"Getting Back to You": A Multiple-Case Study of Sport Re-engagement in 'Rekindler' Masters Athletes

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Abstract

Lifelong sport participation is often non-linear, characterized by periods of engagement, lapses, and potential re-engagement later in life. We may learn from rekindler Masters athletes (MAs), who regularly exceed physical activity recommendations after re-engaging in sport following a prolonged lapse. We explored the facilitators, barriers, and strategies rekindlers used to successfully re-engage in sport. Eleven MAs (9F, 2M; M_{age} = 52.18) created timelines and participated in semi-structured interviews depicting their lapse and re-engagement. Using reflexive thematic analysis, we found that MAs had extensive sport participation in their youth and experienced a lapse. Upon re-engaging, MAs relied upon strategies (i.e., researching the program, setting goals, scheduling, social strategies) and facilitators (i.e., participatory motives, social structures and support, external structures) to overcome barriers to participation. Our results highlight the complexities of sport re-engagement and may help individuals return to sport and physical activity in adulthood.

Keywords: adult sport; active aging; physical activity; qualitative research

Résumé

La pratique sportive tout au long de la vie est souvent non linéaire, caractérisée par des périodes d'engagement, des interruptions et un réengagement potentiel plus tard dans la vie. Nous pouvons tirer des enseignements de l'expérience des athlètes Masters (AM) qui renouent avec le sport après une longue interruption et dépassent régulièrement les recommandations en matière d'activité physique. Nous avons exploré les facteurs facilitants, les obstacles et les stratégies utilisés par les athlètes qui se remettent au sport pour réussir leur réengagement. Onze AM (9F, 2H ; âge moyen = 52,18) ont créé des chronologies et participé à des entretiens semi-structurés décrivant leur interruption et leur réengagement. Grâce à une analyse thématique réflexive, nous avons constaté que les AM avaient pratiqué un sport intensif dans leur jeunesse et avaient connu une interruption. Lors de leur réengagement, les AM se sont appuyés sur des stratégies (recherche du programme, définition d'objectifs, planification, stratégies sociales) et sur des facteurs facilitants (motivations participatives, structures et soutien sociaux, structures externes) pour surmonter les obstacles à la participation. Nos résultats mettent en lumière la complexité de la reprise du sport et pourraient aider les individus à reprendre le sport et l'activité physique à l'âge adulte.

Mots-clés: sport chez les adultes; vieillissement actif; activité physique; recherche qualitative

Acknowledgments

Introduction

Early models of long-term athlete development in Canada (Athletics Canada, 2015; Sport for Life, 2017) describe a mostly linear sport engagement pathway that starts in youth and is endured across the lifespan. Notably, these frameworks do not account for individuals who disengage from sport and later seek to re-engage. The most recent long-term development model (Sport for Life, 2019), along with contemporary lifespan models, such as those from Eime et al. (2022) and Baker et al. (2023), have better captured the fluid nature of adult sport participation.

Eime and colleagues' (2022) Sport Participation Pathway Model highlights the fluidity of sport participation at different levels from preschool age to 20+ years of age by identifying how people may transition to different levels of participation as they get older. One interesting inclusion in this model is how individuals can re-engage with sport after dropping out and return to the sporting pathway (Eime et al., 2022). In a similar vein, Baker and colleagues' (2023) proposed model illustrates how sport participation can occur in early childhood, adolescence, adulthood, and older adulthood. In this model, individuals can participate in both recreational and/or competitive sport, while also being able to switch between the two sport streams within and between developmental stages. Similarly to Eime et al. (2022), this model also depicts how athletes may disengage and re-engage with sport in a later developmental stage. Given that contemporary sport models now highlight sport re-engagement, it is essential to understand how athletes successfully navigate this return to sport. As such, the aim of this study is to explore the facilitators, barriers, and strategies that characterize the sport re-engagement process.

Masters athletes (MAs) are a prime demographic for studying sport re-engagement because they adhere to high levels of sport involvement through adulthood (Young, 2011). MAs are typically over 35 years old, formally registered in a Masters team, club or event, and regularly train to prepare for competition (Young, 2011). Of note, Dionigi (2015) identified three trajectories in MA populations that lead to sustained sport participation. Many MAs are *sport continuers*, whose sport participation is characterized by extensive participation in their youth which is maintained across the lifespan and into Masters sport. Others may be *late bloomers*, individuals who had limited participation in sport until they began participating as a MA. For this study, we are interested in the third trajectory, *rekindlers*, because their sport experience is characterized by participation in sport in their youth, a significant lapse in participation (often due to competing responsibilities), and a successful re-engagement in organized sport later in life (i.e., have overcome significant lapses).

Rekindlers represent a significant portion of the MA population. A survey for United States Masters Swimming by Daughtrey et al. (2011) reported that 81.6% of their participants experienced a lapse of at least six years before re-engaging with Masters swimming. To date, research has explored the sport trajectory of rekindlers (Dionigi, 2015), the reasons behind their lapses (Larson et al., 2018), and their motivations for re-engaging (Larson et al., 2021). However, we have limited understanding of *how* rekindlers re-engage with sport. Learning from successful re-engagers may help inform others on how to re-engage in sport and physical activity following major life events and unforeseen circumstances, which could help lead to physical and psychological benefits (Warburton et al., 2006) and reduced long-term healthcare costs associated with inactivity. As such, we aimed to learn about the facilitators, barriers, and strategies that characterize the sport re-engagement process for MAs. The research question that guided our study was: What are the facilitators, barriers, and strategies of successful sport re-engagers (i.e., rekindler MAs) following an extended lapse in sport participation?

