

Age does matter: Why is being the baby in an age group an advantage?

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Introduction

I've been involved with master's sport for 28 years now. I'm also very competitive. If I'm going to train hard for an event I like to do well. This means *looking for every advantage* I can get. *Being the baby in a 5-year age group* has always been seen by me to be one of those advantages. But is it? Here is some Australian research by Dr Nikola Medic from Edith Cowan University *suggesting five reasons why masters swimmers perceive being in the first year of an age group is an advantage* when it comes to winning medals at state, national and international meets.

The Research

Nikola conducted a survey of 338 (154 men, 184 women) masters swimmers at the 2008 FINA World Masters Swim Championships. The average age was 55.3 years with the range of swimmers being 35-93 years. 70 swimmers were in year 1 of their age group, 76 in year 2, 70 in year 3, 59 in year 4, and 63 in year 5. *22 questions related to perceived advantages associated with being in the first versus the fifth years of an age group* were asked (eg. If I were in the first year of a 5-year age category, my enjoyment at competitions compared to if I were in the final year would be ...). Each response was randomly ordered and coded on a 5-point Likert scale as: 'much lower' (-2); 'a little lower' (-1); 'same' (0); 'a little higher' (1); 'much higher' (2).

The Results

Five factors were identified as important for preparation, attendance, and success at masters competitions. These were:

1. awareness of the advantages of being younger in an age group
2. expectancy to perform better when younger in age group
3. motivation to enter and compete at major meets when younger in age group
4. training longer, harder and more often when younger in age group
5. physiological capacity is greater when younger in age group

So What?

The relative age effect refers to the overall difference in age between people within an age group that may result in differences in performance and participation. Previous research has shown both *increased participation numbers and a performance advantage of being in the first year of a five-year group* in both masters swimming and track and field. The participation increase is greatest in males compared to females and gets stronger with age. Must be that testosterone! The research presented in this study provides *evidence that both physical (training and physiological capacity – cardiovascular endurance, speed and power) and psychological factors (expect to do well, motivation to do well) influence participation and give a performance advantage to the youngsters in an age group. Training smarter and harder can help reduce this relative age effect.* At the risk of pushing my [book \(The Masters Athlete\)](#) too hard, it contains many secrets as to the ways sport science suggests we older athletes can reduce the rate of decline in performance as we age. It would also make a great Xmas present.

Source: Medic, N., Young, B. and Grove, J. (2013). *Perceptions of five-year competitive categories: model of how relative age influences competitiveness in masters sport. Journal of Sports Science and Medicine, 12: 724-729.*