

Narratives of Master-Aged Powerlifters: Understanding Aging and the Serious Leisure  
Perspective

by

Avi Silverberg  
B.A., University of Calgary, 2010  
B.Ed., University of Calgary, 2012

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of the Requirements for the Degree of

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# Supervisory Committee

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Dr. Tim Hopper, School of Exercise Science, Physical Health Education  
**Departmental Member**

# Abstract

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The purpose of this study is to contribute to the literature on successful aging, serious leisure, and sport. A qualitative methodology was used to understand the lived experiences of three master-aged athletes involved in serious powerlifting. The goal of using such an approach was to share participants' stories within a given context, as well as uphold the emotion, merit, and authenticity of each narrative. The results address issues around participants' initial and continued engagement with the sport of powerlifting, the ways in which powerlifting shapes the aging process, and the meaningful role that powerlifting plays in one's life. The discussion offers further exploration of key points, including: reconnecting to one's youth, modified training and pain management, identity formation, resistance toward older female powerlifters, powerlifting as a context for self-improvement, career stages over the life-course, social interactions and relationships, and aging successfully. A number of future research directions are offered in the hope of continuing to understand the experiences of older adults in the context of physical activity.

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# Dedication

To my mom and dad: as you grow older, may your personal stories be written with health at the forefront.



# Chapter 1: Introduction

Canadians are growing older (Statistics Canada, 2011) and one of the challenges confronting this aging population, and Canadian institutions, is how to promote successful aging into later life. Successful aging has been categorized in a number of different ways, both qualitatively and quantitatively, including: positive functioning or psychological well-being, physical and mental health, cognitive growth, high engagement with activities, quality of life, life satisfaction, adaptation to life changes, and social integration (Rowe and Kahn, 1997, Knight & Ricciardelli, 2003; Heo et al., 2013). Previous research has indicated that older adults have the potential to age successfully when adopting a physically active lifestyle (Baker et al., 2009; Knight & Ricciardelli, 2003), and engaging with a meaningful leisure activity (Rowe and Kahn, 1997).

As adults age, many spend less of their leisure time in strenuous physical activity and more in sedentary activities such as reading and watching television (Cavanaugh, Blanchard-Fields, & Norris, 2008, p. 431). The recommended physical activity guideline for older adults in Canada is engaging with at least 150 minutes of moderate physical activity, including regular aerobic conditioning, as well as resistance training two days per week involving major muscle groups (Canadian Society for Exercise Physiology (CSEP), 2011, p. 18). Currently, 70% of adults over the age of 50 years old do not meet the Canadian guidelines for regular physical activity (Brawley et al., 2003, p. 173). Many forms of physical activity exist, but strength training, in particular, has broad ranging positive health outcomes (Geithner & Mckenney, 2010; Seguin & Nelson, 2003; Signethaler & Dell, 2003). Older adults who partake in strength training

activities are better able to cope with the many physical challenges in later life, such as performing activities of daily living and reducing the incidence of unexpected falling episodes (Seguin & Nelson, p. 146). As well, strength training has also been shown to prevent sarcopenia, age-related muscle decline, as well as prevent some chronic diseases, and improve mobility, balance, and flexibility (CSEP, 2011, p. 18). Since there is a decrease in leisure-time physical activity as adults age, there is a pressing need for researchers to understand the leisure context, and experiences within those contexts, that give rise to long lasting physical activity engagement. While studying all forms of physical activity are important, it is particularly critical to study physical activity contexts that include a strength-based component.

The serious leisure perspective, as proposed by Stebbins (2001), is a theory within the field of leisure studies that promotes high levels of activity engagement. Serious leisure suggests that activities exist on a continuum of being more or less serious, where activities can range from being highly meaningful to one's life to activities that are fleeting and casual. Activities that are serious in nature include some of the same responsibilities as work such as obligation, commitment, and responsibility; however, these activities offer opportunities for personal expression, achievement, competence, and overall life satisfaction (Stebbins, 2001). As will be discussed in chapter two, serious leisure is framed around six qualities, including: perseverance, progression through a career-like experience, generating a high personal effort, obtaining durable benefits, sharing a unique ethos, and adopting a social identification (Stebbins, 2007). Individuals attaching significant meaning to their chosen leisure activity may be involved in a serious leisure pursuit, as this personal meaning generates high levels of engagement. Moreover, Rowe and Kahn (1997) identified that the qualities demonstrated through serious leisure participation can support successful aging in older adult populations.

Studies on serious leisure, older adults, and successful aging have occurred within a variety of physical activity settings: cycling (Gibson & Chang, 2012), lawn bowling (Heuser, 2005), distance running (Shipway, Holloway, & Jones, 2012), and golfing (Siegenthaler & O'Dell, 2003). While these leisure activities are physical in nature, they do not typically require maximal strength as a fundamental component of participation. As such, there is a paucity of information investigating the serious leisure pursuits of older adults involved in strength-based activities.

Competitive powerlifting is a strength-based activity that centers around three movement patterns: squat, bench press, and deadlift (Canadian Powerlifting Union, 2014). The goal in powerlifting is to lift as much weight as possible for one repetition in each of these movement disciplines. While athletes in other sporting pursuits, such as bodybuilding, may use these movements in their physical preparation, powerlifting athletes seek to maximize their absolute strength as the primary outcome. In Canada, powerlifting is a structured sport organization, governed by the Canadian Powerlifting Union (CPU), and offers many opportunities for master athletes, including older adults, to participate. In 2013, there were 271 master athletes registered as active members with the CPU (M. Armstrong, Personal Communication, April 22, 2014); therefore, powerlifting provides a unique context to study the experiences of older adults involved in serious leisure activities.

By understanding more thoroughly the experience of older adults in powerlifting, researchers will gain knowledge about strength-based serious leisure activities and its impact on successful aging. As well, from a practitioner's standpoint, a better understanding of the connection between serious leisure and aging will allow sport and leisure organizations,

government departments, and health promotion stakeholders to better cater to the needs of older adults in their physical activity pursuits (Shipway & Holloway, 2010, p. 270).

The following study explored the lived experiences of three competitive older adult powerlifting athletes between the ages of 50 and 59 years old. The participants were selected based on their serious involvement in the sport of powerlifting, including: self-identifying as a powerlifter, competing in at least three powerlifting competitions, and matching the specific qualities of serious leisure to their experiences in powerlifting. The participants' years of experience in powerlifting, level of competition ascertained throughout their careers, and geographic location in which each resided varied. A qualitative methodology was used in understanding the lived experiences of master powerlifters. While the detailed methodology to conduct this study will be discussed in Chapter 3, the reasons for employing a qualitative approach was to ensure flexibility and insight in allowing a detailed and in-depth understanding of the participants' experiences. The goal of the study was not to generate generalizable results, but rather to share participants' stories within a given context, as well as uphold the emotion, merit, and authenticity of each narrative. The primary and ancillary research questions were:

1. What are the lived experiences of older adults who engage in competitive powerlifting as a serious leisure pursuit?
  - a. What was the main attraction to the sport of powerlifting?
  - b. What makes powerlifting, as an activity for older adults, meaningful and important to their lives?
  - c. How do older adults view powerlifting as part of their own aging process.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

### Benefits of Strength Training

The older adult population in Canada is burgeoning as baby boomers reach retirement age and onward. In fact, seniors constitute the fastest growing population in Canada, and by 2031 one Canadian in five will have reached age 65 (Statistics Canada, 2011). One of the challenges facing this population, and Canadian Institutions, is how to promote successful aging and improve health and well-being in later life (Minister of Public Works and Government Services Canada, 2002, p. 1; CSEP, 2011, p. 18). The health and well-being of an older adult can be affected by many chronic conditions that are associated with aging, including: hypertension, arthritis, heart disease, various types of cancers, diabetes, asthma, and stroke (Geithner & Mckenney, 2010, p. 36). However, it has been estimated that 35% of deaths associated with the above mentioned chronic diseases, as well as the disabilities caused by these diseases, can be prevented by not smoking, eating a healthy diet, and exercising regularly (p. 36). Although there are many forms of exercise, strength training, is particularly important in maintaining health in older adults (CSEP, 2011, p. 18).

The benefits of strength training extend beyond mere increases in bodily strength. Strength training has broad reaching benefits across the fitness spectrum, and includes: increases in muscle and bone mass, flexibility, dynamic balance, self-confidence, and self-esteem (Seguin & Nelson, 2003, p. 142). As well, strength training has shown to reduce the symptoms associated with arthritis, depression, type-2 diabetes, osteoporosis, sleep disorders, heart disease, and high blood pressure (Seguin & Nelson, 2003, p. 142; Signethaler & Dell, 2003, p. 46). Due

to these global benefits, the Public Health Agency of Canada (2012) recommends that aging adults take part in strengthening activities using major muscle groups at least twice per week, operating with an overload principle using greater weights than encountered in daily life, or lifting objects that result in fatigue (p. 1). Furthermore, the Canadian Society for Exercise Physiology (CSEP) (2011) advocates that aging adults perform high intensity strength training following the form of 8-15 repetitions for 1-3 sets. These recent recommendations from CSEP have emerged based on research that connects aging to a decrease in muscle mass and a loss of physical functioning. As humans age, there is a natural decline in muscle mass; a phenomenon known as Sarcopenia.

Sarcopenia refers to the loss of muscle mass and strength because of aging (Geithner & Mckenney, 2010), and can be determined by two factors: the initial loss of muscle mass and the rate at which it declines with age (Marcell, 2008). Much of this muscle loss is a natural process as human's hormonal profiles, neurology, and metabolic systems change with age (Seguin & Nelson, 2003, p. 148). These physiological changes result in a loss of 1-2% of total muscle mass per year after the age of 50 (p. 911). In other words, muscle decline occurs with aging, and this decline is consistent year after year. Furthermore, this loss is greater if an individual is sedentary into old age versus being physically active (Geithner & McKenney, 2010, p. 37). However, older adults have shown to slow or reverse some of the effects of sarcopenia by strength training (p. 37). In particular, strength training can target the physiological domains associated with sarcopenia and is therefore a potent and viable addition to any physical activity program for aging adults (Seguin & Nelson, 2003, p. 148). There are two reasons why it is important for older adults, versus other age groups, to maintain their muscles mass, and the concurrent strength related to having more muscle. First, older adults need a proficient level of strength required to

perform day-to-day activities, thus maintaining independent lifestyles; and second, to prevent unexpected falling episodes, which may lead to disability, injury, and sometimes, death.