Methods

A multiple-case study was employed (Yin, 2018) to gain an in-depth understanding of a social phenomenon (i.e., sport re-engagement) while recognising that the boundary between the phenomenon and the context cannot be separated in real world experiences. Multiple-case study designs are useful because they highlight the similarities and differences across cases to enhance the understanding of what is unique within each individual case (Yin, 2018). For this study, a multiple-case study was utilized as it allowed us to determine the various contextual factors that influenced individuals' lapses and re-engagement with sport, while also providing us with the opportunity to explore similarities (and differences) in re-engagement across cases. Given the variability in MAs' history of re-engagement in previous studies (e.g., Dionigi, 2015), a multiple-case study design was deemed to be suitable because it allowed us to identify common factors across cases while retaining participants' uniqueness.

A critical realist perspective was used for this study (Bhaskar, 2008) to explore and explain causal mechanisms and structures that have facilitated or hindered the re-engagement process for MAs after a prolonged lapse. Critical realism's stratified ontology, the *real*, *actual*, and *empirical* (Bhaskar, 2008), provides the necessary framework to explain and explore the process of re-engaging in adult sport. The *real* refers to all underlying "material, psychological and social objects and structures, with associated causal powers and liabilities" (North, 2013, p. 3) which could influence MAs' sport re-engagement. In this study, the *real* could include underlying factors that allow re-engagement to take place, such as athletes' physiology, sport facilities, sport leagues/clubs, and the societal norms. These causal forces exist whether or not an athlete recognizes and experiences them. Next, the *actual* are events that occur because of the activation of causal forces (i.e., the real) under contingent conditions (e.g., personal circumstances, interactions, timing) and occur whether or not they are observed by researchers (Bhaskar, 2008; North, 2017). In this study, the *actual* encompasses MAs' experiences of re-engaging in sport, such as the experiences of joining a new team, developing physical fitness, interacting with new teammates, or experiencing an injury. The *empirical* is the observed and measurable events and experiences of MAs' sport re-engagement (Bhaskar, 2008; North, 2017) represented by the *empirical* timeline and interview data about MAs' *actual* experiences re-engaging in sport following a prolonged lapse. The themes from the interview data were then interpreted through our critical realist paradigm to infer *real* mechanisms and structures enabling and constraining sport re-engagement.

Participants

University research ethics board approval was obtained from the fourth author's institution. Afterwards, Canadian Masters swim or track and field teams/clubs were identified via an online search. Clubs that were close in proximity to the researchers' host institutions were prioritized and contacted via email and provided with a recruitment poster to invite their athletes to participate in the study. Swimming and track and field were selected as they represent two of the more popular Masters sports (Young et al., 2015). All prospective participants completed a demographic questionnaire, and responses were screened for inclusion criteria: a) ten or more years of regular sport participation in their youth; b) a significant lapse of two or more years in their participation in organized sport; and c) a successful re-engagement into organized sport represented by five or more years of organized sport post-lapse. A significant lapse was classified as two or more years

as it is a similar timeframe that is used in sport dropout research (Moulds et al., 2024). In total, 11 MAs (9F, 2M) aged 41 to 70 ($M = 52.18$) participated in the study. Table 1 shows participants' pseudonyms and self-identified demographic information.

Data Collection

Data were collected through timelining and remote semi-structured interviews. Timelining involved visually representing events related to sport re-engagement in a chronological order (Sheridan et al., 2011), which provided participants with agency and insights into their experiences but also facilitated discussion between the researcher and participant. Participants were mailed timelining instructions, pens, highlighters, and grid paper. On the timelines, participants identified when they stopped participating in organized sport and successfully re-engaged (i.e., first competitions after re-engaging). They chronologically placed any research, interactions, strategies, barriers, and/or support that influenced their re-engagement (for an example timeline, see Figure 1). The timelines also supplemented the interviews, as participants were instructed to have it present during their interview. This provided them with the opportunity to review it prior to answering questions, and they were asked to re-visit it at the end of the interview to ensure everything was discussed (Sheridan et al., 2011).

Semi-structured open-ended interviews were conducted through ©Zoom and ™Microsoft Teams. Interviews are useful to explore participants' perceptions, experiences, and attitudes around a particular subject (Harvey-Jordan & Long, 2001). While the interview guide allowed interviews to remain within the scope of the subject (i.e., sport re-engagement), open-ended questions added depth and context (see Appendix A for the interview guide). Prior to data collection, the first and second authors conducted pilot interviews, while the fourth author provided feedback on the interview techniques and guide. This led to some questions being re-phrased and moved within the interview guide. This process allowed the first and second authors (early career researchers) to practice the interview process (e.g., probing and note taking).

The interviews averaged 88 minutes in length (range: 45 to 123 minutes). MAs first answered questions regarding their athletic history pre-lapse. Next, they were asked about their lapse(s) from sport (e.g., why it occurred and how long they lasted). The majority of the interview was focused on why the participant returned to organized sport, their expectations and feelings when they re-engaged, and whether they participated in any sport during their lapse to prepare themselves. Further, participants were asked about barriers, as well as any strategies and facilitators for their re-engagement. The first and second author conducted six and five interviews, respectively.

Data Analysis

Interviews were transcribed verbatim and imported into ©NVivo 14. The first and second authors followed Braun and Clarke's (2022) phases of reflexive thematic analysis. They familiarized themselves with the data by reading the transcripts and listening to the interviews. Next, they coded the transcripts, using latent and semantic coding to capture the complexity of MAs' re-engagement history - semantic coding captured explicit meanings and patterns in the data, and latent coding allowed for implicit patterns and meanings to be uncovered. The two authors continuously compared codes to ensure consistency through all transcripts. Next, codes were grouped based on similarity, which served as the subthemes. During the ongoing communications, the authors reviewed the subthemes alongside the transcripts to ensure they were accurate to the data. The pair had back-and-forth discussions to make sense of the data, reflect on code

distinctions, identify patterns of meaning, and agree on the central ideas to create subthemes. This reflexive process helped generate and label 30 themes. The 30 themes were then organized into six overarching themes surrounding the different phases of the sport re-engagement process that the MAs discussed.

