



New Frontiers

photo: Courtesy of Charlie Barnes

Older Triathletes in Canada Are Smashing Stereotypes and Opening Up New Age Groups

by Theresa Wallace

TRIATHLETES OVER AGE 75 How they keep on tri-ing ↓



Why are some triathletes able to keep training and competing in their senior years while others have had to retire? We talked to some triathletes in this country who are still going strong past their 75th birthdays to see what they have in common. Here's what we learned about them.

→ **They are almost all men.** And most of them live in Ontario or B.C. In Ontario, eight out of 10 provincial triathlon association members aged 75-plus are men. In B.C., all 11 are men. But this is going to change. (See the sidebar on female triathletes.)

→ **They travel light.** Charlie Barnes, who trains in Guelph, Ont., is 5-10 tall and weighs in between 145 and 150 lb. Tony Marriott, who lives north of Hamilton, Ont., is 5-4 and 120 lb. Both have medalled at world championships. In general, older triathletes aren't carrying any extra pounds.

→ **They don't take drugs.** Whatever came first – the almost empty medicine cabinet or the training regime – the 75-plus triathletes we interviewed take nothing stronger than a cholesterol pill, a thyroid pill or maybe a tiny daily blood pressure pill. Most take no pharmaceuticals at all.

→ **They have always excelled at sports – or not.** Victoria's Mike Ellis swims, bikes or runs almost every morning. "Then we spend another hour having coffee," he admits. The 76-year-old has been on the podium in his age group in recent world championships. He also set a new Canadian record in the mile run when he was 15 and kept up the pace, setting another national record in a 50 km ultra race at age 60. On the other hand, Winnipeg's Jim Anderson, who won his age at the national triathlon championships last summer in Toronto with a time of 1:38 for a sprint tri, says he was terrible at sports growing up, and didn't take up running until he was 40.

opposite Charlie Barnes finishes the 2012 Subaru Milton Triathlon in Ontario

above Mike Ellis racing the 2012 Self Transcendence Triathlon at Elk Lake in Victoria

Triathletes and SURVIVORS

Lynda Lemon has medalled in her age group every year for the last five years at the ITU world duathlon championships. She feels lucky to have discovered multisport the same year she was diagnosed with breast cancer. At age 47, Lemon did her first few triathlons in the summer and then had surgery, chemotherapy and radiation beginning that fall. "Training definitely helped keep me strong through it all," the 70-year-old Welland, Ont. resident says.

The Canadian Cancer Society estimates 88 per cent of new cancer cases last year were among Canadians over 50, and 43 per cent were among those over 70. But for older triathletes diagnosed with cancer, there's some consolation.

Victoria's Evan Fagan had prostate cancer in 2011 and took a year off competing but not training. "I did a swim, ride or run every day before my radiation because it helped with the treatment, which really knocks your socks off."

Fagan, 77, advises others to do the same if they can. "It doesn't matter how slow or how far you go. Just get your heart rate up for a bit. Triathlon training can be a big help in sustaining you physically and emotionally through cancer."

right Lynda Lemon

opposite top left Evan Fagan
races the Lavaman Keauhou
in 2013



photo WO Magazine / The Club at White Oaks



→ **They have support.** Their spouses, siblings, children or friends are happy to form a cheering squad, especially at world championships.

→ **They value their physician's advice – but don't always follow it.** While Barnes was training for last year's ITU world championships in London, England, his doctor suggested he was getting older and should take it easy. "I told him I was going to the world championships, and how was I going to get onto the podium if I took it easy?"

Mississauga, Ont.'s Gord Brockie was told by a doctor 25 years ago to quit running for good. Instead, he started taking glucosamine and his knees stopped hurting. He's still running.

Al George of Abbotsford, B.C. says whenever possible older triathletes should have a health care provider who's a kindred spirit. "You need a doctor who understands endurance sports, and who can think further than a hockey stick."

→ **They accept that they're slowing down.** Sport is about the now, and future goals, rather than those long-gone PBs. For example Barnes, 76, says his plan is to bring home gold at the world championships the year he moves to the 80+ age category. "It's kind of scary to think someday I may no longer be able to do triathlons," Barnes admits. "This in itself is another incentive to train hard and do the best I can right now."

