The last twenty years have seen a fundamental change in the lifestyle of those who in previous generations would have been called old, past it or even just middle aged. There was an assumption that age, anything beyond 50, would put a stop to many activities better left to the fit and flexible youth. Of course there were exceptions but they were not seen as a market. Editor-in-Chief David Buirski considers ageing disgracefully.

Greying nomads, balding baby boomers



Craghopper's Simoon range of women's travel clothing.

The look in her eyes said it all. A few years ago, I had arranged to meet - at a trade exhibition - the young and enthusiastic pr lady for a major brand name in the sports activewear field. We had never met but had spoken a number of times on the telephone. She had assumed, because of the voice and the magazine's title, that she was meeting a young, tall, virile athletic journalist. Sadly she was not quick enough to disguise the look in her eyes and her disappointment at the reality that walked on to the stand.

Besides hopefully teaching her never to make assumptions, it also showed her that the older generations are just as keen on sport today as their younger counterparts and take the subject of performance very seriously.

There is a delightful and regrettably accurate "ageing alphabet" verse presently doing the rounds (A is for arthritis, B is for bad back, C is for the chest pains. Corned beef? Cardiac?, etc.) but the fact remains that more people are remaining sports-active to a greater age than ever before. One only has to visit a gym, check the age group of those going for a morning jog, or visit any national park to feel a bit of a wimp if you (that is, any reader of WSA over 50) are not taking part in the late 20th and new 21st century fitness culture. And if you are under 50 and qualifying as a couch-potato (another late development of the 20th century), shame on you!

There appears to be a link back to the 1960s and 1970s when the post-World War II parents of the day seemed to have collectively decided that they were going to delay getting old for as long as possible. And the trend in thinking seems to have become stronger than ever - jeans and trainers are still very much part of the 70-year-old's wardrobe and he or she can wear them with as much fashion panache as people 40 or 50 years younger. It wasn't all that long ago that young consumers were even rebelling against jeans and trainers because they didn't wish to seem old!

Feeling comfortable while browsing

Although many designers and manufacturers will not necessarily admit to specifically targeting the older consumer (advertisements are still driven by models or athletes in their 20s it seems), many have figured out that it is the older, sports active consumer who has the disposable income and the leisure time to buy into the brand or range. In the past few seasons, giant UK retailer Marks & Spencer has moved more strongly into the sports and leisure sector with its Blue Harbour range - featuring young healthy-looking models - and more recently with its View From collection which is available in 125 of its 320 stores.

Now consider how the company, which has a vast middle-aged customer base, describes the move: "The range is ergonomically

designed to deliver performance, benefit-driven products suitable for use by serious and amateur athletes as well as the more occasional participant in sport. All products in the View From range harness the very latest in fibre technology incorporating widely recognised and patented elements such as Coolmax, Xstatic, Polartec fleece and Illuminite. This is the first time that Polartec branding has ever appeared on a high street retail brand and is recognition of Marks and Spencer's entrance into the serious sportswear market. View From is specifically designed for running, fitness, golf, skiing and outdoor pursuits and includes clothing, outdoor footwear and accessories for men and women. The range includes innovative, technical products such as a bonded fleece that is both windproof and waterproof and incorporates stretch panels to ensure ease of movement, moisture-wicking jersey wear and breathable waterproofs."

Even more telling is what M&S's research has shown: "Customers say they often feel intimidated shopping in large sportswear outlets and would welcome an environment where they feel comfortable browsing but where help is available if needed." In other words, while 35 to 75-year-old consumers may not consider themselves serious athletes or competitors, they want to have easy access to all the innovation so long associated with the sports activewear sector without feeling inadequate or pressurised by the sort of salesperson so often seen in specialist outlets.

Travel remains a major stimulus

According to a 2001 survey of the EU countries, the emphasis in sports participation will be less on the competitive team sports and more on leisure and individual sports. By the year 2020, the proportion of 45+ year-olds is expected to make up more than 40% of their populations and this analysis will surely affect the product design and marketing strategies. Travel will remain as much a major stimulus as fashion. In recent years, many top names more associated with haute couture than vigorous pursuits have (had to) broadened their offer into leisure pursuits. Ten years ago who would have thought that Prada would become a trend-setter in the sports activewear arena, who would have imagined that a top fabric producer such as Loro Piana would be fighting for the honours in the most demanding waters of yacht racing at the highest level?