Methodological Rigor

A criteriological approach to trustworthiness was used at various points of the study, whereby *credibility, dependability, transferability,* and *confirmability* were used to ensure the quality of the study (Burke, 2017). To make sure the interpretations of the data credibly reflected the experiences of the participants, member checking was incorporated to ensure participants had the opportunity to review and adjust their transcript prior to analysis. To further establish credibility, our study used methodological triangulation by combining timelining and interviews to gain multiple perspectives to answer the research question. Dependability for this study was established by outlining the rigorous research process in detail and providing a rationale for each stage. Transferability was achieved by providing a 'thick description' of how and where we recruited athletes who were at different stages of adulthood, suggesting broader applicability to other adult athletes from other sports or activities. For confirmability, regular meetings between the first and second authors occurred to review similarity and consistency between transcripts, codes, and themes with the third and fourth authors acting as critical friends. This was done to ensure that the findings were data driven.

Table 1

Participants' Pseudonyms and Demographic Information

Pseudonym	Age	Race	Gender	Marital Status	Income (CAD)	Education	Sport	Competition Level	Hours/Week in Sport	Lapse Length (Years)
Kate	61	White	F	Married	80-99k	Masters	Swimming	Provincial	5	5
Jack	53	White	M	Divorced	100-119k	College	Track & Field (Sprints)	Provincial	6	14
Claire	60	White	F	Married	100-119k	Masters	Swimming	Provincial	2	30
Shannon	50	White	F	Married	>120k	Bachelors	Swimming	National	14	22
Penny	43	First Nations	F	Married	60-79k	Bachelors	Swimming	Provincial	3	10
Juliet	45	White	F	Married	40-59k	Masters	Swimming	Provincial	3	3
Danielle	70	White	F	Married	>120k	Bachelors	Track & Field (Throws)	International	12	10
Alex	41	White	F	Single	100-119k	Masters	Swimming	National	5	8
Ana	42	Asian	F	Single	80-99k	Masters	Swimming	Provincial	3	10 & 5*
John	44	White	M	Married	>120k	Bachelors	Swimming	Regional	6	20
Rose	65	White	F	Married	60-79k	Doctorate	Swimming	Regional	4	40

*This participant had two lapses in sport participation.

Figure 1
Participant Timeline Example
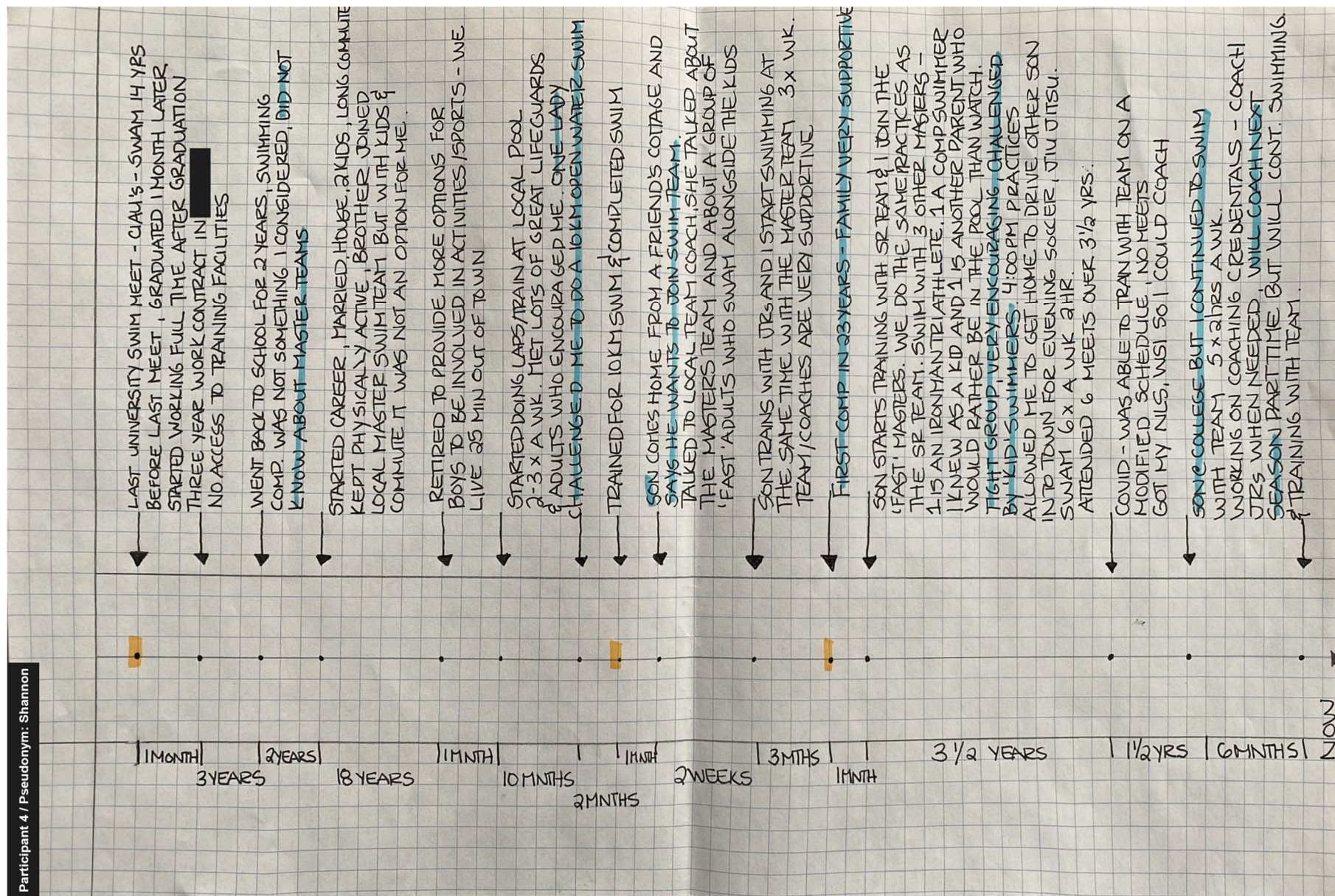
Results

We present our results through distinct phases of the re-engagement process based on MAs' experiences starting with their early sport participation and their lapses. Afterwards, re-engagement is described in four main sections: Strategies for Sport Re-engagement, Facilitators for Sport Re-Engagement, Thoughts and Feelings During Sport Re-engagement, and Barriers to Sport Re-engagement.

