

In a youth-obsessed world, shouldn't mainstream media and brands be paying more attention to the grey and greying generations? *WSA* considers the world of the Masters.

90-year-old man beats Usain Bolt

What a headline that would have made for the world's sports-and-celebrity-obsessed media and big brand marketers! On an age-related basis, it could be true. Usain St. Leo Bolt set the world record for 100 metres at 9.58 seconds in 2009 when he was a few days short of his twenty-third birthday. South African sprinter Lucas Nel ran a time of 18.00 seconds over the same distance in preparation for the XX World Masters Athletics Track & Field Championship held in Porte Alegre, Brazil, this October. Nel had celebrated his 90th birthday a few months earlier in July; he was chasing the record for runners aged between 90 and 94 that had been set at 17.53 seconds by Brazil's Frederico Fischer in 2007 at the WMA Track & Field World Championships in Riccione, Italy. Whether or not Lucas or Frederico has or would have beaten Bolt is a matter for academics, scientists and physiologists analysing the performance to age ratio. But consider this: Nel was four times older than Bolt but his time was not even double that of the Jamaican star.

The world of sedentary watchers of games such as the Olympics and those of the International Association of Athletic Federations (IAAF) might be surprised to learn that there are other global organisations devoted to athletics: the International Master Games Association (IMGA) and World Masters Athletics (WMA) that are recognised by the International Olympic Committee and the IAAF. Taking inspiration from the Olympic Charter, they organise their events starting from the shared and winning concept that "sport is for everybody". Combing through the websites

90-year old South African sprinter Lucas Nel ran the 100 metres at this year's XX World Masters Athletics Championships.

Val Adamson / www.ethekwinilivinglegends.com



devoted to the Masters, one is left with the distinct impression that the big brands and media ignore what must surely be a massive marketing opportunity.

How old is too old?

It appears that age is not a factor when it comes to participating in the world of the Masters. The entry age is usually set at 35 but there is no top age limit. Those who take part have their performances compared with those of a similar age group – the age bands move in five-year increments. In other words, Nel would be competing with other 90 to 94 year olds. Getting started in mature years is simply a matter of will power (and, of course, a degree of fitness). Ex Royal Shakespeare Company actor John Keston could be seen as a role model, having taken up running in his mid-50s to improve his blood pressure levels while teaching music at Bemidji State University in Minnesota. What was a fun run became serious: at 64 he ran the marathon in 2:52:32. At 70, he broke Warren Utes's half-marathon record by 51 seconds with a time of 1:25:36, then improved on Utes's 70-74 marathon record with a 3:00:58 run. Utes was another athlete who came to prominence in the late 1970s when he was well into his 50s.

Minority interest or major market?

Sports oriented manufacturers and developers do not appear to have placed much emphasis on the Masters market and media reporting would appear to be just as rare. In order to get a feel for the sector, it is worth noting how it has developed since the concept of veteran athletics originated in Britain in 1931. Back then, amateur sports were seen as a weekend pastime for young people but a group of 40-year-old athletes, who were still keen on fitness, decided to form the Veterans Athletic Club. Other clubs quickly began to emerge in the US, Canada, Australia and Europe.

The term Masters had not yet been coined. In 1972 a group of mature athletes came together to compete in the first ever International Veterans only Track and Field Meeting. It was held at Crystal Palace in London, seen as a stop-over on their way to watch the 1972 Olympic Games in Munich. It was clearly a success and the international group went on to compete throughout Germany, Finland and Sweden. It was also a social success.

"They had a memorable time," says Bridget Cushen, secretary of the British Masters Athletic Association and still road-running in her 70s. "Yesterday's heroes, Olympians and 'also rans' grasped the opportunity of competing against each other, as well as reminiscing and socialising. The Canadian group was led by Don Farquharson and he suggested that they should hold more



meets. He said he would organise one in Toronto in 1975." Farquharson was an accomplished athlete, born in Wales, who had emigrated to Canada after the Second World War.

