age, defying the idea that the Games are reserved for the young.

"The age of some of the best in the world in their sport has gone up over time, like the Roger Federers of the world, in a number of endurance sports," says Robert Litchfield, a Canadian orthopedic surgeon who has operated on around 30 Olympic-level skiers.

"It's not a given anymore that you'd become weaker and slower with aging," he says. "You can maintain a lot of physical tools if you take good care of yourself—and the advantage (is) with age comes wisdom."



In this Jan. 28, 2018 file photo, Japan's Noriaki Kasai soars through the air during the 18th World Cup Ski Jumping competition, in Zakopane, Poland. Kasai is showing no sign of slowing down. One of six male ski jumpers representing Japan in Pyeongchang, the 45-year-old Kasai is taking part in his record eighth Olympics, surpassing Russian luger Albert Demchenko for the most appearances in the Winter Games. (AP Photo/Alik Keplicz, File)

For Bernard, taking good care of herself is a habit. Though she retired from competitive curling four years ago, she jumped at the chance to join Canada's Olympic curling team as an alternate in Pyeongchang.

She was ready: Even in retirement, she had continued to curl and maintain her usual fitness regimen. She does 90 minutes of cardio and weight lifting a day, at least six days a week. She loves going for walks with her dog and, of course, hiking with her husband. She follows a protein-heavy diet that mainly consists of vegetables and meat, with the

occasional glass of red wine.

"It's just my lifestyle. It's who I am," Bernard says. "I feel like age is such a number these days. It's changed. I look at people now and I think, 'There's no way you're 40.'"

Consistency has also been key to 45-year-old Japanese ski jumper Noriaki Kasai's success. Kasai is competing in his eighth Olympics at Pyeongchang—a record—in a sport where many retire in their 20s. He trains the same way he has since he was young, and mirrors the workouts of his younger competitors. He's even written an advice book on how people can achieve their best physical and mental health after age 40.



In this April 8, 2017, file photo, Buffalo Sabres right wing Brian Gionta (12) skates prior to an NHL hockey game against the Florida Panthers, in Sunrise, Fla. As the longtime NHL veterans try to win a medal for the United States at the

Olympics, their agents are talking to teams about getting them signed once the tournament is over. Gionta and James Wisniewski will have about a day and a half to sign between the end of the Olympics and the deadline to be eligible for the playoffs and are ready to jump back in. (AP Photo/Joel Auerbach, File)

"I feel 20," he said with a grin last week, shortly after completing a 99-meter jump.

Kasai also attributes experience to his continued success. He still learns something from every jump and studies his performance to see what can be improved.

That's important, says Litchfield, who notes that older athletes actually have an edge over youngsters when it comes to familiarity of the competition sites, which they often have visited many times. At the outdoor ski venues, Litchfield says, a seasoned athlete would know about shortcuts, or where any little bumps in the course may be.

Then there is the key driver universal to all Olympians, young and old: competitiveness.



In this March 4, 2017, file photo, United States' Lindsey Vonn competes during the women's World Cup downhill at the Jeongseon Alpine Center in Jeongseon, South Korea. The most prized Olympic titles in Alpine skiing will be won this month on downhill courses raced only once before. "I think it's very unique," said Vonn, who was runner-up in the women's test race. "There are a lot of elements on the Olympic track that aren't on any World Cup (course)." (AP Photo/Ahn Young-joon, File)

"Many say it is just not possible to be successful at the Games at this age," 45-year-old German speed skater Claudia Pechstein told German agency DPA. "I want to prove them wrong."

Pechstein is having another standout year, capped with World Cup victories in the 5,000-meter race and the mass start, beating competitors half her age. "It's incredible," she said. "I could be their mother."

The flipside to consistency for Olympians is knowing how to adapt their

regimens to their changing bodies.

U.S. men's hockey captain Brian Gionta, who turned 39 last month, is the oldest U.S. men's player and one of the oldest players in the men's tournament.



Canadian curler Cheryl Bernard sweeps ice during a training session for the women's curling matches at the 2018 Winter Olympics in Gangneung, South Korea, Monday, Feb. 12, 2018. Bernard, 51, is the oldest athlete competing at the Pyeongchang Olympics. (AP Photo/Aaron Favila)

For him, growing older as an athlete has meant more rehab and more preparation; where he once may have been able to hop off a bus and hit the ice, he now needs to make sure his body is really warmed up and moving properly before a game.

"You have to adjust a lot of it over the years, but it just becomes a lifestyle. ... It's not something that you turn 38, all of a sudden you've got to change everything," he says. "It's a slow progression when you start getting up there in the 30s and stuff. You start changing some things and taking care of your body, listening to your body a little more."

Figuring out how to optimize an aging athlete's training routine has helped extend their careers far beyond what they might have been even just a decade ago, says Shawn Arent, director of the Center for Health and Human Performance at Rutgers University in the U.S.

Huge advances in sports science in the past 10 to 15 years have produced better understanding of what causes the breakdown of an athlete's body, and how to delay it.



Canadian curler Cheryl Bernard, center, joins a training session for the women's curling matches at the 2018 Winter Olympics in Gangneung, South Korea,

Monday, Feb. 12, 2018. Bernard, 51, is the oldest athlete competing at the Pyeongchang Olympics. (AP Photo/Aaron Favila)

Elite older athletes have also usually learned how to cope with the doubts and emotional strain that often wreak havoc on rookies' minds, Arent says. At 33, American skier Lindsey Vonn is in the running to become the oldest woman to win an Olympic alpine medal despite suffering major crashes and injuries. That, Arent says, is a testament to her willpower and mental toughness.

"If you're an athlete who has been able to physically maintain themselves, you now have the physical ability plus the mental upshot that you might not have had as a younger athlete to maintain yourself," he says.

Vonn noted that overcoming the mental aspect of the sport did indeed take time.

"It took me until my third Olympics to really figure out how to deal with the pressure," she told reporters in Pyeongchang.



Canadian curler Cheryl Bernard smiles during a training session for the women's curling matches at the 2018 Winter Olympics in Gangneung, South Korea, Monday, Feb. 12, 2018. Bernard, 51, is the oldest athlete competing at the Pyeongchang Olympics. (AP Photo/Aaron Favila)

Heading into the Olympic curling trials, Bernard took up meditation to help her quiet her mind. But at this point in her life, she's been through enough that it takes a lot to really rattle her. That's a lesson she hopes to impart to her teammates, who are all around two decades younger than her.

"I think the greatest realization for me with these girls is this is just a sport," she says. "It's the Olympics, yes, it's the biggest thing they'll ever play in, but this is just a game, and you've got family and people and things that are so important in life. ... It dials it all back to what it should be."

In the end, though, there's the simplest explanation of all for how these older Olympians are still going strong:

"Genetically," Arent says, laughing, "most of these guys are just superior."

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Citation: Wisdom and drive: Older Olympians becoming the norm (2018, February 14) retrieved 23 April 2024 from

<https://medicalxpress.com/news/2018-02-wisdom-older-olympians-norm.html>

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