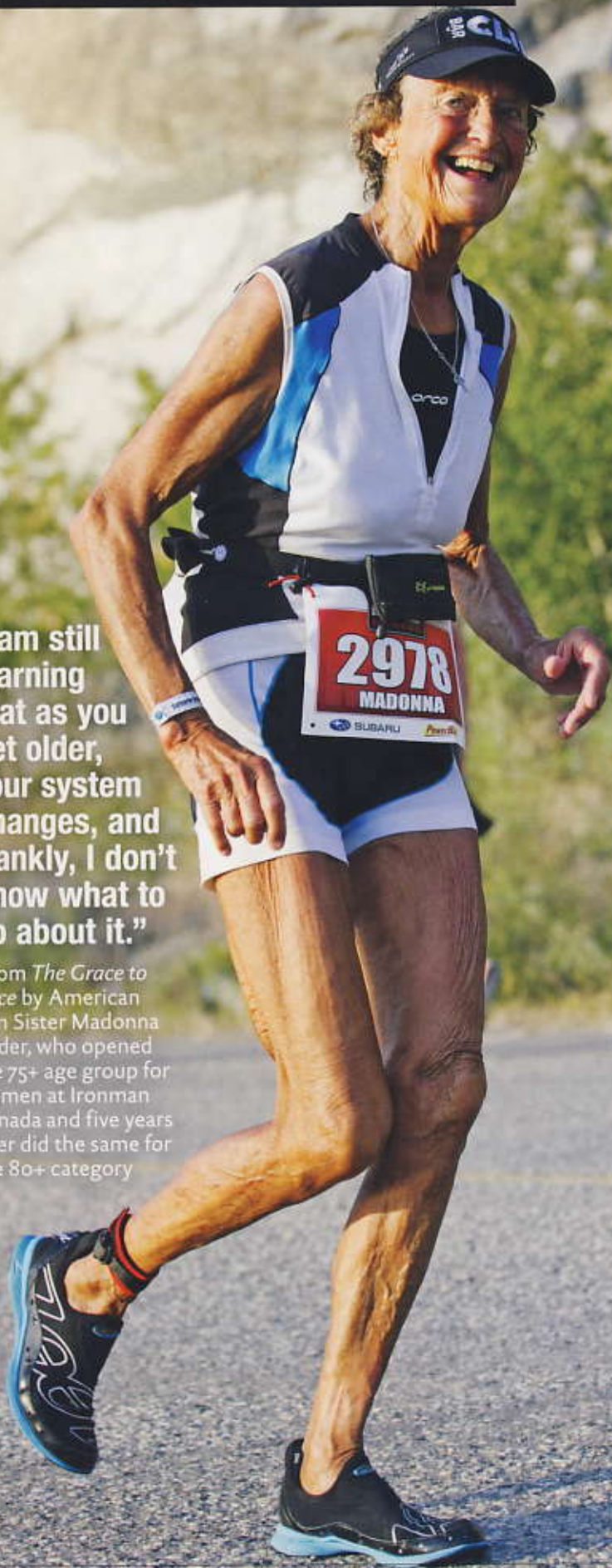


above Tony Marriott with his grandson Matthew Marriott at the 2012 Subaru Guelph Lake Triathlon

left Gord Brockie racing the 2006 Ironman Canada in Penticton, B.C.

"I am still learning that as you get older, your system changes, and frankly, I don't know what to do about it."

—From *The Grace to Race* by American nun Sister Madonna Buder, who opened the 75+ age group for women at Ironman Canada and five years later did the same for the 80+ category



Nutrition, Strength, and Training

When it comes to food, older triathletes need to practice basic sports nutrition and be aware of the nutritional needs of an aging body.

Competitive triathlete, coach and nutritionist Sheila Kealey, author of *Food for Thought: Healing Foods to Savor*, recommends a Mediterranean diet rich in vegetables, fruits, whole grains, legumes, healthy fats and fish. She notes that while older people in general need more protein than younger sedentary people, older triathletes need even more protein than their peers. Additionally, the type, timing and distribution of that protein throughout the day is important.

Strength training is critical for older triathletes due to muscle loss associated with aging. Balance problems can lead to falls, and since triathlon training involves mostly moving forward in a straight line, Kealey believes agility work should be added.

When it comes to training programs, Ottawa coach Julia Aimers says the biggest difference in her older triathletes is they need longer recoveries from hard workouts. "But if recovery is built in properly to their weekly and monthly training plans, older triathletes can really thrive."

Jim Anderson, 75, is the oldest triathlete registered with Triathlon Manitoba. He believes because of its built-in cross-training, triathlon is an ideal sport for his age. "If I did a four-hour run, I'd be beat for a week. But after an hour swim, two hours on the bike and an hour run, I feel great the next day."

photos: davehick.com, Cal Zaryski

FEMALE MENOPAUSE and the knowledge gap

As far as we know, there hasn't been one report of a woman having to stop while jogging to pick up her reproductive organs even though, as 49-year-old physician Julie Curwin observes, "Women only a bit older than I am remember when they were young being told by doctors not to run because their uterus might fall out."

