

Top-level sportsmen may live 13 percent longer than the average man

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Professional sportsmen may live up to 13 percent longer than those in the general population, a new statistical report has found.

The in-depth study by the International Longevity Center UK (ILC) and supported by the Business School (formerly Cass)—based on records over a 180-year-span—finds large differences in the longevity of elite

sportsmen in football, cricket, rugby union, tennis, golf, boxing and horse racing compared with males in the general population that were born in the same year.

"[The longevity of sporting legends](#)," by Professor Les Mayhew, explains that top-level cricketers, rugby union, golf and [tennis players](#) have benefited from the greatest increases in [life expectancy](#), while boxers and jockeys are actually likely to live shorter lives than the average man across England and Wales, after taking into account general rises in life expectancy.

It further finds that among those alive today, there are 36 percent more Wimbledon finalists than would be expected if they had the same mortality as the average male. This compares with 16 percent more England rugby union captains, 14 percent more England cricket captains, and 9 percent more Open Championship champions.

Many of the differences in life expectancy between sports can be accredited to varied levels of risk of injury, differences in socioeconomic status associated with a given sport, varying [education levels](#) and leadership qualities—with rugby union captains, for example, seeing greater gains in longevity than in football.

Further findings from the report include:

- Professionals in cricket, rugby union, tennis, golf and horse racing are more likely to live longer now than they were between 1900 and 1960—due to improvements in safety, lifestyles, and post-career welfare. However, rule changes in boxing over many years to reduce the risk of long-term injury have not altered the fact that boxing is the most dangerous among the sports considered in the report, with elite-level boxers historically living about 25 percent shorter lives than other top-level athletes.

- Between 1968, the start of the open era when professional players were admitted to Wimbledon, and 2020, male finalists experienced a 25 percent increase in longevity. And 50 percent of all Wimbledon men's singles finalists were still alive in 2020, 16 of whom are in their 80s or 90s.
- Footballers are more likely to have shorter lives now than in the 1930s and 1940s, partly due to muddy pitches and heavier balls being used in the early post-war era and more professional matches being played, therefore increasing the risk of long-term head and other injuries.
- Some of the oldest legends reached their prime back in the 19th Century. For example, Tom Morris won the Open Championship for the third time in 1867 at age 46. In the modern era Lester Piggott was aged 48 when he last won the Derby in 1983, Peter Shilton was 40 when he last captained the England football team in 1990 and Roger Federer won his last Wimbledon title in 2017 aged 36.

"It is well established that playing sport has a variety of health benefits, but nobody knew how it impacted how long professional sportsmen may live—until now."

"While it may be unsurprising to hear a boxer is more likely to live a shorter time than the average man, it is more shocking to learn how tennis players continue to live longer as the years pass, and that, despite advances in medicine and technology, footballers are less likely now than in the 1930s to live longer. This research also confirms that social factors—such as socio-economic background and level of education—have a key influence on longevity."

"Now we know that certain sports increase your chances of a longer life, it may encourage those of all ages to continue to be physically active throughout their lives."

Sir Brendan Foster, former Olympian and Founder of the Great North Run, said:

"I welcome this timely report by the ILC ahead of a summer of sports, which demonstrates all too clearly the benefits of sport, not just to our overall health, but also to our life expectancy."

"It also dispels some important myths around sport and brings valuable insight about what aspects of professional sporting careers best support longer, healthier lives—from making sure we address the risk of injury, to creating leadership opportunities for athletes and supporting post-career welfare."

More information: The longevity of sporting legends. ilcuk.org.uk/the-longevity-of-sporting-legends/

Provided by City University London

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