Early Sport Participation and Lapse

All MAs had extensive youth sport histories (ranging from 3 to 40 years), where many participated in multiple sports throughout the year. Immediate family fostered early participation, and organized sport was an obligation for many. Family support for early sport involvement occurred through financial, tangible (e.g., equipment) and/or emotional means. Sport was also a venue for social interaction, where friendships and identities were developed.

Each MA experienced a significant lapse prior to re-engaging in adulthood, mostly in their 20s or 30s as other priorities (e.g., education, work, family) required more resources (e.g., time, energy). Some MAs relocated to different regions, making it difficult to participate because they lacked connections or awareness of sport opportunities. Others burnt out from youth sport and needed to step away. Injury caused other lapses due to extensive recoveries or the inability to do familiar sport activities. Notably, some MAs stayed active during their lapse through non-organized activities such as running or walking, while others stayed involved in sport in other capacities including coaching, administrative positions, or supporting their children's sport.

Strategies for Sport Re-Engagement

Re-engagement strategies denote specific actions or behaviours within the MAs' autonomous control that enabled them to re-engage with sport. MAs used several strategies to re-engage.

Research for Re-engagement

All MAs did research before re-engaging in sport. Some connected with friends or others in the community to ask about joining sport, while others were already familiar with clubs from their children's sport. Claire said her re-engagement was smoother because she was familiar with the coach, "He was my son's coach…. I knew the facility and the team. It wasn't completely new." Most MAs did not have pre-established connections and researched online for information via team/club websites, and reached out via email to ask questions. Juliet was invited to participate in her training group but noted the importance of seeking information online related to her injury and finances, "I did that before I even registered because there was no way I was going to register and waste my money on something that was just going to further my injury."

Through their research, some MAs identified that teams in their area offered trial practices. Three athletes used trial practices to evaluate the team environment and learn whether it fit their routine. Ana said, "I reached out and I said, 'Hey, can I just come check it out and see what the practice is like?'" The trial practice helped her understand that practices were not going to be as intense as she thought, and she thoroughly enjoyed attending. Additionally, some MAs sought preliminary training, as they knew the transition back into sport would be difficult.

MAs researched club fees, accessibility, hours, and social gatherings. Ana expressed how flexible schedules were important, and how she prioritized her sport involvement when picking where to live, "I actually decided what part of the city to live in based on the swim team." Others

like Jack sought information about the social aspects of the team, "[The email] was 'Do you guys have a beer after the game?"'" Overall, athletes' research informed the early stages of re-engagement based on their individual preferences and needs.

Setting and Monitoring Goals and Expectations

When re-engaging, MAs set initial expectations and goals for themselves, which were easily attainable at first. Kate described "just wanting to finish" her first race and Penny wanted to be consistent at practice and to feel comfortable in her first competition. For Juliet, staying in the water for one practice was her first goal, "the first time I got in for 20 minutes and then I was done. I felt accomplished because I had gotten in there after being out for two years."

For others, goals revolved around physical, mental, or social health. Jack described his struggles when he first re-engaged and how he persevered to reach healthy fitness levels, "They talk about a wall. Well, that's still there, it was still the understanding of 'you've just reached the warning label, you can actually continue and you're not going to die.'" MAs' expectations of physical fitness needed to be tempered when returning to sport because of their lengthy lapses. For instance, Penny discussed how her coaches eased newcomers into her club, "[The coaches] tell you to do as much as you can and then stop, like nobody's going to come after 10 years off and be able to swim like 2500 meters, it's just not realistic."

Once initial goals and expectations were realized, MAs gradually adjusted their goals and expectations. Goals surrounding finishing practices and events were replaced with goals about commitment, personal bests, and self-improvement. For instance, Ana always sought to improve performance times. Rose excitedly spoke about how goals surrounding learning and improving swimming techniques brought her enjoyment when she re-engaged, "I think I'm the most improved swimmer … It's fun! I like technique learning!" Other MAs' goals were based on Masters sport records, as specified by Danielle, "There were provincial records for all Masters track and field events by age group and gender. I printed them out and went 'OK there's my goals, those records will have my name on them eventually.'" Importantly, goals and expectations were set and adapted along the way, with MAs noting that setting manageable expectations was a key strategy to sport re-engagement.

Scheduling

All rekindlers used scheduling as a strategy for re-engaging. MAs said scheduling time for sport was about life balance and finding times where sport fit their schedules. To do so, several MAs gave up other activities or shifted other priorities, such as work and hobbies. Jack gave up his long-time board game group because he started to have practices on Fridays, but he was enthusiastic about this because he found a new group *and* had time for sport, "I changed groups of friends to one that play [board games] on a different night!" Other MAs were able to adjust their work schedules to account for their new activities.

MAs also 'protected sport' by prioritising practice dates and times. John said firmly, "I won't accept anything that conflicts with [practices]. If there's conflict, it has to be a significant event for me to prioritize it over going swimming." Similarly, Danielle felt it was better to give up other activities now, as she may not be able to compete in track later, "You have to give up something to be good at something else sometimes. I can golf when I'm 80 or 90, [but] maybe I can't do throws. Now is the time to do throws."