### **Strength-Related Challenges Facing Older Adults**

As individuals grow older, activities of daily living (ADL) pose increasing challenges. These activities include, but are not limited to: house cleaning, shopping, bathing, meal preparation, and laundry (Geithner & McKenney, 2010, p. 36). Aspects of ADL are physical in nature and require a proficient level of upper and lower body strength. For example, walking up stairs while simultaneously carrying a large object requires a baseline in strength to complete the task. Individuals over the age of 55 have reported difficulty in walking 0.4km or carrying 11kg; and, by the age of 80 years, up to 57% of men and 70% of women, are unable to do heavy housework (Hunter, McCarthy, & Bamman, 2004, p. 330). Many of these changes in function are related to a loss of muscular strength. Consequently, if older adults cannot meet a minimum threshold in strength when performing ADL, they risk losing their independence (p. 330). Even in the presence of chronic conditions, older adults who regularly perform strength training exercises are able to perform the functional tasks necessary to live independently (Seguin & Nelson, p. 146). Conversely, if muscular strength cannot be maintained into old age, reliance on others will increase, often causing personal and economic burdens for their caregivers. Furthermore, decreases in muscular strength have been associated with unexpected falling episodes in older adult populations, leading to prolonged or permanent disability.

Falls are prevalent among older adults, and are the leading cause of injurious death within this population (McMahon & Fleury, 2012, p. 2141). The World Health Organization (WHO) (2007) indicates that approximately 35% of people aged 65 and over fall each year (p. 1).

Almost 50% of older adults who fall will experience a minor injury and between 5 and 25% sustain a more serious injury (Ministry of Health Planning (MHP), 2004, p. 8). As well, of all the deaths caused by serious injury, 40% can be contributed to injuries due to falls (WHO, 2007, p. 4). As a country, it is important to prevent falls as the cost to the Canadian economy for fall-related injuries among older adults is \$2.8 billion per year (MHP, 2004, p. 9). The determinants of falls are complex, and intersect with biological, behavioral, and environmental factors; and while it is important for researchers to create solutions for all risk factors associated with falling, the most commonly prescribed prevention strategy is maintaining muscular strength into old age through regular strength training exercise (MHP, 2004, p. 12). Furthermore, when the loss of muscular strength coincides with a decline in physical functioning, older adults reach the highest level of frailty, which amplifies the risk of falling due to environmental hazards (p. 4). For example, falls are preventable if older adults are able to balance on uneven or cracked surfaces and have ample strength to navigate difficult terrain, such as stairs or steep hills. Maintaining a minimum level of strength is pivotal in protecting older adults from falling, thereby allowing older adults to live a healthy and independent lifestyle free of disability and disease (WHO, 2007, p. 6). A person's overall health into later years has been identified as one of the most important elements contributing to successful aging (Knight and Ricciardelli, 2003, p. 228).

### **Successful Aging**

The term 'successful aging' has been widely used in the literature. As such, there are varying definitions associated with this term. Some meanings that have emerged include: positive functioning or psychological well-being, physical and mental health, cognitive growth, quality of life, life satisfaction, adaptation to life changes, and social integration (Knight & Ricciardelli, 2003, p. 224; Heo et al., 2013, p. 105). However, researchers have suggested that



because of the varied definitions in the literature, and the lack of standardization of the term, successful aging is a complex construct to study (Vaillant, 2002; Knight & Ricciardelli, 2003; Baker et al., 2009). As such, researchers have adopted both objective and subjective ways of studying, understanding, and defining successful aging. While the current study doesn't aim to promote one way of knowing over another, or seek to clarify an existing definition, a look at the different approaches to understanding successful aging will be reviewed in order to situate and establish the study's methodology.

### *Objective Ways of Understanding Successful Aging*

Rowe and Kahn's (1997) work on successful aging provides a useful framework to study the aging process objectively, and is one of the dominant models within the field of gerontology. They propose that successful aging is the balance of three interrelated components: first, having an absence of disease and disease-related disability; second, maintaining high mental and physical capacities; and third, actively engaging with life. An important feature of this model is that the components are not viewed as equal, but rather as a hierarchy. If individuals can remain free of disease and disability, then maintaining mental and physical functioning is achieved, and therefore, actively engaging with life becomes possible. Thus, Rowe and Kahn studied indicators that influence these outcomes, for instance: length of time engaged in a physical activity, level of formal education, amount of annual income received, and involvement in volunteer work. In addition, Rowe and Kahn used self-efficacy and life-satisfaction scales to reveal indicators that promote successful aging as defined by their model.

The first two components of successful aging mentioned above, being free of disease and maintaining a high level of functioning, are said to be realized through regular physical activity

(Geither & McKenney, 2010, p. 37). Baker et al. (2009) conducted a study to see if physical activity was linked to successful aging using Rowe and Kahn's model. Baker and his team studied the relationship between physical activity involvement and successful aging by surveying 12,042 older adults using the Canadian Community Health Survey. Their results determined that older adults who were physically active are two times as likely to be successful agers versus their inactive counterparts, and therefore, physical activity is an important contributor to successful aging.

However, some have criticized Rowe and Kahn's model of successful aging by over-estimating the number of older adults who can progress into later years of life in a disease-free state (Ouwehand, de Ridder, & Bensing, 2007). In other words, reaching advanced old age in the absence of impairment is difficult. Thus, placing an emphasis on disease may not allow for an accurate portrayal of how older adults age successfully. Young, Frick, and Phelan (2009) suggested that successful aging ought to include mechanisms such as resilience, coping, and social support. Thus, their model allows individuals who experience physical disability a chance to achieve successful aging through psychological and social dimensions even in the face of disablement.

However, meta-analysis data from Hank (2011) suggested that when successful aging is measured across objective indicators, there is a low prevalence of older adults aging successfully, with only 8.5% aging successfully throughout Europe. Most models of successful aging through objective measures view the issue as dichotomous, "all-or-nothing" or "succeed or fail", where individuals either meet the specific threshold for success or they don't (Peterson & Martin, 2014, p. 7). Perhaps this data alludes to the notion that there is more to the story of successful aging than merely examining objective indicators.

### *Subjective Ways of Understanding Successful Aging*

Peterson and Martin (2014) suggested in their essay on successful aging that “instead of measuring success merely in years...it is important to add the subjective experience, or process, of dealing with the potentially positive and negative aspects of aging” (p. 9). Their main contention is that the word “success” has etymological roots, and rather than take the term for granted and simply juxtapose it with “aging”, researchers ought to consider the evolution of the word and critically examine the literary, humanistic, historical, and subjective perspectives involved. Over the years, success has had different meanings in different cultures. Success has not always implied positive meanings; sometimes the meaning has implied tension, and even if aging is seen as a negative process, it can be successful nonetheless. Moreover, the “subjective experience of aging is not a straightforwardly linear event, especially within the changing social and political contexts that constitute a life-course” (p. 6). For example, reaching a very old age in and of itself can be positive or negative, despite whether it’s a success that someone has achieved a long life. Therefore, success is viewed as a matter of perception, and ought to include subjective measures in the study of aging. As Martin and Gillen stated (2014), success is not the same for everyone, for every culture, or for all historical time.

Subjective measures of successful aging can be those that are defined by older individuals themselves. Proponents of using subjective measures suggest that objective criteria fail to understand older individuals’ opinions of how success should be perceived (Farina, 2011, p. 4). Thus, Knight and Ricciardelli (2003) addressed this issue by interviewing 60 adults over the age of 60 to determine what they viewed as components of successful aging. The main element associated with successful aging was health, in the context of being proficiently healthy

to engage in their chosen leisure pursuits, since leisure provided older adults a way to achieve personal growth, feelings of happiness, and personal relationships with others.

### *Situating the Current Study in Successful Aging*

It should be noted that this study does not value one definition of successful aging over another. Furthermore, this study did not set out to prove or disprove whether serious leisure promotes successful aging. Rather, this study only aims to provide a window into the experiences of those who engage with a serious leisure pursuit, and further, understand the role that serious leisure pursuit played in participants' aging process. Despite that this study focuses on the lived experiences of older adults, the idea that health and engagement with a meaningful leisure activity contributes to aging successfully cannot be ignored in the literature, since this view is supported by work on both sides of the qualitative and quantitative spectrum (Rowe and Kahn, 1997; Crowther, Parker, Achenbaum, Larimore, Koenig, 2002; Vaillant, 2002; Knight and Ricciardelli, 2003; Brown, McGuire, and Voelkl, 2008). Therefore, this study builds on that work and is a key motivator in understanding the leisure experiences of older adults. It should be noted that active engagement with a meaningful leisure activity has been said to be a nebulous concept to study quantitatively, warranting further qualitative investigation (Brown, McGuire, and Voelkl, 2008). As Peterson and Martin (2014) believed, a qualitative assessment of aging can preserve the meaning of each story, which can inform researchers and practitioners on a more individual view of the term that is, in part, determined by a particular context. The literature review now shifts to discuss the term leisure and the types of experiences people can have when involved in a particular activity.

## **Leisure**

The term “leisure” can be a useful framework to assess the various experiences one derives from engaging with a chosen activity. Leisure, as defined by Stebbins (2011) is “an uncoerced, contextually framed activity engaged in during free time, which people want to do and, using their abilities and resources, actually do them in a satisfying and fulfilling way” (p. 6). Traditional views of leisure are associated with trivial and frivolous pursuits, especially when compared to employment (Green & Jones, 2005, p. 165). Thus, historically, leisure has taken on a second class status, where activities surrounding paid work are dignified, and time spent in leisure is unimportant and doesn’t contribute to personal success (Parker, 1975, p. 92). However, Stebbins (2001) suggested the time free from the things one must do is where individuals can have a personally satisfying and full existence (p. 53). For many individuals, including older adults, the pursuit of a freely chosen activity offers a source of personal expression, achievement, self-competence, and pleasure (Clarke & Critcher, 1985, p. 166).

