Introduction

In this chapter I draw from interview data on older athletes (over 75 years old) who regularly compete in individual sports, such as running, swimming, cycling and racquet sports (Dionigi, 2008). I make sense of this data using the work of Jones and Higgs (2010) and Bauman (2000), among others, on normative pronouncements as they relate to ageing, activity, health and fitness in contemporary society. The 7 people who are the focus of this chapter were born between 1913 and 1926. They have experienced The Great Depression, World War I and/or World War II. In addition, they have lived through a cultural period in which understandings of ageing were predominantly associated with the acceptance of natural bodily decline (Jones and Higgs, 2010) and sport was considered inappropriate, dangerous and unnecessary for women and older people (Grant, 2001; Dionigi, 2010). Now older adults live in a climate that is shaped and defined by a resistance to old age and one in which ‘active ageing’ is promoted in media reports, government policies and in the sport/exercise sciences (Pike, 2011; Tulle, 2008; World Health Organization, 2002).

Since the ‘fitness boom’ in the 1970s and the emergence of ‘successful aging’ discourses (for example, Rowe and Kahn, 1997) in the 1980s and 1990s, it has been argued in research and policy that ‘old muscles are supposed to be moved’ (Grant, 2001: 780). In this climate, sport and physical activity are positioned as crucial in delaying age-related decline and reducing the risk of many chronic conditions (Tulle, 2008). Today everyone is highly encouraged to keep physically, mentally and socially
active to maintain their health and, consequently, opportunities to participate in structured physical activity/exercise, such as Masters sport, are readily available.

Theoretical framework

To contextualise this change in understandings and opportunities related to ageing, it is important to consider the shift from modernity to ‘second modernity’ and the associated construction of the Third and Fourth Ages (Jones and Higgs, 2010). Jones and Higgs, among others, characterise second modernity in terms of individualisation, fragmentation and the ‘normalization of diversity’ (2010: 1514). That is, since the nineteenth century there has been a shift away from the production-based ideals and prescribed functions of modernity to a focus on consumption, individual choice, leisure and pleasure. As a consequence, understandings of ageing that were the norm during modernity, such as the acceptance of decline and dependency in old age, are ‘banished to the margins’ in second modernity where the focus is on ‘self-care which is aimed at delaying or denying bodily decline (Jones and Higgs, 2010: 1516). This shift has contributed to older people becoming the valued targets of anti-ageing products and services that promote youthfulness and active living under the banner of ‘active ageing’ (Gilleard and Higgs, 2002, 2000). Masters sport is just one example.

Higgs et al. (2009) argue that these new consumer markets provided the basis for certain generational identities, such as the Third Age, to emerge in the latter half of the twentieth century. A key feature of the Third Age is ‘the effective use of leisure’ and ongoing engagement in ‘activity, exercise, travel, eating out, self-maintenance and self-care’ (Gilleard and Higgs, 2007: 25; Laslett, 1989). There is a moral imperative embedded in the desire to remain healthy, active and engaged, as shown in Bauman’s (2000: 78) discussions around ‘the pursuit of fitness’ in contemporary consumer society. A goal of the Third Age is to delay or prevent the Fourth Age, which is characterised by sickness, dependency, frailty and the imminence of death (Blaikie, 1999). Being exposed to these multiple and conflicting discourses and opportunities associated with ageing and activity throughout their lives undoubtedly influenced the way the participants in this chapter rationalised their interest, competitive practices and experiences in physically demanding pursuits.