Social Strategies

MAs used social aspects of sport to support re-engagement. Many were socially oriented and used sport as their social outlet. Other MAs used sport to form social identities. For example, Penny became more involved with her club by participating in social events and volunteering, and Shannon sought out her team members to learn the team lingo. Rose described how her identity as a youth swimmer helped her form her identity as a club member and as a Masters swimmer, "I used to wear a shirt from my youth swim team until it was a rag, now I wear my Masters swim club shirt and hoodie with pride … I was always a swimmer, now I'm a Masters swimmer." MAs also used others to stay accountable. Alex noted, "if I have a training partner or a team that notices an absence, that's always been motivating… I can't cancel or I'm going to get [expletive] if I don't show up."

Some MAs noted the importance of role modelling. Rose found inspiration in older swimmers, and recounted how a 99-year-old swimmer got a standing ovation after setting an age group record, "Masters sport promotes the idea of doing the best as you can. If you're wet, you're a winner because you're there." Others acted as a role model to other MAs or youth athletes in their clubs. Jack noted enthusiastically, "people come up to me after and ask, 'How old are you? You're older than my dad and outrun me.'"

Other Strategies

MAs listed other unique strategies such as investing in equipment and facilities. Danielle and her spouse opted to purchase their own equipment so they could practice at home. While this was not an option for all athletes, such as the swimmers, Rose said that simply investing in quality gear was important, "Invest in good gear - for example, prescription goggles allow me to read the digital clock when I'm swimming timed intervals."

MAs also considered their abilities and injuries when determining what sport fit their needs. Four athletes had concerns with current and previous injuries upon their return. One athlete chose swimming because it was low impact. Others considered their body's limits given their age and injuries, while also focusing on their bodily awareness. Juliet worried about worsening her injury, "I [was] apprehensive a little bit. I didn't want to further injure myself."

Notably, several rekindlers were reluctant to compete at the beginning of their re-engagement process, attending only practices at first. In summary, MAs used several different strategies to re-engage and stay involved with their sport following a prolonged lapse. Ultimately, these strategies stemmed from their own volition, were unique to their individual experiences and were pivotal for re-engagement.

Facilitators for Sport Re-Engagement

Facilitators included people and/or external structures that assisted or enabled the MAs sport re-engagement. While MAs autonomously re-engaged in sport, there were factors that made re-engagement easier.

Participatory Motives

Athletes had a variety of reasons for re-engaging, but all had some cue that made them want to try sport again. Many were motivated by seeing active friends or family members. For instance, Shannon noted how she got involved in swimming because she had to take her children to swim practice, "I'm not going to sit there behind the glass and watch … if I'm going to be there, let's see how I can incorporate being involved."

Others were motivated by the social outlet that sport would afford them. When asked about why he joined recreational soccer, Jack stated, "I read an article that talked about how soccer was great for older people because it encompassed sport with social aspects." Other MAs were health oriented and decided to re-engage because they were out of shape and often compared their current activity level to when they were younger. Those who had lapsed due to injury attributed their re-engagement to helping with their recovery.

Social Structures and Support

The MAs emphasized the importance of joining a welcoming team and receiving encouragement. Rose shared, "They make sure you know the name of everybody in your lane … that was huge, if they were not welcoming, I would have probably wanted to quit." Jack, who was added to a group chat when he re-engaged, felt this helped him develop a sense of belonging and community, similar to his experiences at work:

> We shared jokes and our community grew to be more friendly. We went for dinner as a group and that's encouraging … In [my profession], we do a community of practice. It's the same here, [sport] is our community in practice.

Another helpful aspect was the coaching staff. Rose noted how the coaches were crucial when she first started, "the coaches are very welcoming. They give me actual coaching tips. I'm actually learning." For Juliet, she appreciated that the coaches provided her with individualized instructions and training modifications that were specific to her injury recovery, which helped manage her anxiety when coming back to sport.

Other social agents (e.g., family, teammates) were also essential for support and encouragement. For example, MAs' decisions to re-engage often occurred when their other responsibilities were more manageable. Claire spoke of how she was able to re-engage when her children were less dependent on her, "'this is perfect, my kids are gone, I can go [swimming], I have time' and that's when I decided. I thought I'll just get in just to swim and do the practices."

Within sport, Ana felt the support she gave and received helped her get through difficult practices, "if a practice is tough, we're all suffering together, or if you do well, we encourage each other." Kate said support from her new teammates allowed her to overcome negative self-talk at first, "Everyone's got that little voice that's like 'oh you're not good enough.' Other people are helpful when they are encouraging and happy to have you."

External Structures

Various work-related factors facilitated MAs' re-engagement. Kate's job provided training facilities, and her co-workers were also physically active, "there were team events with people from your office, so there was a lot of encouragement, and facilities are there." Penny said her work benefits helped her remain committed after re-engaging, "I have a health spending account with money specifically for sporting activities or equipment. One year I bought a bike, and now I pay for my swim membership every year with it." Additionally, the MAs spoke to how their financial situation impacted their sport participation. For instance, Danielle spoke to how her socioeconomic status was important for her re-engagement:

> Financially, we're more well off than a lot of people. Going to meets, you've got to fly or drive, have hotels, register for the meets, and eat when you're there. You can't be poor to do this sport because you have to have money to run around and compete, otherwise you're only going to be competing in your hometown.

Thoughts and Feelings During Sport Re-Engagement

MAs experienced a variety of thoughts and feelings defined as psychological and physical sensations interwoven and embedded throughout the re-engagement process. In the early stages, most MAs felt nervous or anxious. Claire felt like she was in youth sport, "I felt like I was 12 years old again with butterflies in my stomach. I was really nervous." Similar to the nervousness, all MAs expressed degrees of physical fatigue and soreness, but for most, these feelings were indicative of positive change.

