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1 **Performance declines are accelerated in the oldest-old track and field athletes**
2 **80 to 94 years of age**

3

4 Original investigation

5

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29 **Keywords:** aging, athletics, activity, running, longevity, age

30

31 **Abbreviated title:** The oldest-old track and field athletes

32 **ABSTRACT**

33

34 Physical performance declines with age, even in exercising, healthy older individuals without
35 major illnesses or orthopaedic issues. Declines are often reported to accelerate after the age of 70
36 years, but almost no data are available on performance in the fittest oldest-old. The aim of the study
37 was to assess decline rates in performance at high age. The biggest dataset of track and field athletes
38 ≥ 80 years (1567 results) ever published was collected from results lists of the years 1997 to 2019,
39 including 100m, 200m, long jump, shot put, discus and javelin throw. Performance at age 80 of
40 athletes still participating at age 85 was compared to those who discontinued. Only one out of every
41 22 athletes competing at age 80 still competed at age 90. The performance decline was more than
42 three times as steep in athletes ≥ 80 (on average 1.62%/year, p-values: men: 200m $p=0.037$, all
43 other disciplines $p<0.001$, women: shot put $p=0.017$, discus $p=0.010$) compared to athletes 30-69
44 years (0.46%/year), and this acceleration occurred at an average of 67 years. Performance at age
45 80 was similar in athletes still participating at age 85 to those who discontinued, and the variability
46 in results was decreased after age 90. Physical performance declines more than three times as fast
47 after around the age of 67 years compared to before. Declines are fastest in sprinting, indicating
48 that sprinting and running exercises are most crucial for old athletes' performance. Better
49 performing athletes did not compete longer.

50

51 INTRODUCTION

52
53 Other than many of their sedentary peers or patients with orthopaedic constraints, master athletes
54 continue to exercise until high age¹⁻⁴. Maintaining high levels of physical exercise throughout the
55 life span seems to slow the multi-systemic deterioration commonly observed in inactive
56 individuals⁵. Accelerated declines in performance after the age of 70 have been reported in many
57 athletic disciplines^{1,6-10} and are evident even in longitudinal data¹¹⁻¹³. The age of peak performance
58 is usually reported between 18 and 23 years, and performance starts to decline progressively after
59 staying relatively constant in the third decade of life¹.

60 Factors that may contribute to this age-related decline are decreases in pulmonary function¹⁴,
61 muscle wasting and weakness¹⁵⁻¹⁶, loss of motor units¹⁷ and reductions in cardiovascular
62 function¹⁸. World records give a rough understanding of the age-related decrement in
63 performance^{8,19}, but they only reflect performance of the most exceptional individuals. While the
64 better athletes might continue to perform well into high age, motivated by their successes, lower
65 performers could show a faster drop in performance and stop competition altogether. If so, the
66 accelerated decline in performance in the normal population could in fact be even steeper than that
67 reported for world records. Until now, however, this has not been systematically investigated.

68 Rates of performance declines seem to differ between disciplines and types of events^{1,20}. In direct
69 comparison, aging affects anaerobic power more than aerobic power²¹, but many more factors seem
70 to determine declines in athletics performance. In a previous study comparing several athletics
71 disciplines, we observed the steepest declines in javelin throw and 400 m (women), and in pole
72 vault and 800 m (men) while athletes seem to perform longer in the throwing disciplines than in
73 the sprints, runs and jumps¹. Due to low numbers of participating athletes in the oldest age groups,
74 decline rates are mainly unknown for the oldest age groups, apart from the running disciplines^{22,23}.

75 This information would be valuable for a more specific training advice for older athletes and to
76 better evaluate and compensate deficiencies in frailty and sarcopenia.

77 We used a dataset with a substantial number of longitudinal observations to 1) analyse patterns of
78 performance declines in the oldest group of athletes and 2) assess whether older athletes that stop
79 competing are indeed poorer performing individuals. The hypotheses were that 1) declines in
80 performance are accelerated at high age, and 2) better athletes continue longer, leading to an under-
81 estimation of the actual age-related rate of decline in performance in the master athlete population.

82

83 **METHODS**

84

85 Ethical approval was given by RWTH Aachen University Hospital IRB (reference number EK
86 300/17, date of approval: October 11, 2017). Informed consent was not needed, as only data from
87 published result lists was used.

