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Sport Participation in Europe: Older Amateur Athletes and the European Senior Games

*M. Hess*¹

¹*Cunef University, Business Administration, Madrid, Spain*

mjhess@profesor.ie.edu

Background

Europe's inhabitants are aging. Of the 500 million people living in the EU27 countries, currently 87 million (17.4%) are aged 65 years or older. This number will reach 117 million (23.5%) by 2030 (Eurostat). Not only is Europe aging, but the aging population is changing the meaning of getting older: people are living longer, with lower rates of disabilities, achieving higher levels of education and wealth, and are increasingly active in competitive sport (Dionigi, 2006; Smith & Storandt, 1997; Stevenson, 2002; Trauer, Ryan, & Lockyer, 2003). This rapidly growing segment of "older" athletes (50 years or older) is competing regularly in an expanding range of highly organized, sanctioned sport competitions such as the European Senior Games. Thus, one of the most dynamic and attractive subsegments of Europe's aging population is the "over 50 year-old athlete", which we simply refer to in this paper as the "50+ athlete".

Existing Research

As a result of the 50+ athletes' expanding participation in competitive sport, an increasing amount of research is being carried out to improve understanding of this attractive demographic. Several researchers have explored the motives and experiences of older sport participants (Cardenas, Henderson, & Wilson, 2009; Casper, Gray, & Stellino, 2007; Dionigi, 2002 & 2006; Flatten, 1991; Gibson, 2004; Hodge, Allen, & Smellie, 2008; McIntyre, Boag, Coleman, & Cuskelly, 1992), whereas others have examined the socio-demographics of 50+ participants in specific sporting events (Cecil & Heo, 2009; Heo & Lee, 2005; Horneman, Carter, Wei, & Ruys, 2002).

While these contributions have provided tremendous insight into the 50+ athletes' motives and profile, little research has been done on European athletes and events designed for them.

Purpose of this Research

The purpose of this research is to extend the existing research by providing an analysis of the characteristics of 50+ European athletes who participated in the first pan-European Senior Games^[1]. The other objective is to analyze the senior sporting event itself to evaluate the attractiveness of this type of competitive platform for older athletes.

Data Collection Procedures

The unit of analysis for this study is the 2009 European Senior Games event and the participating athletes. To analyze the characteristics of the European Senior Games athletes, we carry out a case study of the Senior Games, which held its first-ever event in 2009. The case study involves gathering participation data on over 3,000 athletes that participated in the event. This data enables us to evaluate participants' demographics, behavior, and sport preference.

In addition to surveying participants we explore the characteristics of the competitive sport platform (the European Senior Games) by conducting interviews with the event's directors. We also gather second-hand data, which include newspaper and magazine articles, press releases, and event and association webpages.

Preliminary Results and Discussion

This research adds an important European perspective to the existing research on 50+ athletes. Findings enable us to offer an initial profile of the "European 50+ athlete" and to improve understanding of the trends of this segment. In addition, insight is gained regarding a newly developed competitive sport platform, the European Senior Games, being offered to this segment. By contributing to the understanding of Europe's 50+ athlete population, this study provides practical insight to the athletes themselves, sport event managers, sport tourism managers, governments who want to promote healthier aging, and companies that want to serve this attractive and growing sport participant segment. It also offers a helpful roadmap for future research of the 50+ sport participant and the competitive platforms designed for them.

[1] The European Senior Games is a pan-European Olympic-type competition for athletes aged 50 and older.