Since aging adults typically have more free time as their work and family obligations reduce, engaging with a meaningful leisure pursuit provides a unique context, aside from other activities, in which high levels of life satisfaction can be realized. McGuire, Boyd, and Tedrick (1999) suggested that leisure is more about the meaning attached to the particular activity rather than the activity itself. Some researchers, such as Reker and Wong (1998) suggested that the personal meaning surrounding a leisure activity is derived from an individual’s values and beliefs. They asserted that personal meaning through a leisure activity can be achieved in many ways, such as: by realizing one’s potential, including creativity and personal growth; providing service to others; or having a context to express one’s life purpose or calling. In fact, older adults in Australia and the United States reported that engagement with meaningful leisure activities was an important contributor to overall life satisfaction (Hawkins, Foose, & Binkley,

2004, p. 4). Furthermore, in the absence of a meaningful leisure activity, older adults have been shown to lack an overall sense of well-being (Cavanaugh, Blanchard-Fields, Norris, 2008, p. 430). As older adults retire from the work force, there is availability to pursue activities of choice, which may include spending more time in an already established leisure activity, or allowing freedom to explore novel opportunities, including health-related endeavors. Recently, there has been a push for research to focus on the specific characteristics of leisure that promote successful aging (Brown, McGuire, & Voelkl, 2008, 74). The concept of “serious leisure”, as proposed by Stebbins (2001) incorporates high levels of meaningful activity engagement, which has shown to be a positive contributor to successful aging.

### **Serious Leisure**

To contrast the words “serious” and “leisure” seems contradictory. However, the words related to serious should be closely linked with “earnestness, sincerity, importance, and carefulness, and not solemnity, joylessness, distress or anxiety” (Stebbins, 2001, p. 3). Serious leisure can be differentiated with what Stebbins (2001) calls “casual leisure”. Casual leisure activities are relatively short-lived in nature, and fit within such categories as: play, relaxation, passive entertainment (reading, watching T.V), active entertainment (video games, or attending parties), sociable conversation, and sensory stimulation (sex, eating) (p. 4). These activities consist of immediate, intrinsically rewarding experiences, which require no specialized training to enjoy (Green & Jones, 2005, p. 166). On the other hand, serious leisure is less hedonistic in nature, and often associated with a deferred sense of gratification, and a continual evaluation of the costs and rewards of that activity (Raisborough, 1999, p. 67). A defining attribute of serious leisure is the level of commitment and engagement a person demonstrates in the pursuit of a chosen activity, especially over time, and the perceived benefits that he or she derives from

participation (Stebbins, 2001). Serious leisure should also be seen as distinct from what Stebbins (2005) calls project-based leisure. Project-based leisure experiences are typically defined as an activity that requires considerable planning, effort, and sometimes unique skill or knowledge in order to participate, but only lasts on a short-term basis. While serious leisure is similar to project-based leisure, in the sense that it requires planning, effort, and specialized skill, serious leisure is an experience that endures over time, whereas project-based leisure is often a one-shot or occasional experience.

As noted earlier, serious leisure can be defined as having six unique qualities: the need to persevere, progression through a career-like experience, exhibiting a high personal effort, receiving durable benefits, sharing a unique ethos with others, and gaining a strong social identification (Stebbins, 2011). The following section will examine the six qualities of serious leisure as proposed by Stebbins. By deconstructing the qualities of serious leisure, the conceptual differences between serious and casual participation in a chosen activity will be revealed.

First, serious leisure activities require a level of perseverance (Stebbins, 2001, p. 6). The act of perseverance can be summed up by conquering adversity or sticking through something no matter what challenges are presented. For example, in the study by Brown et al. (2008) on shag dancers and serious leisure, participants who demonstrated high levels of personal growth and engagement also demonstrated perseverance through learning challenging footwork in order to master the specific dance moves (p. 82). Perseverance is more than conquering physical challenges though, and can include environmental or emotional challenges too, such as: confronting dangerous weather conditions on a hike or handling embarrassing moments in a group situation (Stebbins, 2001, p. 6). As well, a number of structural constraints can occur

when engaging with various leisure activities, such as time, distance traveled, and price of involvement; all of which can warrant a need for perseverance or negotiation on the part of the individual participating.

The second quality of serious leisure is finding a “career” within the pursuit, which is shaped by either turning points or stages of achievement (Stebbins, 2001, p. 6). The term career is normally associated with occupations, but here, the term is broadly used, centered on acquiring and expressing special skills, knowledge, and experience within a leisure activity (p. 3). The career process can be viewed as a series of stages: beginning, development, establishment, maintenance, and sometimes, decline (Stebbins, 2007, p. 20). These career stages are exemplified in the study by Baldwin and Norris (1999) on leisure participants within the American Kennel Club (AKC), a competitive show dog organization. Their study identified four distinct career levels, which were defined by level of competition, type of involvement, the unique roles assumed by each participant, the underlying motivation for engaging with the AKC, and the number of years of experience. A long-term career was characterized by a clear trajectory through various stages, either displaying more or less involvement, skill, or experience as time went on. In contrast, participants involved with casual leisure activities may change the manner in which they participate, but there is no clear progression characterized by acquiring new knowledge or training.

The third quality of serious leisure is exerting a high personal effort (Stebbins, 2007, p. 11). This personal effort can involve the preparation required to participate in the activity or the participation itself (Green & Jones, 2005, p. 168), and, like a career, generally requires specialized training or skill, or acquisition of new knowledge. For example, a serious sport fan might spend a considerable amount of effort in learning an entire team’s roster and statistics.



The acquisition of this knowledge is based on a continual effort of reading books, visiting specialized websites, going to sports museums, talking with other fans, and attending games. On the contrary, a sports fan, who is a casual leisure participant, may only attend the game, and not spend effort learning insider game knowledge (de Groot & Robinson, 2008).

Fourth, serious leisure participants receive durable benefits from the activity. These benefits can be viewed as broad outcomes, and can be anything that appeals to the participants, whether physical, social, or psychological. Stebbins (2007) has suggested there are eight durable benefits in serious leisure: self-actualization, self-enrichment, self-expression, regeneration or renewal of self, feelings of accomplishment, enhancement of self-image, social interaction/belongingness, and lasting physical products produced by the activity (p. 12). Durable benefits are distinct from rewards. Rewards are often connected to motivation, attracting and holding a person's participation in a specific activity (p. 13). For instance, a reward for an older adult playing golf could be swinging a hole-in-one. However, a durable benefit, as seen in the study by Siegenthaler and O'Dell (2003), is the social interaction and development of friendships that an older adult obtains through participating in golf. Additionally, according to the study by Major (2001), a durable benefit for females involved with serious running activities was the feeling of power and control derived from the activity, which created higher self-confidence among participants. Benefits can be seen as outcomes, while rewards can be seen as the motivational antecedents. In other words, the rewards are sought through participation, and benefits are simply acquired as a result of participation. However, as Stebbins (2007) noted, both benefits and rewards constitute "two sides of the same social psychological coin" (p. 13). Thus, although the distinction between the two constructs can be made, both are required for serious leisure pursuits. On the contrary, casual leisure activities

are often entertainment driven and the experiences are relatively short-lived and not enduring (Greens & Jones, 2005, p. 168).

The fifth quality of serious leisure is the ethos, or social world, that grows up and around the expression of the activity. In other words, leisure participants adopt certain norms, values, behaviors, and language practices that are associated with the activity, thereby adopting a unique social world. Unruh (1979), in his seminal piece on the characteristics and types of social worlds, recounts that a “social world” can be seen as an “internally recognizable constellation of actors, organizations, events, and practices, which have coalesced into a perceived sphere of interests and involvement for participants” (p. 115). Furthermore, Unruh suggests that social worlds are decentralized, not interned by geographic boundaries, and, at the core, defined by effective communication shared by a common language system among group members. In other words, a social world is an organization of people who share common interests and channels of communication, yet aren’t bound by traditional brick and mortar structures or formal boundaries (Crosset & Beal, 1997, p. 81). Social worlds are flexible and adaptable based on incoming and outgoing members, and symbolized by the production of a “social object” (Stebbins, 2007, p. 12). A social object arises out of the coordinated efforts of people to create and distribute an object, as well as create parameters to understand what is and isn’t part of this object (Unruh, 1980, p. 283). Green and Jones (2005) use surfing as an example to describe a social object, whereby surfers coordinate their efforts to create the conditions for surfing, determine the nature of what constitutes surfing, and promote the surfing identity as a unique sense of being. For instance, two surfers without ever having met before could successfully carry on a detailed conversation about surfing, based on a shared language practice, which only they and other members of the group could understand. An integral part of being a member of a social world is

the identity that participants create around the activity, usually manifesting in particular norms, dress, speak, and value system. Shipway, Holloway, and Jones (2012) add that shared values among members of the same group give rise to feelings of commitment and passion toward the specific activity (p. 2). Therefore, participants who do not understand the mores and conventions associated with a particular social world are likely involved with casual leisure activities, rather than serious leisure pursuits.

The final quality of serious leisure, which extends from having a unique ethos, is strongly identifying with the chosen activity. A person who has a strong social identification attaches value and emotional significance to a group membership (Green & Jones, 2005, p. 169), thereby deriving a sense of personal meaning and belongingness. Individuals form social identities through traditional forms, such as gender, race, religion, politics, and work, where opportunities exist within these groups to validate feelings of self-worth and self-esteem (p. 169). However, being involved in serious leisure activities has shown to be another context in which a person can achieve a strong sense of social identification. These serious leisure identities can be seen just as important and valuable as traditionally ascribed groups, and have been linked with motivation to pursue a particular activity (Stebbins, 2001, p. 15). For instance, a study on serious leisure participants involved with the sport of CrossFit showed that participants confirmed their identity by calling themselves “Cross-fitters” in everyday situations, demonstrating the central role that the activity played in their lives (Silverberg & Meldrum, 2013). In contrast, casual leisure activities are “too fleeting, mundane, and common place for most people to find a distinctive identity there” (Stebbins, 2001, p. 13).