88

89 **Generation of dataset**

90 Performance data of athletes 80 years and older were extracted from the following official ranking
91 lists of annual best results: North Rhine 2001 – 2019 (North Rhine Track and Field Association)²⁴,
92 Westfalia 2001 – 2019 (Soccer- and Track and Field Association of Westfalia)²⁵, Rheinland 1997
93 – 2019 (Rheinland Track and Field Association)²⁶ and Bavaria 2012 – 2019 (Bavaria Track and
94 Field Association)²⁷. All result lists are publicly available online. The named areas were selected,
95 as their results are publicly available online and date back a decent number of years. For master
96 athletes, annual best result lists are neither published for the world, nor for Europe or complete
97 larger countries. The selected areas within German comprise a total population of more than 35
98 million, making this a valuable data-set.

100 **Statistical analysis**

101 All statistical tests were executed with IBM® SPSS® Statistics version 25. The six disciplines with
 102 the most participants in the targeted age group were selected for analysis: 100m and 200m sprint,
 103 long jump, shot put, discus and javelin throw. Regression analysis was performed, and regression
 104 lines and equations with their corresponding p-values are shown when significant (regression
 105 coefficient, significance level 0.05). The decline in athlete numbers with age was compared to the
 106 official population numbers in Germany (German Federal Statistical Office)²⁸. A two-sided t-Test
 107 was used to compare performance of athletes who had a result at both 80 and 85 years to athletes
 108 who had a result at age 80 but not at age 85. The percent annual decline was calculated for the 80+
 109 athletes by normalizing their performance to the average performance values at age 80 years.

110 For presentation purposes and to calculate the age of onset of accelerate decline, the performance
 111 for all athletes was normalized to the average performance at age 30 years. Normalisation of data
 112 is further explained in the results section. The age of onset of accelerated decline was calculated
 113 from regression equations of the younger (30–69 years) and older (≥ 80 years) athletes, based on
 114 the percent annual decline normalized to age 30 years, using the following formula (regression
 115 equation: $Y = aX + b$):

$$116 \quad \text{Age of onset of decline} = (b_{30-69} - b_{\geq 80}) / (a_{\geq 80} - a_{30-69})$$

117 Implement weights in the throwing disciplines stay constant for athletes older than 79 years, which
 118 means that no changes in weights of javelins, discuses and shots affect absolute results. The
 119 following implements are used by athletes 80 years and older: shot put: men 3 kg, women 2 kg,
 120 discus throw: men 1 kg, women 750 g, javelin throw: men and women 400 g. In data of younger
 121 athletes, changing implement weights affect results of regression statistics.

123 RESULTS

124

125 Characterization of data-set

126 A total of 1567 results of 80- to 94-year-old athletes (1422 and 145 results from men and women,
127 respectively) from six athletic disciplines were included in the analysis (**Table 1**). In 80+-year-old
128 athletes, throwing disciplines were the most popular track and field events. In men, shot put was
129 the most popular discipline, followed by discus throw and javelin throw. For the women, discus
130 throw was the most popular discipline, followed by shot put and javelin throw.

131

132 Participation and performance

133 **Figure 1** shows the decline in the number of ≥ 80 -year-old male (**A**) and female (**B**) participants
134 with age and compares these numbers to official population numbers for Germany in the year 2019
135 (**C**). While the overall pattern of population and participation decline with age appears similar, the
136 proportion of the population participating in master athletics decreases with increasing age (**D**).

137 Overall, there were 415 results of 80-year-old (women and men) and only 19 of 90-year-old
138 athletes. This means that only one out of 22 athletes who competed at age 80 still participated at
139 age 90. **Figure 2** shows individual longitudinal changes of performance in shot put (the most
140 popular discipline) in absolute (**A**) values and as % of performance at age 80 years (**B**). It can be
141 seen that the performance declined in the large majority of athletes.

142 **Supplement Figure 1** shows results of regression analyses for 100m (**A**), 200m (**B**), long jump
143 (**C**), shot put (**D**), discus (**E**) and javelin throw (**F**) in the 80+-year-old athletes. The three
144 exceptionally slow 200m results were excluded from the analysis, as they were not representative
145 for the master athlete population. In men, there was a linear decline in performance in all six
146 disciplines. Exponential, logarithmic and polynomial regression models led to lower R^2 values in

147 all disciplines compared to linear regression. In women, due to lower participation, only the discus
148 throw showed a significant age-related decline in performance that was similar to the rate of decline
149 seen in men. Regression lines are only shown when significant.