There is little doubt that travel will influence the development of the sports activewear business. Take a look at the activities offered on a current cruise to Alaska, for instance, remembering that most cruise customers are likely to be well past the 50-year-old mark. A helicopter flightseeing and glacier trek requires enough stamina for a four-and-a-quarter hour excursion where the easy part (sitting in the helicopter) takes up a mere 30 minutes but the trek on the glacier fills two hours. (One variant offers four hours on the glacier!) The organisers outfit all the enthusiasts with top quality mountaineering gear, jackets, shell pants, gloves, hard-shell mountaineering boots, harness, ice axe and crampons. There are some caveats though - guests should be in good physical shape and anyone weighing 250 lbs. (113 kgs.) or more will be surcharged for the flight portion of the trip.

So, it's back to the fully equipped gym on board ship (carefully avoiding the buffet) in appropriate 'mvt' leotards, shorts and footwear to limber up for the next excursion. That next excursion could be a two-hour walking tour or two hours of sea kayaking. Be warned, that takes place in all weather conditions and "warm clothing is recommended" - the tour operator provides the rain gear, the life jackets and, of course, the two-person kayak. This is where it may be advisable to take a younger, fitter partner along with you.

Then there is the adventure hike covering up to six miles, when you are advised again to wear warm clothing - the guide provides drinking water and a rain poncho; or four hours of fly fishing; three hours of snorkelling; or three hours of mountain biking (the operator provides the bike, rainwear, gloves, helmet and safety gear). If this still hasn't changed your view about market potential, you might consider the implications of a five-and-a-half hour horseback riding adventure. With an eye to the health of the horse, if you weigh in at 250lbs don't bother to put your name down.

But you don't have to go to Alaska to see the influence of the older generation. The soft spike syndrome on the fairways of the world did not arise from the demands of the world's top golfers. It really came through from the ranks of ordinary and mature club members who found that their feet were not as tired or sore after hacking their way round eighteen holes shod in soft-cleated shoes as when they wore metal spikes. Examine the trends in outerwear, the wearability of fleece and waterproof jackets across the age span,



This selection of images drawn from the Marks and Spencer 'View From' and 'Blue Harbour' ranges illustrates the universality of the company's latest output. The blend of fabrics including polyesters, cottons, polyamides and Lycra creates clothing for both active and sedentary leisure.



Stylish travel clothing from Rohan (Intercontinental Coat with Crosscheck shirt.

consider the market for waterproof, breathable membranes or wax jackets or even sport specific socks. Then try and fool yourself that there hasn't been a radical change in the demographics of the consumers chasing those products.

Probably a lot fitter than their own offspring

In years past, eyebrows would have been raised at the sight of men and women deep into their 70s putting mountain bikes in their MPVs or on the back of their 4x4s and setting off for the forests of Germany for a fortnight's cycling - but no longer. It is almost commonplace, and with this commitment comes the desire to be appropriately kitted out, with the same high-tech gloves and cycling gear that those aspiring to the Tour de France hunger for. Down under in Australia, there is a whole fraternity of grandparents which has decided that the parents of their grandchildren can get on with looking after them while they look after themselves, spend the kids' inheritance and get on the road for three months at a stretch to explore their own continent. With typical Aussie forthrightness, they have been named the grey nomads. Given the gruelling conditions of the outback, this baby boomer bandwagon needs as much outdoor sports activewear as anyone else does. By the time they get back to seeing the grandkids, they're probably a lot fitter and bronzed than their own offspring - and better motor mechanics, too.

It has frequently been said that 'age is a state of mind' - and, on current evidence, those who have passed the half way mark on their way to chalking up a century have decided that they are not prepared to allow age to dictate their state of mind. It will be physical ability that will decide their sporting pursuits and they will not countenance comments from passers-by such as: "hey, old timer, aren't you too old to be doing that." The guide line today is to wear what you feel comfortable in and do what you feel is right, not what someone else feels is only fit and proper for you.

Now that reminds me of the old joke about the nonagenarian going to see his doctor about his sex life, complaining that he's only able to manage sex once a week. "Good heavens, man," says the astonished doctor, "I'm just 42 and consider myself lucky if I have sex twice a week."

"I didn't come to listen to your problems," growled the 90-year-old as he got on to his mountain bike and pedalled off to find a more sympathetic medic.