In summarizing the six qualities of serious leisure, it should be noted that these qualities do not have to be achieved equally and in totality to be considered serious leisure. Some of these

qualities may present themselves to a greater degree in certain serious leisure activities, while other qualities may only exist in particular stages of an activity or under specific conditions. For instance, the shag dancer may exhibit immense personal growth through dancing with various partners and overcoming challenging footwork, whereas the sports fan, in a rather isolated pursuit, commits a high personal effort to learn intimate game knowledge. In both of these instances, the participants are involved with serious leisure but the extent of these qualities differ depending on the specific nature of the activity. Furthermore, leisure pursuits can be viewed as a continuum of activities being more or less serious. The terms serious and casual should not be seen as dichotomous or mutually exclusive, but rather fluid, where levels of engagement can shift depending on the individual and type of leisure activity. For instance, casual leisure activities, such as reading, might evolve into serious leisure, or shift within the continuum to be more serious.

Furthermore, serious leisure can include various levels of commitment and responsibility. Stebbins (2007) observed that at any point in time a person engaged with serious leisure can be classified as either: devotees, participants, or dabblers (p. 20). The “devotees” are highly dedicated to their chosen pursuit, whereas “participants” are only moderately interested in it, albeit more so than “dabblers”. “Dabblers” are individuals who aimlessly do something as a temporary diversion, and do not commit to the activity long term. “Devotees” and “participants” are defined by the varying amounts of time they commit to their hobby, and the level of engagement spent in training or preparing for the activity (p. 20).

### **Serious Leisure, Older Adults, and Sport**

Studies have been unfolding on the serious leisure activities of older adults, particularly within the context of various sporting endeavors. Gibson and Chang (2012) investigated older adults' involvement in cycling and the durable benefits sought by participants in an organized bicycle tour. It was shown that the new experiences born out of cycling in various events is one of the main benefits and reasons for involvement. Heuser (2005) studied the serious leisure careers of older adult female lawn bowlers. Their study demonstrated a career distinction amongst bowlers based on the various stages of involvement. However, regardless of the rate of involvement, bowling represented the vehicle through which women built community and personal identities. Shipway, Holloway, and Jones (2012) examined the social world of serious distance running. Their study found that serious runners developed and confirmed a running identity, which produced a level of social fulfillment as they were connected to a broader running community. Importantly, the social world provided opportunities whereby runners could celebrate a shared sense of being. Siegenthaler and O'Dell (2003) investigated whether golfing, as a serious leisure activity, could contribute to successful aging. Their study provided a window into some of the durable benefits acquired by participating in golf. The researchers interviewed 19 older adults who were serious about their involvement with golf, and found that some of the benefits of participation included meeting people and interacting with friends, as well as using golf as a therapy to help cope with physical and emotional challenges. Their study concluded that as the degree of seriousness about golf decreased, golf's contribution to successful aging also decreased. Both Dionigi (2006) and Heo et al. (2013) studied the participation of older adults in competitive senior Games. Some of the sports included: tennis, volleyball, track and field, cycling, swimming, shuffleboard, table tennis, and race walking. These researchers helped redefine the possibilities of the aging body, demonstrating that serious leisure can empower older

adults to achieve high levels of physical competency. Studies on serious leisure and aging conclude that by participating in a physical activity or sport in later years can contribute to high levels of social and physical well-being, as well as produce a lifestyle surrounded by healthy behaviors (Heo et al., 2013). Although studies on serious leisure and aging have been documented in the foregoing sporting contexts, there has not yet been any research exploring the experiences of older adults in strength-based sports, such as powerlifting. In Canada, powerlifting is a structured sport organization, governed by the Canadian Powerlifting Union (CPU), and offers many opportunities for master athletes, including older adults, to participate.

## **Powerlifting**

Powerlifting measures absolute strength by lifting the most amount of weight during one repetition (Vanderburgh & Batherham, 1999, p. 1869). Athletes compete in three specific movements: the squat, bench press, and deadlift, which are designed to measure different areas of human strength. The first movement, the squat, begins with the lifter standing erect with a bar resting on the shoulders. The athlete bends the knees, moving the buttocks towards the floor until the hips pass the parallel position. At this point, the lifter returns to standing, concluding with an erect posture. The squat utilizes every major muscle in the lower extremity and is a symbol of total lower body strength. The second movement, the bench press, is performed by lying on a horizontal flat bench face-up. The lifter takes the bar at arm's length, and lowers the bar until it touches the chest. Once the bar touches the chest, it is pressed until the arms are straight and the elbows locked. The bench press uses muscular strength throughout the entire upper body, including the back, shoulders, chest, and triceps. Lastly, the deadlift is a movement whereby athletes pull a bar off the floor assuming a standing upright position. The knees must be locked with the shoulders retracted. After standing erect with the barbell, the lifter returns the

bar to the floor. The deadlift is a total body movement, requiring both lower and upper body strength in different stages of the movement. To score in powerlifting, the heaviest lift of each movement is added together to give an athlete a “total”. For competition purposes, athletes are grouped together in both age and weight classes.

The most recognized governing body for powerlifting is the International Powerlifting Federation (IPF). The IPF operates on six continents and includes a total of 95 subsidiary countries acting under the purview of the International framework. The Canadian affiliate to the IPF, the Canadian Powerlifting Union (CPU), is a non-profit organization that formed in 1982. Recent membership numbers show a steady increase in active members over the past four years, with a significant percentage of the total membership numbers comprised of master-aged athletes (M. Armstrong, personal communication, April 22, 2014).

<b>YEAR</b>	<b>Total Membership</b>	<b>Total Master Membership</b>	<b>Percentage of Master Memberships</b>
2010	730	159	21.78%
2011	809	205	25.34%
2012	996	222	22.29%
2013	1320	271	20.53%

The CPU has provincial representation in all provinces except New Brunswick and the Territories. Each provincial association governs its own affairs in accordance with the CPU and IPF bylaws, and hosts local and provincial powerlifting contents. All members of the CPU are subject to both in-contest and out-of-contest drug testing in accordance with the World Anti-

Doping Agency (WADA), the same agency that is supported by the International Olympic Committee (IOC). At this time, powerlifting is not recognized by Sport Canada since the status required for affiliation requires a membership base of 5000 people, inclusive of all ages.

### **Master Powerlifting**

The IPF has developed different age classes for master athletes in order to provide a space where individuals of like-ability can compete against one another. There are four master age categories for both men and women: Master 1 (40-49), Master 2 (50-59), Master 3 (60-69), and Master 4 (70 and upwards). These master age categories have been created with the understanding that, within each age subset, athletes have the fairest ability to compete against one another in sanctioned competitions. Competitions are available at different levels, from local, regional, National and International. There is no prerequisite for master athletes to compete at local level competitions. However, while each province unit varies slightly, most have a qualifying standard to participate at the Provincial Championships, as well as requirements to participate at the National Championships. At the top level, the IPF sanctions a World Master Powerlifting Championships, hosted annually. The CPU nominates master athletes to represent Canada as part of the World team, which is based on their performance at the Canadian National Championship. Athletes attending the World Championships compete for individual rankings based on their total within a specific age and weight class. However, each country also competes in a team competition, which is based on a point system of individual performances. Recently, Canada has had strong showings in the team ranking at the World Championships. In 2011 and 2012, the Canadian Master Powerlifting Team has ranked top three in each Master category (IPF, n.d.). These results indicate that Canadian master



powerlifters are among the most competent in the world when compared with similar-aged competitors from other countries.

In summary, the Canadian population is growing older, and two factors, participation in physical activity and engagement with meaningful leisure pursuits, have been shown to promote successful aging (Baker et al., 2009; Rowe & Kahn, 1997). The serious leisure perspective is a way of looking at leisure activities and the types of experiences that arise from prolonged and meaningful participation. Specifically, serious leisure activities are those that are viewed as highly substantial and fulfilling, where participants can acquire and express a combination of skills, knowledge, and experience (Stebbins, 2001). It is important for older adults to adopt leisure activities that incorporate a strength training element to reduce the impacts of age-related muscle decline correlated with a loss of physical functioning (Seguin & Nelson, 2003). Older adults who maintain strength have more control over activities of daily living and reduced chances of unexpected falling episodes (Geithner & Mckenney, 2010; MHP, 2004). There have been numerous studies examining the serious leisure experiences of older adults in various physical activity contexts; however, there have been no studies conducted in powerlifting, the quintessential form of strength training. Results from the study will showcase the experiences of older adults involved in powerlifting, as a serious leisure pursuit, and how their experiences impact their aging process.

## Chapter 3: Method

This chapter will outline the methods employed in conducting the study. I start by revising the research questions, since these questions guided the design, analysis, and representation of the study. Next, I offer an overview of the participants and proceed to discuss the recruiting process. In order to understand the recruiting process in further detail, I situate myself as the researcher within the research context, as it's important to recognize my particular relationship with the participants and my background and connection to the powerlifting community. The final headings in this section will address the study's design, which used open-ended interviews, and the process of data analysis. The data analysis included two stages: (1) categorizing the interviews into unique narratives using NVivo10, and (2) utilizing the method of concept mapping to add meaning and conceptual representation to each of the participants' stories. This chapter is infused with the epistemological and ontological assumptions that underpin the study's methodology. Importantly, the study is conducted through a qualitative lens, viewing knowledge as co-created between the researcher and participant, while truth being constructed through the representation of the participant's story; validated by the stories' emotion, merit, insightfulness, authenticity and its ability to engage the reader to internalize the participants' narratives and draw knowledge out of this experience.

### Research Question

1. What are the lived experiences of older adults who engage in competitive powerlifting as a serious leisure pursuit?
  - a. What was the main attraction to the sport of powerlifting?

- b. What makes powerlifting, as an activity for older adults, meaningful and important to their lives?
- c. How do older adults view powerlifting as part of their own aging process?