For others, they initially felt out of place when re-engaging with sport. Danielle said, "I felt like a fish out of water." Similarly, John stated, "It's like going to a new school in terms of that first day of the first week, you know? Not being super comfortable or knowing who's who or what the social conventions are." However, once the MAs spent more time in sport, the feelings subsided. John continued, "after the first week or two, it felt pretty good."

MAs also discussed the mental benefits of being back in sport, along with general feelings of happiness and excitement: Juliet said, "movement is so important for my mental health"; Claire reflected, "I opened my eyes to how much I enjoy swimming"; and Shannon said "I felt I had a purpose. I felt excited." For Ana, the positive feelings of being back in the pool helped her see past the difficulties of getting back in shape and ultimately boosted her confidence.

The MAs often had mental and physical hurdles and had to remind themselves of their reasons for doing sport. Kate reflected, "I was always fit because of being in sports, but now I'm not in sports anymore, but I'm still competitive and need external motivation." Roberta summarized how motivation and meaning were key for re-engaging with sport after a lapse, "from an adult perspective it's about the love of the sport and you doing well individually, and how important that journey is for you whether it's to B champs or A champs or Olympic trials."

While each rekindler had their own journey, it was clear sport re-engagement allowed MAs to develop a positive sense of self through their renewed sport identity that kept them engaged in life. Shannon said, "this is what I've been missing for the past 25 years. This is where I'm comfortable… And I got it back." Similarly, Jack explained how he re-found his passion, "I'll describe it as a fire … I wouldn't encourage somebody who hates the sport to go back into it, but if you've got that fire, you can rekindle that fire, it doesn't matter the age." For some MAs, their identity was tied into their competitive selves. Penny expressed how she loved the rush of going up against others, "I am a competitive person… that rush of being on the block, people yelling your name, that idea that you're about to jump in the pool and swim really fast and your heart's racing… it's really fun."

Barriers to Sport Re-Engagement

During their re-engagement, MAs had to navigate personal circumstances and/or social structures that were detrimental to the process. Many barriers were related to the considerable time and effort sport occupied within their day-to-day lives. For Kate, the time she needed for childcare was taking away time from leisure activities when she first re-engaged, "Having kids is one of the biggest unengaging parts because there's so much going on. When do you get to do your thing? … my son was in cadets and baseball, so I wasn't able to do as much."

In addition to familial responsibilities, MAs' careers hampered their ability to return to sport. For instance, Alex moved across the country after finishing university and found herself working two jobs, limiting the time she could spend in sport earlier in adulthood. Similarly, Ana "was very much focused on other things like a career."

Other barriers included the additional time commitments required from Masters sport

programs beyond being an athlete. Danielle noted how many Masters clubs in her region required volunteer hours, which was a barrier to her and her husband's participation as they were already heavily involved in their community. Another barrier included living far from training facilities, which made attending training difficult. This was overcome by finding suitable facilities or purchasing their own equipment. Lastly, athletes also discussed how their mindset was a barrier when returning to sport in an organized setting. For Juliet, who was returning following a major injury, she spoke extensively of her feelings of apprehension and worry that she would re-injure herself, "I think for me, something that's holding me back could be myself, right? … 'am I going to injure myself?'"

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore how rekindler MAs re-engaged with organized sport following a significant lapse. Many MAs in this study experienced initial nerves, physical fatigue, and a sense of being out of place when they began re-engaging. However, over time, these feelings were replaced with excitement, mental well-being, and a renewed sense of identity tied to their sport participation. We were interested in the strategies and facilitators that made re-engagement easier, and barriers that made it more difficult.

Gradual and Deliberate Re-engagement

From the beginning, rekindler MAs were deliberate about re-engagement. Several mentioned the research they did (e.g., seeking information from others, online searches, trial practices) and interactions they had (e.g., word of mouth, social invitations) to identify opportunities for re-engagement. The MAs entered Masters sport through the two avenues: *seekership* (i.e., seeking out opportunities to participate), and *solicited recruitment* (i.e., being invited or persuaded to get involved by another individual; Stevenson, 2002). Most entered sport through seekership (Stevenson, 2002), with many rekindlers first engaging in sport outside formal clubs to explore activities before committing. For example, some athletes swam at leisure centres during public swim times, to explore different options without the upfront financial costs. While Stevenson (2002) identified that MAs engage in *seekership,* our results highlight the need for thorough research to find suitable opportunities that will meet MAs' wants and needs. We identified novel strategies like observing a training session and participating in a trial practice, which allowed them to do so.

Some MAs were recruited (Stevenson, 2002) by friends, and our results speak to the importance of social connections. During the re-integration process, many valued participating with loved ones or friends in order to spend quality time with significant others and engage in sport simultaneously (Dionigi et al., 2012; Jenkin et al., 2021). Together, these results suggest that research and social connections are critical for identifying viable engagement opportunities. These findings illustrate how MAs exercised agency to actively navigate and utilize existing informational and social structures in their environment to facilitate sport re-engagement.

Self and Social Regulatory Strategies

MAs used key regulatory strategies to re-engage suggesting the activation of important psychological mechanisms related to self-management and goal pursuit, alongside social mechanisms leveraging group dynamics. Specifically, they set and monitored goals, often not setting competition-based goals until they became accustomed to the environment. They put great effort into attending training sessions or competitions and mitigating interference from other

priorities in life. Additionally, MAs purposefully trained with others to promote accountability to their training sessions. These strategies appear to be helpful for adults as they return to sport following extraneous circumstances and major life events. Importantly, these strategies have also been noted to help MAs maintain their increased sport participation throughout adulthood (Appleby & Dieffenbach, 2016; Makepeace et al., 2021). Therefore, it is likely that employing these strategies can help adults stay in sport in both the short- (i.e., immediately following re-engagement) and long-term.