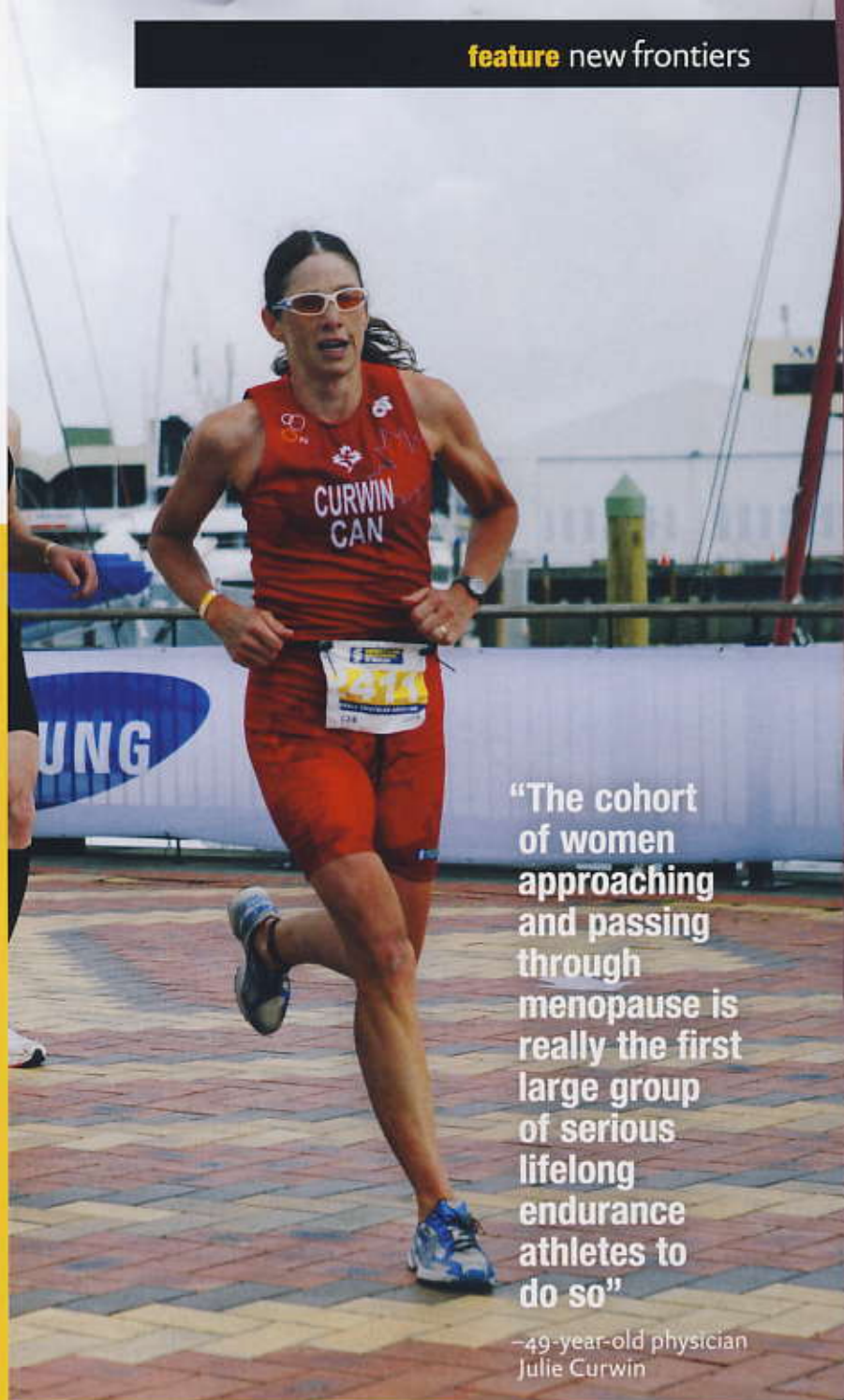
But there are still many other knowledge gaps for female athletes as they age. Curwin, an ITU world age-group triathlon champion who lives in Sydney, N.S. explains: "The whole idea of the competitive post-menopausal female athlete is relatively new, and the cohort of women approaching and passing through menopause is really the first large group of serious lifelong endurance athletes to do so."

How do the potential mood swings, depression, hot flashes, night sweats, bone density loss and weight gain of menopause affect high-performance athletes? What about pharmaceutical hormone replacement therapy (HRT)? At the highest levels of competition, some forms of HRT would not be allowed unless an athlete applied for a therapeutic use exemption (TUE), which might be hard to get. "Each case is very individual," explains Danielle Côté, a spokesperson for the Canadian Centre for Ethics in Sport.

However, female athletes wondering about the pros and cons of HRT find there's no clinical research evaluating whether HRT influences an elite menopausal athlete's performance, and little research on menopausal female athletes at all.

This lack of research isn't because scientific researchers don't care, explains Kealey. Studies on menopause and sport would be expensive and require a critical mass of female athlete subjects followed over a number of years to properly measure outcomes.


So a critical mass of older women athletes needs to assert itself before important questions relating to physiology and performance are seriously explored. Bev Watson, 60, shattered the Ironman world record for her



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—49-year-old physician Julie Curwin

age group by 27 minutes last year in a time of 11:50. Watson, of Priddis, Alta., explains: "There is a crest of a wave coming. As I get older, the women in the age groups behind me are faster, and there are many more of them."

Watson races competitively all over the world in triathlon, Spartan and other endurance races. She figured out on her own how to deal with the challenges of menopause, but wishes there was a way to more formally share experiences and pool knowledge. "Triathletes are very open about their bodies and I have a few teammates I can chat with. But still, I would love to talk to more elite women athletes about the aging process. If there was a way we could all communicate, it would be amazing." 

above Julie Curwin racing the 2012 Barfoot & Thompson World Triathlon Grand Final in Auckland, New Zealand

opposite right Bev Watson racing the 2013 Ironman 70.3 Hawaii

opposite left Sister Madonna Buder racing the 2012 Ironman Canada in Penticton, B.C.