## **Overview of Participants**

After receiving ethical approval from the Human Research Ethics Board at the University of Victoria, three older adult powerlifters were recruited, two females and one male. The ages of each participant were between 50 to 59 years old. According to the IPF weight classifications, the participants recruited were categorized as Master 2 athletes (ages 50-59). Research conducted with master athletes in various competitive sporting contexts has previously defined “older adults” as those who are aged 50 and older (Diongi, 2006; Heo et al., 2013). Thus, the age of participants for the study were selected in line with prior research. However, it should be recognized that there is no pre-determined age that defines “older adults”, since it was clear in the results of my research that being “older” was recognized as a state of mind rather than a chronological age. We should also recognize that the Master 2 category in powerlifting does not assume or delineate a particular way of living in the world, and that the experiences within this category can be unique, and potentially, wholly different from a similar-aged adult.

Further, selection criteria for participants included: self-identifying as a powerlifter, being a current member of the CPU, previously competing in at least three powerlifting competition, and the ability to speak English. Also, the selection criteria required each participant to feel that they were engaged in a serious leisure pursuit. Thus, as part of the recruiting process, participants were briefed on the meaning of serious leisure and asked whether their experiences in powerlifting matched these criteria, in particular, as it related to the six qualities of serious

leisure. Due to the selection requirements outlined above, it was assumed that each participant viewed powerlifting as a serious pursuit, and an activity that was highly meaningful, where involvement was enduring rather than fleeting. Furthermore, subsequent narratives from the interviews appeared to support the idea that participants viewed powerlifting as a serious leisure pursuit.

While it was important to ensure each criterion above, diverse perspectives were selected in order to showcase different stories and experiences within powerlifting. Therefore, participants were selected who had: varied years of experience in the sport, from those who were involved as young adults to those who only got involved later in life; participated in roles outside of being an athlete, such as being a volunteer, administrator, or coach; and, competed at various levels from local, provincial, national, and international events. In this way, each participant recruited displayed a unique voice. Specifically, it should be noted that one male and female participant were involved in powerlifting as open-aged athletes, and continue to be involved with powerlifting currently; and, one female participant only began powerlifting as an older adult with no previous experience in strength training.

## **Recruitment**

### *Researcher's Background in Powerlifting*

Recruitment occurred using my first-hand knowledge of the sport of powerlifting. To understand the method of recruiting, an understanding of my involvement within powerlifting, and the various roles I have assumed is essential (Sparkes, 2002, p. 51). While I will outline a number of roles, I do this without the intention to be self-aggrandizing, but rather, to be transparent as a researcher in showcasing my deep involvement within the powerlifting

community. Importantly, I consider powerlifting meaningful leisure activity based on the qualities of serious leisure noted in Chapter two.

To begin, I have nine years of competitive powerlifting experience, competing at different levels, most prominently, competing at the World Championships on three occasions. As well, I am a National record holder in the bench press, two-time overall National Bench Press Champion, and medalist at the 2010 World Bench Press Championships. In order to achieve this kind of success within powerlifting, I have had to design my lifestyle to support such a rigorous athletic endeavor. As a result, my training requires intense focus and commitment, and my social community involves only those who directly support my goals.

Outside of my role as an athlete, I have contributed to the leadership and administration of the sport in a number of ways. First, I am a coach at various levels, acting on behalf of the national powerlifting organization. From 2012 to 2014, I was named as the Head Coach for Team Canada Powerlifting, coaching the World Bench Press Team, World Sub-Junior/Junior (14-23 years old) Team, and Open Men's and Women's World Powerlifting Team respectively. As part of representing these teams, I have travelled internationally and worked one-on-one with Canada's top athletes. In addition to this coaching role, I operate a private online coaching business, Pursuit of Strength, which provides athletes with various remote coaching services, including powerlifting programming and contest preparation. In contrast to the elite clientele I work with for Team Canada, my business caters to a variety of clientele, including athletes ranging from different age categories, sporting backgrounds, goals, and level of experience. Through this business, I have coached both novice and elite athletes through different stages of their athletic development.

Second, I'm a member of the Alberta Powerlifting Union (APU) Executive Committee, which is a non-profit, volunteer-based organization that administers the sport of powerlifting within Alberta. From 2011 to 2013, I served as the Secretary for the APU; and from 2014 to present day, as the President. As part of the Executive duties, I am required to attend every competition hosted within Alberta. Due to this exposure at local and provincial competitions, I have developed many relationships with athletes, spectators, and volunteers, and have engaged in repeated dialogue with these members broadly. Ultimately, this ongoing connection and ground level experience with powerlifters provides me with a deeper understanding of the intricacies of the sport and those who participate.

Third, I've acted as a Meet Director for both local and provincial powerlifting competitions in Western Canada. The Meet Director's role is to provide a safe and friendly powerlifting environment, while ensuring the infrastructure and organization of the contest is efficiently controlled. Moreover, the Meet Director is responsible for shaping the experiences of those who enter a powerlifting competition; whether or not the athletes had a successful experience relies, in part, on the Meet Director. Within this role, I take pride in structuring a welcoming and inclusive powerlifting environment, where athletes of all ages and abilities feel comfortable competing.

Lastly, since I'm nationally certified by the governing body for powerlifting in Canada, I regularly serve as a referee at powerlifting contests. I have provided referee duties at all level of competition, including: local, provincial and National. While the referee's job is to uphold the highest standards for competition according to the accepted rulebook, the referee is in a unique position to watch hundreds of lifting attempts in a single day of competition, thereby witnessing, broadly, the lifters who compete at various levels.

In the recruitment process, I was able to use this first-hand knowledge of powerlifting in order to select participants who fit the study's criteria. It is only through my unique perspective that the participants were identified and selected. While this may be seen as a limitation, a researcher who had no powerlifting-related knowledge or established relationship with the powerlifting community might have failed to identify participants with such rich, enduring, and authentic stories to share, and furthermore, might have been unsuccessful in connecting with participants on an interpersonal level.

While Patton (2002) suggested that reporting the researcher's background is a key function in building credibility and authenticity to qualitative studies, it is equally as important to describe my own thoughts and feelings toward the role that powerlifting plays in my life. Powerlifting is an activity that develops physical strength. I use the physical strength achieved through training for powerlifting as a way to measure my own personal growth as an athlete. While many people achieve a sense of personal growth through their families, careers, or other leisure activities, powerlifting is the context in which I am able to draw feelings of accomplishment and satisfaction. Training and preparing for a powerlifting competition can take many weeks, months, and sometimes years, and the payoff that is realized after achieving personal goals and milestones is an incredible sense of elation. While these feelings are experienced personally, I am intimately attached to a broader powerlifting community that is able to share similar emotions. In other words, when I succeed or fail, others are able to feel that same success or failure, and the emotions are used to celebrate or support each other in the community. The powerlifting community is a major part of my life, since I'm able to draw an incredible amount of inspiration and motivation to continue my pursuits, as well as have a place

to share common experiences with people who understand the perspective of being a competitive powerlifter; the highs and lows, the successes and struggles, the wins and losses.

### *Method of Recruiting Participants*

The specific method for recruiting participants occurred in the following ways. The contact information of numerous master-aged athletes was obtained prior to the commencement of the study due to my already established connection within the powerlifting community. In other words, since I'm deeply rooted within the powerlifting community, I already acquired many contacts of older adults who fit the study's criteria. Therefore, in considering the participants for this study, I pursued participants who demonstrated the qualities described in the selection criteria, as well as, participants with whom I had a good rapport, in order to ensure openness and trustworthiness in later stages of the research process. While there were many older adult powerlifters who fit the study's criteria, I specifically selected participants who I understood to display interesting and unique stories worth sharing, especially stories that would appeal to a variety of audiences, not solely audiences affiliated with powerlifting. As well, I selected participants who I believed engaged with powerlifting on multiple levels, and maintained their connection to the sport for a variety of reasons, which is evident through the individual narratives showcased in Chapter 4.

To initiate contact with the participants, I used a scripted email that was approved by the Human Research Ethics Board. The message informed participants of the study's purpose, research questions, design, and role of the researcher. The master powerlifters I contacted were given a voluntary choice to participate and told that whether they decided to be involved or not, their actions would not affect their status as an athlete or member of the APU/CPU, or any future



services they chose to access from me or APU/CPU. Importantly, I did not recruit any participants who I've previously coached, thereby avoiding any power-over relationships. Recruitment occurred on an ongoing basis until unique stories and experiences presented themselves. Notably, there were not any participants who were contacted that refused to be part of the study; each participant I contacted was eager to be involved and share their individual story.

## **Data Collection**

### *Design*

Once participants volunteered to be part of the study, an interview was scheduled at a time of their convenience. The Interviews varied in location. I was able to meet two out-of-the three participants in person since they resided in the same geographical location. The exact locations of these interviews were determined by the participant based on their level of comfort; one participant chose his place of resident, the other chose a private meeting room at her workplace. However, the third participant lived too far to conduct an interview in person, and so the interview was scheduled over the phone. Since I had already established a relationship with each participant, based on my connection to the powerlifting community, the location and manner of the interviews did not affect the quality of the data collection process.

The interviews were conducted from October 2013 to January 2014. Each interview lasted between one and two hours, and discontinued when information no longer pertained to the purpose of the study. As well, the audio from each interview was recorded in order to allow me to transcribe the data for the purposes of analysis. The recorded audio files were saved in a password protected folder on my computer, and the entirety of the data collected from the

interviews are scheduled to be discarded five years after the completion of my graduate program. Furthermore, the participants were given pseudonyms throughout all stages of the research process in order to ensure confidentiality.

Prior to the commencement of each interview I obtained participant consent (See Appendix A). Additionally, the participants were asked whether they self-identified with powerlifting. To determine whether or not participants self-identified, they were asked if they referred to themselves as a “powerlifter” in their day-to-day lives, outside the gym environment. If a positive response was obtained, then it was assumed that participants were self-identifying with powerlifting. Furthermore, I asked participants whether they felt powerlifting was a serious leisure activity. To determine the seriousness of participant’s engagement with powerlifting, I read an overview detailing the six qualities of serious leisure, and then asked the participant if they felt powerlifting was a meaningful and enduring activity based on this definition. Importantly, each of the three participants who were interviewed for the study had a positive response to both self-identifying with powerlifting and viewing it as a serious leisure activity.