Facilitators and Barriers

Facilitators and barriers outside of the MAs' control also influenced their re-engagement. Notably, all participants had previous sport experiences that were generally positive in nature, which made the re-engagement process feel more familiar and easier (e.g., knowing rules, norms, training plans). A key finding, highlighting a potential causal mechanism for MAs, was that reclaiming a previous sport identity was essential to MAs' success. MAs described regaining a lost piece of themselves (i.e., their sport identity) that centred on being physically active, sporty, social, and competitive. Within an adult exercise context, Strachan et al. (2017) found that possessing an exercise identity led to individuals to prioritising exercise, participating in purposeful exercise regularly, and extending physical activity to other facets of life. Similarly, Stevenson (2002) found salient personal identities (i.e., athlete or exerciser) and social identities (i.e., team member) fostered deeper connections and prolonged engagement at their clubs. Together, these findings suggest that psychological mechanisms related to identity continuity and self-concept exert significant influence on motives and persistence required for sport re-engagement.

MAs also identified barriers to re-engagement, with many MAs noting childcare as a factor in their lapse and as a barrier to re-engagement. Fortunately, our results offer a more optimistic picture, expanding on research that identified childcare as a barrier during adulthood (Jenkin et al., 2021). By having a timeline and taking a retrospective approach, we were able to identify that MAs successfully re-engaged once structural constraints related to childcare lessened as their children grew older and became more independent, allowing more time for personal leisure pursuits (Dionigi, 2015; Jenkin et al., 2021).

Working multiple jobs or trying to establish themselves in their career was also a barrier. Larson et al. (2018) also found that time conflicts between work and sport were particularly disruptive for rekindlers. However, our retrospective approach allowed us to identify that once MAs' work schedules (i.e., a temporal structure impacting MAs' resource allocation) became more consistent, they were able to find time for a regular sport routine using the self- and social regulatory strategies described earlier. For some MAs, workplace structures facilitated engagement by offering access to facilities or health spending benefits.

Unique to this study was MAs' stress about aggravating previous injuries. While fear of re-injury is also a common barrier for younger individuals (e.g., Kvist et al., 2005), our results were unique in that many MAs were returning to sport years after being injured. In fact, some MAs even changed events or sports to manage their fear, an adaptation to navigate perceived physical liabilities in the context of available sport structures. This suggests that MAs returning post-injury may benefit from individualized training to mitigate the constraining effects of psychological mechanisms like fear-avoidance, and that coaches and clubs should consider how to accommodate MAs who are switching sports due to past injuries or fear of future injuries. While the psychosocial aspects of injury remain understudied in MAs, our findings suggest that re-engaging following an injury may be a longer process for older athletes and may require additional supports than younger populations.

Beyond personal challenges like injury, organizational structures embedded within club policies also influenced re-engagement in sport. One such barrier was the volunteer hours at some Masters clubs. Rathwell and Motz (2021) noted that Masters clubs often require or encourage MAs to serve on the board of directors, support staff, or as a referee/official. While MAs may appreciate the opportunity to volunteer at their club, others viewed sport as personal time and were less enthusiastic about committing additional hours to volunteering (Rathwell & Motz, 2021). For instance, Danielle explained how her and her husband were discouraged by the volunteer hours because they were already heavily involved in community activities. Together these results suggest that clubs should consider the constraining impact of such structural expectations (i.e., mandatory volunteerism) on MAs, especially when dealing with those attempting to re-engage after a prolonged lapse. Such requirements could conflict with MAs' available time resources from other personally fulfilling roles and commitments.

Privileges

The MAs in this study were also privileged in ways that certainly impacted their success through enabling mechanisms linked to resource availability and reduced constraints. Our sample was largely composed of white, highly educated, and affluent individuals, which is consistent with most samples of MAs (e.g., Larson et al., 2021; Motz et al., 2023). Many MAs had high paying jobs that provided the financial freedom to afford Masters sport. Some MAs were also fortunate enough to have jobs that had facilities where they could train, health spending benefits that they could use to cover health-related expenses (e.g., club fees, equipment), and flexible schedules. These observed privileges highlight how broader social structures related to class, education, and employment act as causal structure that shape opportunities unequally. This is important to note, because our findings may only readily apply to other privileged portions of the population seeking to re-engage.

While our findings were derived from a sporting population that tends to be privileged, some strategies are applicable to less privileged populations who are looking to re-engage with sport and physical activity following a lapse. For instance, research is an important aspect of re-engaging where individuals should look for opportunities that best fit their situations. While some MAs were more selective in picking clubs or sports based on attractiveness of facilities and having several opportunities for training, others noted how they often looked at club fees, practice times, and how accessible the facilities were. These research strategies may be well suited for those navigating more significant structural constraints in less privileged situations to determine what clubs are perceived to be accessible based on finances, transportation, and time. Additionally, individuals who participate in non-organized sport/physical activity or trial practices prior to formally re-engaging may be able to re-develop their athletic identities, leading them to signing up and committing in organized sport settings that work best for them.

Limitations

The first limitation of this study was that all MAs were from swimming or track and field; prominent Masters sports that may increase opportunities (e.g., more clubs, facilities, or practice times) for re-engagement. Athletes hoping to re-engage in other sports may face more obstacles due to weather/climate, number of clubs in the region, or longer commute times. Furthermore, track and field and swimming are predominantly individual sports, so while the athletes competed through clubs or teams, this study lacked perspectives from athletes who participated in team sports. Importantly, those participating in task interdependent sport (e.g., soccer, hockey, baseball) may have different factors that influence re-engagement because these sports require the

interaction of team members to achieve the team's goals (Evans et al., 2012). Therefore, future research may want to explore how characteristics of task interdependent sports such as the tactics, positions, and roles on a team may influence re-engagement.