150

151 **The onset and rate of accelerated decline**

152 **Table 1** and **Figure 3** show the data of the present study combined with those in Ganse et al.¹.
153 Regression lines are shown for the 30- to 69-year-old athletes and the 80+-year-old athletes. In
154 each discipline, the slope of performance decline is steeper in the older athletes (≥ 80 years)
155 compared to those 30 to 69 years old. The regression equations were used to calculate the age of
156 onset of an accelerated decline, defined as the age at which the two regression lines cross (**Table**
157 **1**). The average age at which the accelerated decline started was 67 years (**Table 1**). Shot put
158 (**Figure 3B**) was the discipline with the latest onset and discus throw (**Figure 3D**) the earliest onset
159 of accelerated decline (see also **Table1**). In **figure 3G**, we pooled the data of all disciplines and
160 normalised the performance to the average performance at 30 years in each discipline. In **Figure**
161 **4A** it can be seen that the average performance decline after the age of 80 as a percentage of the
162 performance at the age of 80 was 2.5%.

163

164 **The end of participation is independent of performance**

165 To answer the question whether the drop out of poorer performers affected the rate of decline,
166 performance at age 80 of athletes who still participated at age 85 was compared to those who
167 discontinued (**Figure 4B**). We found no difference in performance between these groups in any of
168 the disciplines (100m: $p=0.9$ men; 200m: $p=0.1$ men; long jump: $p=0.1$ men; shot put: $p=0.5$ men
169 and $p=0.6$ women; discus: $p=0.9$ men and $p=0.9$ women; javelin: $p=0.9$ men; due to limited
170 numbers of athletes, women are only reported for shot put and discus throw). **Figures 4C** shows a

171 decreased variability in performance after the age of 90 years, which may reflect that at this very
172 advanced age cessation of poorer performers may play a role.

173

174 **DISCUSSION**

175

176 In the present study we analyzed 1567 competition results of 80- to 94-year-old master athletes.

177 The main findings of the study were: 1. the performance decline was on average more than three

178 times as steep in athletes ≥ 80 compared to athletes 30-69 years; 2. the onset of this accelerated

179 decline occurred at an average age of 66.9 years; 3. only one out of 22 athletes competing at age

180 80 still competed at age 90; 4. performance at age 80 was similar in athletes still participating at

181 age 85 to those who discontinued; 5. there was a decreased variability in results after age 90.

182

183 **Performance in athletes 80 years and older**

184 We found a faster rate of decline in performance in athletes older than 80 years than we previously

185 reported in 30- to 69-year-old athletes¹ which is in line with previous smaller studies showing an

186 accelerated decline after the age of 70^{2,6-9}. One potential criticism of such studies is that they may

187 underestimate the rate of performance decline in the older master athletes as particularly the weaker

188 athletes may stop competing. In line with this criticism is our observation that the proportion of the

189 older population participating in master athletics decreases with age, suggesting that indeed frail

190 or ill individuals usually do not compete anymore. To clarify this point in more detail, we compared

191 the performance at age 80 of athletes who still participated at age 85 to those who discontinued

192 master athletics competitions and found no difference in their performance at 80 years. This thus

193 indicates that performance selection does not introduce bias in the accelerated decline we observed

194 in our 80+-year-old athletes. Further evidence supporting the decline is real, is reflected by the

195 similar coefficient of inter-individual variation in performance up to the age of 90 years and the
196 similar rate of decline in the longitudinal data on shot putters.

197 Reasons for an accelerated performance decline at very high age have not been clearly identified
198 by research. A “fading integrative physiological capacity“ was suggested by Lazarus and
199 Harridge⁹, and other authors indicated that a stochastic process, as seen in the accumulation of
200 DNA damage²⁹ is to be expected to deliver an accelerated decline in old age³⁰.

201

202 **The onset of an accelerated decline**

203 Our data set combined with our previous data set¹ allowed us to calculate the age at which the
204 accelerated decline occurred. Data suggest that shot put (71.6 years) was the discipline with the
205 latest, and discus throw (55.2 years) the earliest onset of accelerated decline. The early onset in
206 discus throw is certainly affected by an apparently steady performance in earlier years, caused by
207 the extensive declines in the weight of the discus with age. All disciplines require muscle power,
208 and the decrease in power with age seems to be a key factor in the decline in performance in master
209 athletes¹⁵. To a limited extent also changes in technique contribute, as we have shown in javelin
210 throwers². Another factor might be that some disciplines are more injury-prone than others³¹. A
211 factor opposing the accelerated decline and potentially making it appear less intense than it really
212 is, is the fact that athletes on average got better over the last decades. Schneider et al.²² showed a
213 minor effect of the calendar year on speed in sprinting and running disciplines. Kundert et al.²⁰
214 showed the same for jumping and throwing events by analysing performance in the World Masters'
215 Athletic Championships 1975-2016.

