

Baby Boomers Recapture Their Youth on the Playing Field

By Denise Mann

Remember the good old days ... playing high school or college ball with friends, fans, and family cheering as you carry the ball past the 10-yard line, steal home, or sink two foul shots.

For some baby-boomers, such memories are just as likely to have occurred yesterday as they were in the in the 1950s or 1960s. Middle-aged warriors are storming playing fields across the country. Take Dana Marek, a 47-year-old father who enrolled at the University of Massachusetts in Boston in September 1999 and became a full-time member of the men's hockey team there. He dropped out of college in the early 1970s after a year and decided to re-enroll to set an example for his son.

Getting off the couch and exercising more is generally a healthy thing to do. Regular exercise is known to reduce risk for heart disease by raising levels of high-density lipoprotein, or "good," cholesterol and keeping weight down. However, when a middle-aged person decides to get back in the game, he is often not in the same shape he was back in his day.

It's called "boomeritis," a term coined by the American Academy of Orthopaedic Surgeons to describe the increasing number of sports-related injuries among baby boomers -- those 76 million people born from 1946 through 1964. They may be training less, but boomers are still actively participating in sports. The result can be strains, sprains, aches, and pains or even more serious injuries to knees, ankles, and shoulders.

The prevailing thought was that older athletes just competed because they were still kids at heart and could not give up their sports. But baby boomers are still striving for the same maximum performance that they sought in their youth. They are revolutionizing masters athletics just as they did the diaper industry when they were born. The result has been masters athletes winning awards and accolades.

"With the baby boomers came the exercise boom, and for the most part, baby boomers are the population group that are most interested in maintaining their exercise and fitness levels," says Lewis Maharam, MD, a sports medicine specialist in New York and the president of the New York chapter of the American College of Sports Medicine.

Still, "as you get older, your muscles and ligaments get more brittle, and you are more likely to have an Achilles tendon rupture or a muscle pull. But good flexibility training can help to decrease that risk," says Maharam, who is also the medical director for the New York City marathon.

"When you are younger, you can get away without training or stretching to prepare you for play. But as you age, in order to maintain the same fitness level, you have to do stretching and flexibility exercises before play," he tells WebMD.

But, Maharam points out, masters -- or mature, older -- athletes must do just what younger athletes do when they want to get back in the game -- "train and train hard." Maharam authored a review article on factors affecting masters athlete performance for the journal *Sports Medicine*.

"It's like taking a person who runs two miles a day and telling them to run the marathon," says [Jacob D. Rozbruch, MD](#), an attending orthopaedic surgeon at Beth Israel North in New York.

"Most baby boomers have passed the peak of their strength and their agility," he says. "When you are in your 20s and 30s, your body is quite forgiving. Strength is at its maximum, and stiffness is at its least."

"[But] when you hit your 40s and 50s, work is all-consuming, and you tend to slack off a little at keeping fit," he says.

Then comes the midlife crisis, and all of a sudden you want to get competitive again.

"People who have stayed competitive all along have a better chance of avoiding injury, but weekend warriors who don't realize that they have to train to play whatever sport they play or want to play are more likely to sustain an injury," he says.

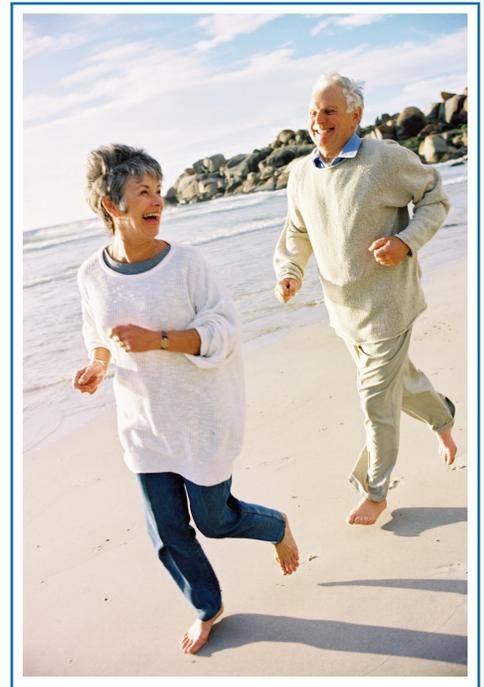
Before transitioning from a couch potato to an athlete, see your doctor for a physical. "The first muscle you should have checked is your heart, and doctors can also check out joints," says [Rozbruch](#).

"Start off slowly, doing less than you think you could or should do," he says. [Rozbruch](#) recommends engaging in some type of an aerobic warm-up routine or any other type of exercise that raises the pulse.

Whatever you do, don't work through pain. "Pain is a communicative tool. It's how your body tells your brain that something is wrong," he says.

Bodies that are not properly conditioned are more prone to injury, says Kaare Kolstaad, MD, an assistant clinical professor of orthopaedics at Baylor College of Medicine in Waco, Texas. His advice:

- Get in shape before playing a sport; don't play a sport to get in shape.
- Lose weight, if necessary, as extra pounds can put extra stress on joints.
- Always warm-up.
- Buy the right equipment for the sport. It may have changed since the last time you played.
- Hydrate and eat properly.



For more information on
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