The interview guide was designed with open-ended questions in order to allow participants to speak freely about their experiences in powerlifting (See Appendix B). I had an outline of topics to be covered in each interview, based on the research questions, but did not conform to a fixed script since each interviewing context was inherently different. Importantly, in order to understand each participant’s unique perspective, part of the interview questions sought to reveal their particular history within the sport of powerlifting. The tone of the interviews remained conversational and informal. The advantage of having an open interview format is that the researcher is able to have flexibility in using his knowledge, expertise, and interpersonal skills to explore interesting and unexpected ideas or themes that are raised by the

participants (Klenke, 2008, p. 130). However, Sewell (n.d.) voiced that open-ended and conversational interviews require the interviewer to be able to know when to probe for more in-depth responses or guide the interview to ensure all areas of each topic are explored fully (Using Qualitative Interviews section, para. 3). Thus, since I already had established relationships with each participant, and had extensive knowledge in the sport of powerlifting, I was able to accommodate the conversational nature of the interview process, probe for opinions and feelings in relation to a particular experience, understand the historical context in which the participant was situated, and at the same time, cover all topic-related questions.

### *Methodology*

One of the dominant tenets with any qualitative method is that the researcher, using his or her own filtering system, is the instrument, rather than an external measuring device, as seen with methods associated with the scientific paradigm (Patton, 1987). Therefore, in the context of this study, I brought my own perspectives and worldviews to the research process, and as a result, was affected by my personality, knowledge, skill, and training in the sport of powerlifting. Sewell (n.d.) stated that while these subjective factors are sometimes considered threats to validity, they can also be strengths since the “skilled interviewer can use flexibility and insight to ensure an in-depth and detailed understanding of the participant’s experience” (Design and Development of Interview Studies, para. 4).

It is important to realize that I shared the research context with the participants involved. Interviews are necessarily a social process. Therefore, the knowledge that was created throughout each interview was negotiated mutually through the interactions between me and each participant (Klenke, 2008, p. 131). Fundamentally, in order to understand the meaning

around each narrative, the participant and I depended on each other for this process to be successful. Rather than the participant simply sharing a story, and then accepting this narrative at face value, I would create meaning alongside the participant to ensure the insightfulness of each story. For example, it was common throughout the interview process for the participant to share a particular narrative, and then, as a meaning-making method, I would explain this experience comparing my own lived realities with the participant's experiences. Often this process prompted both the participant and I to understand our experiences in a deeper and more significant way, or at the minimum, verified the way in which I interpreted the story as being coherent, thereby upholding the integrity of each narrative. While there were certainly times throughout the research process when the participant's experiences closely aligned with my own lived realities within the sport of powerlifting, there were also moments where the participant's experiences disconfirmed my own understandings. Ultimately, these disconfirming moments, where my own thoughts and ideas were challenged on what it meant to seriously engage with powerlifting, created an honest and authentic research enterprise, as well as acted to preserve my reflexivity as a researcher.

In short, I meaningfully assumed an active role with the participant in co-creating what was known and valued within the researcher context. Since I was able to understand the intricacies within the sport of powerlifting, and the type of experiences that arise through participation, the stories were able to be told in a way that enhanced their uniqueness, impact, and authenticity (Sparkes, 2002, p. 208). While other researchers could, in theory, utilize the same interview questions, the knowledge obtained from the interviews in this study was borne through an inter-subjective awareness, a relational process, where new knowledge was only able to flourish because of the interdependent relationship between the specific researcher and

participant. Importantly, whether the interview was conducted in person or over the phone, the knowledge created within the research context remained a relational process.

## **Data Analysis**

After the interviews were conducted, I began a process of categorizing the data collected (Miles & Huberman, 1994). To aid in the process of analysis, the interviews were reviewed audibly and memos were created connecting audio clips with commentary that revealed significant emotion and stories that added greater insight into particular experiences. The audio clips were reviewed again, and then transcribed verbatim. Once the interviews were transcribed, I used NVivo10 to categorize narratives perceived as important and unique. These categories were broad so that I could group narratives with similar qualities. For example, some categories included but were not limited to: “stories around commitment”, “stories around the experience of competition”, “stories around struggle”. Often, stories would overlap between two or more categories, and so, when applicable, a single narrative would lend itself to multiple categories. In this way, categories were flexible, and not used to derive fixed outcomes. Importantly, while participants sometimes offered similar stories in light of a particular experience, there were many cases of unique stories being revealed, only applicable to the singular participant. Thus, in the process of categorizing stories, no pre-conceived labels were used when analyzing each interview. The categories used to group narratives were independently unique to each interview, and each analysis was rooted in the participants’ own lived experiences. As core narratives emerged, the qualities of serious leisure guided further analysis and understanding of each story.

In order to continue to see connections within stories and add meaning to each narrative, I created a conceptual representation using a concept mapping software called MindMaple v.1.65

(See Appendix C, D, & E). Concept mapping is “a schematic device for representing a set of concept meanings embedded in a framework of propositions (Novak and Gowin, 2984, p. 15). In effect, concept mapping allowed for further data analysis by allowing me to focus on detailed quotes from the interviews, as well as develop a broader understanding of the bigger story. Concept mapping was a way to describe relationships within and across stories, as well as a way to illustrate participants’ experiences visually. Previous research suggested that concept mapping is a way for the data analysis process to preserve the meaning within a given text, as well as root the participants’ experiences within a given context (Daley, 2004, p. 1)

Bygstad & Munkvold (2007) contend that throughout the data analysis, researchers ought to return to the participants and ask for clarity on particular interview responses. While this follow-up method of interviewing has said to add validity to the research process, the current study did not employ this technique due to the already established and well-founded relationships that I had with each participant. These prior relationships ultimately built the context around the interview process, as well as how the knowledge was created and mutually agreed upon and understood. In this way, the data collected from each interview didn’t seek for clarity, as noted by Bygstad & Munkvold, but rather strived to capture authentic and compelling expressions of reality (Sparkes, 2002, p. 209). The authentic representations of these stories were made possible because of my ability to understand the nuances and idiosyncrasies of the sport of powerlifting and how each participant fit within this milieu. However, when a researcher is immersed within the research process, it is important to maintain a level of reflexivity. Thus, I critically reflected on the evolution of my own thoughts and actions throughout the research process, and how I had shaped the research, and vice versa (Watt, 2007). To aid in this process, I regularly met with research colleagues and my graduate supervisor who

did not have prior exposure to the sport of competitive powerlifting. In this way, I was able to engage in thoughtful dialogue around participants' stories and my own personal experiences with powerlifting.

## **Representation of Data**

The representation of research refers to the process of construction by a researcher to create a textual product (Sparks, 2002, p. 9). It is now thought that how a researcher represents data is an integral feature of the research enterprise. Ultimately, the findings are "inscribed in the way we write about things" (p.11). Therefore, in order to create meaning around participants' narratives, and uphold the emotion, merit, insightfulness, and authenticity of each story (p. 208), I present my findings by telling an intact story of each participant. Each story is presented uniquely as its own, bestowing the lived experiences of each participant in the context of powerlifting. Each story is told separately from one another, and uses quotes from the interview to deepen the reader's connectedness and identification with the story. I did not separate narratives into fixed categories, as the flow of each story is important. Rather, I frame participant's stories around a history of his or her involvement, as well as embed my own particular relationship with the participant. To help construct the stories, I used the concept maps to string together relevant narratives from the participants' past, allowing me to see how particular experiences shaped big picture events. The stories are not meant to be read as a mirror of the world, and ought not to serve as an all-encompassing story for every master powerlifter. While certain experiences might emerge across stories, the only person who inhabits these narratives is the individual participant. Importantly, these narratives are distinct, only providing a window into a single experience as a master powerlifter. Readers are asked to judge these

stories on their ability to be drawn into the “experiences of respondents in such a way that those experiences can be felt” (p. 206) While readers may not be affiliated with the powerlifting community, readers ought to internalize the participants’ narratives, and draw knowledge out of this experience by incorporating their own past and perspectives. Finally, each story is a representation of the knowledge that was co-created by the researcher and participant throughout the research process. These stories were informed by the participants’ experiences in powerlifting, and at the same time, the researcher’s particular relationship with each participant, and his own knowledge and understanding of the powerlifting world.



## Chapter 4: Results

This chapter will detail three unique master powerlifting stories. In the first story, we meet Earl; a 58 year old powerlifter who engages with powerlifting on multiple levels, deriving a significant amount of personal accomplishment through his volunteer roles as a sport administrator. The second story introduces Lucy; a 55 year old powerlifter who has reached incredible athletic success as both an open-aged and master-aged athlete, strongly committed to becoming the best lifter in the world for her class. The third story is Judy's; a relative newcomer to the sport of powerlifting, at the age of 53, who uses powerlifting as a means to build strength in order to continue pursuing activities outside of the gym context.

As suggested earlier, the stories are portrayed as narratives, giving reference to the participant's particular history within the sport, and using quotations from the interview to add detail and emotion, as well as enhance the reader's connectedness and identification with the stories. The stories will reveal both positive and negative experiences in relation to the participant's involvement with powerlifting. Each story serves to address the primary research question: What are the lived experiences of older adults who engage in competitive powerlifting as a serious leisure pursuit?

### **Stories of Master Powerlifters**

*Story #1: Earl – 55 years old, impassioned by being the 'sport administrator'*

*"I saw three guys in the corner of the gym, all small guys, putting up enormous weights, I was inspired by it. Some will tell ya it's intimidating, but I was inspired by it. That's what I think everyone in the gym should be, they should be inspired"*

At this point in Earl's life, he was 28 years old, unemployed and out of shape. He decided to join a local gym to work on his fitness, but didn't know what he was doing. After visiting the gym for a few weeks, he started talking with the "guys" who lifted heavy weights as they seemed like people who knew what they were doing; they were powerlifters. As time went on, these powerlifters showed Earl how to properly perform the powerlifting movements, and invited him to be part of their training group. A year later, Earl entered his first powerlifting competition.

