

## The Doc Is In

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**Body Language**

### **Aging and Racing: Slowing Down Isn't Inevitable**

**By Alec Isabeau, D.C.**

It's a given among runners that as we age beyond our late thirties we invariably begin to slow down and our days of setting PR's are over. Historically, we've simply attributed this common phenomenon to the natural aging process and, therefore, we've done little to try to counteract this "inevitable" process of slowing down. As it turns out, the very common theme of slower racing with increasing years may not be solely due to the biologic clock ticking away. There may be a couple of simple (though not necessarily easy) things we can all do if we want to continue setting PR's well into our tenures as master and senior runners.

A few studies have been published in the past few years looking into the relationship between aging and race times. While the broad trend is certainly for runners to race slower beyond about age 40, researchers have found many notable exceptions. Some runners continue to race very fast, and even set PR's, well into their 40's and 50's. Others slow down a bit with the years, but not nearly as dramatically and traumatically as most runners do. What are these gazelles doing differently than the rest of the herd?

Two very basic factors emerge in these studies of fast, old runners:

1. They train hard and sensibly. That is, they include regular doses of intervals, fartleks, or tempo runs into their programs – workouts which tend to be avoided by many older runners. Ongoing, high quality training, combined with adequate rest and recovery, is directly related to fast race times in older runners. High mileage training, on the other hand, does not correlate with fast racing.
2. They maintain their flexibility. More specifically, the hip flexor muscles (the quadriceps and psoas muscles) of the speedy old runners are more flexible, thus allowing for a slightly greater average stride length during high speed running.

That's it. Out of all the numerous variables which play a role in our race performances as we age (e.g. diet, motivation, injuries, genetics, etc.) two fundamental factors appear to be most important: Quality training and flexibility. All other things being equal, the fastest master and senior runners tend to train harder and maintain their flexibility, something all of us can do if we're so inclined. Train hard, rest adequately and stretch

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your hip flexors – that's the apparent secret of the fast old dogs. And one more thing: have fun. Running is play time, after all.

Here's a quick updatification on the "Older, Faster Runners" article:

In the fourteen years since that article first appeared, I haven't seen any studies that have refuted those conclusions, but a few questions have arisen in recent years. The relationship between training fast and racing fast is essentially undisputed: while there's distinct value and great fulfillment derived from long, slow runs and periods of high volume training, faster racing correlates mostly strongly with faster training, at any age.

The flexibility issue cited in the 1997 article does raise some questions now, though.

While poor hip flexibility does indeed shorten the stride and appears to constrain top-end speed, more recent studies regarding stretching, flexibility and running suggest that very flexible runners actually tend to run slower and are injured more frequently. Add to that the emerging emphasis on purposely *shortening* the stride, while increasing the cadence, as a means to running and racing faster and things get more confusing.

Likely, there is a "U-shaped curve" regarding flexibility, racing speed and injury predilection: very stiff, inflexible runners (I'm talking to you, fellow aging males) and very flexible, gumby-like runners (this tends to be women, those who can readily contort themselves into bizarre yoga poses) appear to have the greatest difficulty running fast, durably and consistently. Certainly, this is a generalization that seems valid to me, after years of clinical practice working with countless injured runners. So it seems that, in order to keep racing fast as the years fly by, we should continue to train fast and find that delicate balance of flexibility and stability -- a nice mix of yoga and Pilates could be just the right medicine, perhaps. And I have to add one more thing about trying to race fast as we age: don't stress too much about it, please. It's OK to get slower, really! Enjoy the journey.

Doc