The five-day event he organised brought together over 2,000 competitors from 38 countries who competed across all disciplines. It was an opportunity to discuss the way forward and the result was the establishment of the World Association of Veteran Athletes. The name was later changed to World Masters Athletics and the remit was to organise, promote and regulate athletics in five-year age increments, for men and women, who had reached the age of 35.

It was also agreed to hold a biennial World Championship. The 1977 event was held in Gothenburg, Sweden, a city that has been hosting international sporting events over many years including the 1958 FIFA World Cup (the city was the birthplace of football in the country and the first match was played there in 1892) and more recently the XIII FINA World Masters Championships for aquatic sports in 2010. (The XV takes place in Montreal July/August 2014.) By comparison with the lack of apparent support for veteran athletics, the senior swimmers' event does have the sponsorship of Speedo.

The 1977 event attracted the interest of 2,750 competitors, from Olympic medallists to ex-football and rugby players, from recreational runners to mothers who had not competed since leaving full time education. "The star of the event," recalls Ms Cushen, "was Duncan MacLean, a 92-year-old music hall comedian. He did the 100 and 200 metres dressed in a tartan. The papers called him 'the Tartan Flash'."

Today the World Masters Athletics organisation has 168 affiliated countries and arguably it is

World Masters' Athletics organise, regulate and administer athletics for masters (women and men of not less than 35 years of age).

 World Masters Athletics



Athletes competing in field events at the 2012 North, Central American & Caribbean Masters Championships in Saint John, Canada. Howard Booth (left) and Geraldine George Francis (right).

Jamie Roach/Shutterstock.com

larger than the Olympic Games. The Olympics sets a limit of 10,500 competitors to cover all sports, although the 2012 Olympic Games in London was said to have had 17,000 for the 26 sports that included equestrian, swimming, shooting, cycling and others that do not fall under track and field. The World Masters Athletics Track & Field Championships held in Miyazaki, Japan, in 1993 still appears to hold the record for the largest Field & Track event ever, when 12,500 competitors from 100 countries took part.

The more one analyses the world of the Masters, the more one realises just how large the sector and how important it could be for marketers whose focus seems totally committed to the 10-15 year time span that takes in the Open Athletics programme. Youth and junior athletics cover a three-period. In the world of Masters, there are over 60 years of active competition and participation.

The greying generation is not just interested in life insurance

The greying generation clearly attracts a great deal of attention from the companies producing golf clothing and equipment. Age appears to be of little concern in golf and top players continue to excite pundits and spectators – and the media. But athletics – that's different.

The opportunities for participation in athletics are vast, with most countries holding their own championships, indoor and outdoor. One would have imagined that the big brands would be eager to add their support but this does not appear to be case. Looking at sponsors and partners for Masters Athletics events, one can find local tourist boards, insurance companies, car companies and others who clearly feel that their

message is appropriate for the greying generation.

Admittedly this article cannot be taken as a definitive analysis but a random search of major international Masters events only threw up one shoe brand and, as it was for a long distance run in an Eastern European country, one was left with the feeling that this was not a major marketing decision of a global brand but a sponsorship that came out of the local agent's discretionary advertising budget.

As Ms Cushen points out, the time span of the Masters covers more than 60 years of competition. "We tend to be brand-loyal; you not only have a brand-loyal customer for over 60 years but you also have his family. As they are also likely to be county chairmen, club secretaries, officials and coaches, they are in a prime position of influence and good example." Are the brands missing out?

The next World Master Games will be held in Auckland in 2017. Sixteen cities around the world competed for the honour. In 2009, Sydney played host and attracted more than 30,000 athletes. New Zealand's prime minister, John Key, forecasts that the games will inject over \$50 million into the economy. It is suggested that international visitors will spend over 266,000 hotel nights in the country, while coping with over 35,000 participants in 30 different sports.

Surely the promotion of sports and sportswear has another dimension – social awareness and responsibility. In past issues, WSA has covered the looming problem of obesity, especially in the developed world. Active lives are seen as the way ahead to improve a nation's health; it's not a matter of winning and setting records. It's about encouraging participation across the ages. 🌐