216

217 **Decreased variability from age 90 years**

218 The similar variation in muscle mass between young adults and older people³² suggests that the
219 rate of muscle ageing does not differ much between individuals at population level. Similarly, we
220 found that the variation in performance of master athletes was relatively constant up to the age of
221 90 years, but decreased to almost half the original variation in participants older than 90 years. The
222 cause of this decline in variation could, in contrast to the absence of selection between 80 and 85
223 years, be a selection of athletes with the healthiest physiology who can continue in sports until that
224 high age. In fact, only 1 out of 22 athletes competing at the age of 80 was still competing at the age
225 of 90 years. These survivors deserve further study as they may reveal some factors contributing to
226 their longevity and excellent performance into old age.

227

228 **Differences between disciplines**

229 In the present study, we found the steepest slope in percent performance decline per year in the
230 sprint disciplines. This is a remarkable difference to the younger master athletes¹, where javelin
231 throw and 400 m (women), and in pole vault and 800 m (men) showed the steepest declines. This
232 finding indicates that the ability to sprint or run in particular is a very crucial limiting factor in
233 athletic performance at high age and should be given specific priority in the attempt to counteract
234 performance declines at high age.

235

236 **Sex aspects**

237 Ten times more men participated in track and field competitions than women, even though life
238 expectancy of women exceeds that of men. Reasons for the lower participation of women may be
239 related to traditional role models in the generation born in the 1930's and 1940's³³. This influence
240 of role model is also reflected by the relatively late introduction of organised female athletic
241 competitions. For instance, the first women were allowed at the Olympic Summer Games in 1928

242 and other disciplines were opened for women much later: long jump, 200m and shot put in 1948,
243 400m in 1964, 5000m in 1996 and pole vault as late as 2000.

244

245 **Practical applications**

246 The present data give an indication of which performance declines to expect in the healthiest oldest-
247 old. This is relevant in many fields, be it for the older people and athletes themselves, in
248 rehabilitation, for decision makers, for the design of infrastructure, or for insurance companies.
249 Most people are not aware of rates of performance decline with age, and this knowledge could help
250 them plan their lives better and clarify expectations. On a practical level, as the decline rates are
251 steepest in the sprints, we recommend older people to put an emphasis on trying to keep their ability
252 to sprint or at least run, and to include sprinting in their regular exercise sessions. For the general
253 population and/or athletes that intend to finish their sports career, it seems recommendable to
254 include especially running and if possible, sprinting in their exercise routine.

255

256 **Strengths and weaknesses**

257 The major strength of the study is the exceptionally large amount of data of athletes older than 80
258 years. It is the first study to analyse such a larger number of the oldest-old athletes. A weakness is
259 that the majority of the data are cross-sectional, but longitudinal data from a substantial number of
260 older athletes followed the same pattern as the cross-sectional observations. In addition, we do not
261 have data on medical history or training volumes. Due to the anonymized analysis, we are not able
262 to name the total number of athletes included in the study, just the number of results. We also
263 cannot provide information on the reasons for the individuals to stop competing at the end of their
264 active competitive career, which would be desirable to have. It would also be good to see

265 longitudinal data of individual athletes spanning 30 years and more partnered with information on
266 injuries and other life events to evaluate the actual aging effects on the individual participant.

267

268 **CONCLUSIONS**

269

270 Our study is the biggest dataset of athletes 80 years and older ever published, and it gives new
271 insights into the rate of decline in performance and abilities of the oldest-old athletes. Performance
272 declines accelerated around the age of 70 years and this accelerated decline is not underestimated
273 by drop out of the poorest performers after the age of 80 years. The performance decline was more
274 than three times as steep in athletes ≥ 80 compared to athletes 30-69 years. However, the lower
275 inter-individual variability in performance after the age of 90 years might be related to the selection
276 of the toughest in the very oldest-old.

277

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279

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