I've known Earl since I first became involved with powerlifting. I don't remember the first time we met, but I do remember he was one of the first people I encountered through competing. He has always held some sort of leadership or administrative role within the sport since joining powerlifting. Perhaps this is the reason why he is one of the first people I can ever recall meeting. Earl is the contest director for many local, provincial, and National powerlifting Championships. If Earl is not hosting events, he is a devoted volunteer. He has attended every competition held within his home province of Alberta, often serving as a scorekeeper, referee, or platform manager. Thus, I was likely first introduced to Earl while competing at one of these events he either hosted or volunteered. Since that time, we have often trained with one another, sharing the camaraderie of being workout partners, especially as competitions approach. However, our relationship is also connected through our passion for growing the sport of powerlifting.

In 1985, the first year Earl competed in powerlifting was the same year that the Alberta Powerlifting Union was officially registered as a Society. At that time, there weren't many athletes involved, and the organization lacked structure. However, Earl wanted to see

powerlifting grow, and in 1987, he took over as the Alberta Powerlifting Union President. Following that role, he served eight years as the Canadian Powerlifting Union President, and two years as the Assistant Secretary for the International Powerlifting Federation. As part of his tenure in these leadership roles, Earl made a major contribution in creating the constitutional changes necessary to include amputee lifters in the sport of powerlifting. Furthermore, Earl was pivotal in bringing the sport of powerlifting online, and in the late 1990s, he served as the first Webmaster for the Alberta Powerlifting Union, Canadian Powerlifting Union, and International Powerlifting Federation. While Earl still continues as the Webmaster for the National organization today, there are many additional roles he is currently involved with, including acting as the: Executive Secretary for the Canadian Powerlifting Union, Records Chairman for the Canadian Powerlifting Union and Alberta Powerlifting Union, Officiating Chairman for the Alberta Powerlifting Union, and Head Coach for the Canadian Masters Powerlifting Team. Each of these roles, provincially and nationally, are volunteer-based positions, and thus monetary compensation is not received for leading within these organizations.

When asking Earl about how much time he collectively spends on each of these roles within powerlifting, he replied:

*“Probably 20 hours per week. The time is tremendous. At least for me, anyways. You just do it because you have to do it. You just make the time”.*

Earl views the time he spends on the administration of powerlifting as part of his identity, and while the roles are volunteer-based, they serve a necessary purpose. Earl explained that the administration is a personal obligation, and something that has become more of an obligation as he grows older. He said:

*“Somebody has got to do it. And if you want it done right, you got to do it yourself. I’ve never really wanted to give it up because no one else is going to be able to do it as well as me, well maybe they could do it as well, but would they be able to keep doing it for the next 15 years? 20 years? 25 years? And stick with it as much as I do?”*

Earl views the work he does for the administration of powerlifting as the object in which he derives a sense of accomplishment:

*“Powerlifting makes me feel like I’m contributing to something that’s bigger than just me, and contributing to the growth of it. I’m sure you can get the same sense of accomplishment from other things. But I’m not involved in anything else that would give that to me. I know a lot of people that get that (a sense of accomplishment) out of their career, their family life...I guess I just picked powerlifting as the place where I get my sense of accomplishment. Everyone wants a feeling of accomplishment, more than you want to get paid for something”.*

Earl views his involvement with the administration of powerlifting similar to the commitment required to build and maintain a career. Earl reflected on how he needs to keep a balance in his life in order to make powerlifting a priority:

*“You got to keep the balance pretty narrow. You can’t have too many things going on in your life and give them all what they’re due. Like, if I had kids, and they wanted to play hockey, and my wife wanted to be in dog obedience classes, and everything else going on in my life, I wouldn’t be able to give powerlifting what it deserves. (pause). And I feel like I’ve given powerlifting everything I’ve got to give”.*

However, striking that balance between giving powerlifting what it deserves and the rest of his life has been, admittedly, challenging, and perhaps has led to the detriment of other areas in his life. As Earl described, there were many sacrifices he has made in order to continue his commitment toward powerlifting:

*“I’ve gone through two wives since getting into powerlifting. Powerlifting is still there. The wives are gone. You have to give something everything you’ve got. And if you’re involved in too many things, you can’t give them everything you’ve got. So maybe I’m*

*guilty of not having enough left over to have made those marriages work. Or if I wanted to have kids, to make that work”.*

Nevertheless, as Earl grows older, he reflected on how his involvement in these various roles is an intellectual activity, and how this mental stimulation is important to his well-being:

*“It keeps me mentally busy because of what I do on the computer all the time...It gives me something to occupy my mind. It gives me something to keep my brain busy. I don’t want to come home and veg and sit in front of the TV, and I know way too many people my age who do that. I want to keep my brain going. If I don’t have something to do I’d be doing something totally non-productive”.*

While Earl still competes in powerlifting today, he often has to forego his own athletic pursuits in lieu of the organizational roles he continues to be part of:

*“I’ve given up on my commitment on the lifting because of the administration...There have been a lot of contests where we didn’t have enough referees, so I’m having to referee and not lift. I think if I wasn’t so involved with that I probably would have been a much better lifter. But you got to decide which is more important. I always, and I mean always, put the needs of the sport before my own needs”.*

That being said, Earl has had a long powerlifting career. In Earl’s younger years, competing as an open-aged athlete (ages 23-39), he claimed gold at the National Championships on two occasions, and previously set the National record for the deadlift. As well, he qualified for the 1996 World Championships and placed 10<sup>th</sup>.

Presently, Earl is very successful master-aged athlete. At 58, Earl placed 3<sup>rd</sup> at the 2013 World Master Powerlifting Championships. In 2014, Earl broke the National bench press record for his age and weight class; lifting 507lbs. Interestingly, this weight was the heaviest bench press he had ever lifted in his entire powerlifting career.

When asking Earl about how his approach to training has changed as an older adult compared to his younger self, he was acutely aware of his training evolution and the types of modifications that are necessary:

*“I’ve really had to modify my training as I get older. I used to go to the gym and would be there for two-and-a-half hours. Now if I do that it would kill me. When you get to your 50s you start to realize you just can’t do everything. You can’t do those long workouts. I will go in now, and the day I bench, I bench, and that’s all I do. The day I squat, I squat. I used to be able to do a lot more assistant work, but I just can’t do that anymore. I have to concentrate my energy on the main lifts”.*

Furthermore, Earl acknowledged that there are a lot more aches and pains while training for powerlifting. In part, managing the level of aches and pains is one of the reasons for Earl’s adapted training program as he grows older. While aches and pains aren’t unique to older powerlifters, and typically experienced by athletes of all ages, Earl’s occurrences with injury seem far more common in his older age and much more debilitating on a day-to-day level:

*“Aches and pains seem to come and go from nowhere. My back will just pop out some days. I’ll have a heavy deadlift workout, and I’ll feel great, then the next day I wake up and I’m crooked. Literally, crooked. You can see it in the mirror. My shoulders are three inches left of where they should be. I’ve had days where I think I won’t be able to walk normally for the rest of my life. That seems to happen a lot more than it ever did. But it goes away”.*

While this amount of prolonged pain seems serious, Earl minimizes the extent to which these experiences affect his overall well-being. In fact, through his justifications he made some apparent contradictions by suggesting that powerlifters have less aches and pains than the average population, but on the other hand, admitting to having injuries that required surgery. For instance:

*“Physically, I think powerlifting keeps your bones and muscles active. Too many people get old too early...I see them shuffling around. Guys who have had bad knees for 20 years. Well, powerlifters don’t have that. I’ve never had shoulder problems. I’ve never had elbow problems. I haven’t had any serious aches and pains for years. Except for this knee. My left knee. I had it operated on a couple years ago”.*

While this sort of experience might dissuade someone from continuing a particular type of exercise, Earl continues to be committed to his powerlifting training. Earl said that one of the motivating reasons to train at such high intensity, despite his aches and pains, is knowing that a competition is approaching, and the desire to achieve specific goals and outcomes at these competitions. For example:

*Just going to the gym to lift weights, get in shape, for no real reason, I couldn’t get motivated by that. Doing your targets in the gym doesn’t really mean anything. But on the line, on the competition platform, that’s when it counts.*

For Earl, the motivation to compete is derived through the challenge required to be successful on the competition platform. It’s the process of setting a goal, and working through challenges in order to attain that goal – as noted by Earl, sometimes the challenge is managing various aches and pains. In talking about the necessity of a challenge in order to feel successful in his training, Earl said:

*“I am always the kind of person that does best when I have a challenge or a goal. Having a challenge is beating yourself, doing better, doing at least what you did before. The hard work is the fun part. (Pause). I guess I feel sorry for other people my age because they don’t know that feeling of a challenge. Maybe they never have. Or never will again. That’s for sure”.*

Through powerlifting, Earl also derives a sense of uniqueness in being able to accomplish certain physical tasks that other people his age aren’t able to achieve. He believed the physical

strength acquired through powerlifting makes him special, and thus, a motivating reason to continue his engagement with powerlifting as he ages. Earl admitted:

*It makes me feel special about myself that I can do something that normal people can't do, don't do, won't do. A lot of people my age go to the gym and they work out and they play around on the treadmills. But it's not the same as putting 400-500lbs over your face and lowering it to your chest and trying to push it. It's not the same. It's not the same level. It's not the same intensity.*

Earl also strongly believed that powerlifting allows him to maintain a sense of youthfulness as he ages:

*I think too many people get old too early. They get ahead of their time and powerlifters don't have that. It keeps us young. You can tell when you interact with a person. You can tell whether someone is old. They have old attitudes.*

Earl connected the idea of self-improvement with being a youthful quality, and that powerlifting allows opportunities for self-improvement. Earl told stories of some of the oldest powerlifters he knew still competing, and reflected on how their youthful perspective was a result of wanting, despite age, to improve their skill in powerlifting. In other words, Earl believed that since powerlifters continually search for improvements in their physical accomplishment, that those older athletes are able to focus their mindset on enhancing their physical functioning rather than allowing it to deteriorate. Furthermore, Earl voiced that the “rush” of competing is a feeling that is ageless:

