

## Seven Deadly Mistakes Made by Masters Athletes

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Both bitter experience and published research have both shown us that older athlete's physiology declines with age. It's also shown us that we take longer to recover. My years as a competitive athlete and sport scientist (that appears a dirty word at present!) have shown me that masters athletes need to 'listen to their bodies', train smart and use the 'principles of training' as their guide, train hard but recover harder, and cut back on training when the stress of life, family and work get on top.

Forty five years of competing at state, national and international level have taught me many lessons. The last 25 of these years have been in competitive masters sport and been associated with a PhD on 'lifetime athletes' and ongoing research on masters athletes. Based on this experience and knowledge, below is what I see as the 7 most common training mistakes older athletes make, especially for those masters athletes coming back into competitive sport after many years away.

1. **Believing body and mind are still 20.** There is no doubt about it - older athlete's minds are still young. However, our bodies are aging. Research has shown us that as we age, muscle mass drops and the heart doesn't beat as fast. Thus speed and endurance, in general, decrease with age. Research has also shown us that our ability to recover from hard training decreases and that for genetic or lifestyle reasons our chronic disease risk factors can catch up with us. These factors mean we need to start training more cautiously and slowly and recover longer and smarter between training sessions. Not go like a 'bull at a gate' as we used to.
2. **Not using the principles of training.** If there is one lesson I have learnt over the years, it's how important the principle of 'progressive overload' is. Too many older athletes, particularly those new to sport or not having trained for years, train too hard, too long or too often. Tiredness, overtraining, burnout and injuries are usually the result. The key? Progressively increase how long, how often and how hard we train, and in that order. [The Masters Athlete](#) has a whole chapter on these training principles.
3. **Not listening to your body.** You know when you are tired, when a joint or muscle 'niggle' may mean trouble coming, when your training performance is poor, when the throat starts to croak, when you are 'short' with family and friends. These are signs that you need to rest, recover harder, change your training habits. If not, you'll pay the price. At the risk of pushing my book too hard, Chapters 13 and 14 of [The Masters Athlete](#) has chapters totally devoted to preventing overtraining and staying healthy and illness-free. Real world strategies based on science and experience!
4. **Not training hard enough.** I am a huge believer that performance-focused masters athletes need to train with intensity. While I appreciate not every masters athlete wants to win a medal, most of us want to perform at our best on competition day. Research on athletes young and old, female and male, sprinters or endurance, black or white, has always shown the same thing - intensity (how hard we train) is the key. However, intensity also brings with it tiredness, fatigue and an increased risk of injury. Prepare the body well for the hard work by developing a good base, getting the muscles and joints strong and then progressively building the intensity.
5. **Not recovering hard enough.** I have a saying: "train hard but recover harder". For older athletes this is particularly the case. Research and experience has shown me that our muscles don't bounce back like they used to. This means not only taking longer between quality (hard or long) sessions but also being very, very focused on the recovery strategies science has shown work – active recovery, compression garments, hot-cold contrast

baths/showers, food and fluids, ice (water), pool work, massage, spas and stretching. Chapter 15 of [The Masters Athlete](#) covers these strategies in depth and detail.

6. **Cutting back during times of stress.** Most of us have family and work commitments. I have two (great!) teenage daughters and a patient wife. I have a stressful job (9 postgrads now doing masters athlete research!) and community service obligations (netball coaching and conditioning). All these factors have time demands and thus stress demands. I've learnt over the years what the stress research has said for years – that the stress response of exercise and life are the same. Thus, during times of psychological stress, cut back on the intensity, duration or frequency of training and, from my experience, in that priority order!
7. **Not training smart.** I see way too many of my masters swimming, cycling or triathlon mates who do what every else is doing. Training with much younger people, or following the pack. As we age our physiologies, our health, our ability to recover, and our fitness all change. While it's great to train and be pushed in groups, there are times when we need to 'do our own thing' and that thing is what our own bodies are telling us, not our minds!

*Peter Reaburn is an Associate Professor in exercise and sport science at CQUniversity. He was the founder of Miami Masters in Queensland, Chair of the 1990 National Swim Organising Committee, spent two years as State President of AUSSI Queensland and 10 years on the National Coaching Panel. He has won national distance swimming championships and was world-ranked in 1500m freestyle as a younger master swimmer. He still swims open water and was winner of the Australian Ironman Triathlon (50-54 years) in 2005. He has recently written the definitive book for masters athletes titled *The Masters Athlete* now in its second reprint and available hardcopy or in pdf format with individual chapters also available in pdf at: [www.mastersathlete.com.au](http://www.mastersathlete.com.au).*