Second, our sample was also solely composed of rekindlers, thus all the MAs had past experiences in organized sports and re-ignited a past athletic identity (Dionigi, 2015). Therefore, our results may not be as applicable to those who do not have previous experiences in sport or have had negative experiences. Further, those competing in adult sport on a more recreational basis may need different strategies due to having less structure and time commitments (e.g., minimal practices, lack of coaches).

Concluding Thoughts

Overall, this study provides insights into the complex interplay of factors influencing how adults can successfully re-engage in sport following a prolonged participatory lapse. The MAs described autonomous strategies and support from different facilitators and barriers (often stemming from underlying social, psychological, or material structures) to re-integrate into organized sport environments that met their wants and needs. Throughout their re-engagements, MAs experienced a myriad of emotions tied to successes and barriers. The evidence generated by this study identified contextual strategies of re-engagement for MAs, which, by acknowledging the likely influence of underlying personal and structural factors, can be practically used by adults who are currently in a lapse from sport and are contemplating returning. For instance, these strategies may prove valuable not only for those returning to sport, but also to other forms of organized physical activity. These strategies may be particularly relevant for those seeking to re-engage in sport or physical activity after lapses caused by major life events or widespread extraneous circumstances.

Beyond the applied value, the findings of this study also offer a detailed look at the re-engagement journey, moving beyond the linear pathways depicted in older athlete development models (Athletics Canada, 2015; Sport for Life 2017). Specifically, these findings provide rich, contextual detail to help illustrate the fluid re-engagement processes that contemporary frameworks now recognize (Baker et al., 2023; Eime et al., 2022). Whether the findings presented in this study apply to contexts beyond re-kindling athletes is yet to be determined.

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Appendix A

Interview Guide

Athletic History
1. Going back to when you were younger, I was wondering if you could discuss the sports or types of physical activity you participated in.
    a. For each:
        i. How often did you participate?
        ii. What level of competition?
        iii. What's the highest level you competed at?
    b. What helped you maintain your participation at this age?
    c. Who supported your participation?
        i. Why do you believe they helped/supported you?
2. Why did you participate in organized sport when you were younger?
    a. Were you interested in sport as a fan or spectator?
3. What importance did sport have in your household as you were growing up?
    a. Was sport participation required in your household?
    b. Were your family or friends involved in organized sport or physical activity?
4. As you got into early adulthood (post-High School, College/University), did you participate in the same activities or sports?
    a. If yes:
        i. How often?
        ii. What level of competition?
    b. If no:
        i. Why did you stop?
        ii. What activities/sports did you switch to?
5. Once you finished competing at the highest level, were you able to stay active?

Lapse in Participation
For the following questions, you are encouraged to use your timeline to help you answer the questions.
In the questionnaire you reported a lapse or interruption of 2 or more years in your sport participation. I just want to remind you that for the purpose of this interview we are not discussing any lapses that were a result of COVID-19 but rather one that happened earlier in your life.
6. When did you experience the lapse?
7. How long did your lapse in participation last?
8. What was the reason(s) behind this lapse?
    a. Why do you believe this/these influenced your ability to participate?
    b. What was your schedule like during this time?
9. How did you feel being away from organized sport/physical activity?
10. During this lapse, did you still try to stay active?
    a. If yes, what did you do?
    b. Was this deliberate so you could eventually re-engage?

Re-engagement with Sport
Now I am going to ask you about your successful return to sport or physical activity.
11. When did you first start thinking about returning to organized sport or physical activity?
    a. What exactly were you thinking about at this time?
12. Why did you choose to re-engage with sport when you did?
    a. What factors drove you to return at the time that you did?
    b. Was this your first attempt at re-engaging?
        i. If not, what did your previous attempts look like?
        ii. Why did you keep attempting to re-engage?
13. What did the process of re-engaging look like?
    a. Did you do any research/looking around for the right sport or program?
    b. What did you look for?
    c. What did you find?
    d. Where did you look?
    e. Did the research help you with your return to sport?
    f. Did you do any solo training/practicing/exercise/PA in preparation for your re-engagement with sport?
14. What were your expectations for yourself when you re-engaged with sport?
    a. What were you hoping to achieve when you returned to sport?
15. Did you return to the same club/team/group that you participated at prior to your lapse?
16. When you returned to sport, what events or sports did you start with?
    a. What made you choose these particular events?
17. How often did you engage with the sport when you first returned (i.e., practice, training, competition)?
18. How did you feel during the first few *training sessions*?
    a. How were you feeling before they started?
    b. How were you feeling after your training/practices?
    c. How did this compare to training before your lapse?
19. How did you feel during the first few *competitions*?
    a. How were you feeling before they started?
    b. How were you feeling after your *competitions*?
    c. How did this compare to competitions before your lapse?
20. Did you use any strategies to make sure that you stayed committed to your training and competitions when you first started to re-engage with your sport(s)?
    a. If so, what were they?
    b. Why do you believe they helped you re-engage with your sport?
21. After you returned, did you adjust your day-to-day schedule to facilitate sport participation?
22. Did anything or anyone make re-engagement in sport/physical activity easier?
    a. What facilitators were influential for you?
    b. Was there anything about your situation that helped you but may not be applicable to others?
    c. Did anyone support your return to sport?
        i. What types of support did you receive from these individuals (emotional, tangible, informational)?
        ii. How do you believe they influenced your re-engagement?

          iii. If you had not received this support, do you think you still would have returned to sport?

23. Did anything or anyone make your re-engagement more difficult?
    a. Why do you think they made your return difficult?
    b. How were you able to manage these barriers?
24. Is there anything about your return that you think was important that we haven't talked about yet?

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