*“You just love that feeling, the feeling of ‘I just pulled 600lbs off the floor’”. The rush it gives you. I mean, it may not be the same weight as compared to when I was younger, but the rush feels the same”.*



Earl admitted that strength often decreases with age, especially if a person has been competing for a long time. As a result, Earl has witnessed some powerlifters who see their strength decline, typically when they have reached the master-age categories, and ultimately retire from competing in the sport altogether. However, for Earl, it has been particularly important that the sport of powerlifting offers master categories. He views the master categories as a way for people to continue, or start, powerlifting at a later age, in a way that levels the playing field. Thus, even though Earl has competed as a younger adult and seen, on the whole, a decline in his strength as he ages, he finds motivation in the ability to compare himself against similar-aged master powerlifters:

*“When I was in my 20s, 30s, and even 40s, I felt like I was indestructible. Youth is often like that. But I’m sliding down the other side of the hill. I can’t do everything I was able to do when I was 35. But that is part of maturity. That is part of getting older – to realize that you can’t do the same thing you did. But I can still compare myself to people in my age group. And I don’t see anything wrong with that”.*

Over the years Earl’s engagement with the powerlifting has shifted to focus on his relationship with other powerlifters. He values the social relationships with other members of the powerlifting community, but at the same time, recognizes that maintaining these connections as he ages are only made possible through the advancements of social media. He noted that he doesn’t spend much time with people outside the gym, and much of his daily life is isolated. Thus, as a way to maintain his relationships with other powerlifters, Earl interacts through email, text, various Facebook pages and forums, all of which connect him to the powerlifting community broadly. Furthermore, Earl cherishes the time spent at competitions, despite often long travels at a personal expense, to engage face-to-face with other powerlifters:

*“I love going to contests for the personal interaction. I’ve known people for 25 years, coming up on 30 years with some of them, and that’s the only time I ever see them is at*

*the contests. Nationals is like a family reunion in many ways – when you're there for 5 or 6 days it's a social activity with people you haven't seen in a year, and likely won't see again for another year".*

In summary, while Earl has seen much success on the competition platform as an athlete, both as a younger and older adult, he often derives his sense of accomplishment and identity through the volunteer roles he assumes. The amount of time committed toward the sport administration is incredible, and he views this involvement similar to the type of responsibility required to maintain a career. Furthermore, as Earl ages, he views his volunteer roles as being intellectually stimulating, admitting that he values this kind of activity in his overall health and well-being. As an athlete, Earl finds that competing in powerlifting holds his training accountable, in that competition requires him to set goals and overcome challenges to be successful. As Earl competes as an older adult, he understands the importance of modifying and adapting his training, especially in relation to his current pain and injuries. Earl derives many durable benefits from competing in powerlifting, including: having a sense of pride in performing physical tasks that other older adults aren't capable of doing and maintaining a youthful outlook on life through continuously advancing his physical capacities. Earl has found it particularly important that the sport of powerlifting offers master classes in order for him to continue competing in his later years. As well, Earl's engagement with competing in powerlifting stems from being deeply connected to the social community surrounding the sport, admitting that he often travels to competitions to see friends, which is equally as important as competing itself.

*Story #2: Lucy – 55 years old, elite-level powerlifter throughout all stages of career*

Lucy began her powerlifting journey in 1979. Her entrance into the sport happened by accident. At that time, she was just starting her career in the military. During one of the training drills that involved running, Lucy sustained a severe ankle injury as her foot landed in a gofer hole. The physiotherapist who treated her injury recommended a series of ankle strengthening exercises. To ensure Lucy performed these exercises with proper form she was referred to the military gym to work with some of the trainers. Lucy admitted that in those days, especially in the military, women weren't seen entering gyms. However, the trainers she met were very supportive in getting Lucy healed, and throughout that process, showed her a few additional exercises that involved the powerlifting movements.

*“They welcomed me with open arms. I went to just get the physio. So it was a soft start. And then of course I developed a rapport with them and I just enjoyed hanging out with them. I think they really enjoyed the novelty of teaching a woman how to do this stuff”*

The trainers in the military gym were all involved with competitive powerlifting, and so through showing Lucy how to squat, bench press, and deadlift, they ultimately recruited her into the sport. Lucy was always athletic, competing in gymnastics, swimming, and track, all of which supported her quick transition into the sport of powerlifting.

Entering her first powerlifting competition came with an initial hesitation. Since she always trained with other men, she never had a gauge on how she would fare against other women. In fact, before knowing there were classes based on gender, Lucy thought she would need to compete against other men. With the support of her training group, Lucy attended her first local competition, and remembers setting some Provincial records for her weight class, and

ultimately lifting enough weight to qualify for the National Championships. It was a quick rise to the top for Lucy, and through that process she began to uncover certain talents, performing feats of strength that she previously didn't think were possible:

*“I found out I was strong. I had no idea that I was strong at all. I found that the more I did it, the more strength I was getting. I found out I had some talents that I had no idea I could tap into. It was an experience I wasn't really expecting, but it was the best thing that could have happened to me”*

Lucy was extremely empowered by the physical strength she was gaining:

*“I couldn't see any limits. When I was in the gym I saw no limits as a lifter. I saw no end. I saw only improvements. It allowed me to think of myself as someone who can be successful at whatever I wanted to take on”.*

Six months after Lucy's first competition, she won the Canadian Championships, setting the National total record, and qualifying for the 1980 World Championships. Prior to 1980, the International Powerlifting Federation only sanctioned World Championships events for men. However, in 1980, the first World Championships for women was created, and Lucy was one of eight Canadian females to make the team for this inaugural event. Lucy remembered the moment when she pulled the last lift to secure the bronze medal in her weight class:

*“I was the last lifter of my flight to go up and pull. I watched two girls from two other countries miss that same deadlift and I thought to myself there's no way that weight is not coming up. I remember thinking that as I walked out on the platform. I'm just going to pull until I get it. And that's what I did. I pulled it and it was the bronze overall. That was the lift for me”.*

Lucy had mixed support from her parents. Shortly after Lucy's involvement with powerlifting, her mom commented: *“But dear, don't you think you're going to get too muscular?”* While this comment was made early in Lucy's powerlifting career, the misconception that an athlete needs to be big in order to be strong is still dominant among public

discourse today. On the other hand, Lucy's dad was extremely supportive of her powerlifting endeavors. In fact, Lucy qualified for the World Championships in 1981, 1984, 1985, and 1987; and throughout two of these World Championship experiences her dad attended to support Lucy.

In 1987, there was a coalescing of life factors that led Lucy to retiring from competitive powerlifting until 1994. Lucy had just finished her career in the military, which was an experience that admittedly made her feel like a "lost soul", and while she was trying to find a life outside of the military, Lucy was capped financially from years of competing at the international level. Lucy voiced: *"Canada does little to support its World Powerlifting Teams"*. Powerlifters are not funded in their athletic pursuits, so all travel costs are paid personally, a barrier that is just as true today as it was then. Furthermore, Lucy had met her now husband, and was focused on building a successful marriage and family.

Lucy remained physically active during her time away, still using the powerlifting movements in the gym. During this retirement period she had three children. In 1995, she just had her youngest daughter, and thought about stepping onto the competition platform again. She was training hard to try and get her body back to where it was before the pregnancy and eventually was convinced to do a competition from a few friends. One competition led to another, and it snowballed into training for and competing at the Worlds Championships that year. However, it was a bigger commitment to compete in powerlifting with a family. In fact, Lucy's entire family needed to support this endeavor in order for her to feel successful:

*"We did the Worlds in 1995. I say 'we' because my whole family got dragged into it. My husband was working full-time. We had three kids. We had to sit down and talk about it as a family and I had to make sure the kids understood that if I do this then family comes second and powerlifting comes first until it's over"*.

The World Championships was hosted in Tokyo, Japan, and affording this International travel was still prohibitive:

*“We had to fundraise. I had neighbors throwing garage sales. I had pubs throwing comedy nights for us. I couldn’t believe the support we got. There is no way we could have afforded Tokyo other than the fundraising that was happening”.*

Undeniably, Lucy had a tough time parceling the efforts required to raise a family, maintain a career, and train for powerlifting. Lucy admitted that traveling to Tokyo with her husband, and leaving her kids behind, particularly her youngest daughter at two-years old, was heart-breaking. Thus, when Lucy returned from the World Championships, she decided to prioritize raising her family, and retired from competitive powerlifting again. However, during this second retirement, Lucy always maintained a passion for powerlifting:

*“I never let it go. You never really do. You just kind of put it on the back burner and still go to the gym. I trained like an athlete, I just didn’t do competitions”.*

Lucy didn’t step onto a competition platform again until 2009. At this time, she was considered a Master II athlete. She believed it was the right time to return to the sport since her children were older and there wasn’t as much pressure of having to contribute to an income. The initial spark to return to the platform happened when Lucy reconnected with a female competitor from the initial 1980 World Championships. In 2009, these two had the opportunity to train together. Lucy was commended on her bench press strength, and after researching the Canadian records, she realized that her training numbers were well-beyond the current records for her age class.

Lucy reflected on her initial thoughts about returning to the sport:

*“When I start competing it’s a runaway freight train. I go to a local meet, then I want to do another, then it’s Provincials, then it’s Nationals, and holy crap, now you have to raise money and go to a World’s. So I thought, do I really want to wake up the demons?”*

In referencing the “demons” Lucy said:

*“The demons are the things that take over your life, putting training ahead of family and work, causing your family to have to buy into the dream. There are the fundraising obligations that must be met, over and above family and work in order to make the dream happen. They rule you and consume you until the thing happens. They can be evil or they can be great. They are a double-edged sword that you must wield with skill so your family and friends don’t get left behind in your pursuit of the platform. So when I wake up the demons, I truly have made the commitment to take it all the way to Worlds. At that point, I train like a demon and cannot quit until it’s done, I never could”.*

Ultimately, with the support of her husband and older children, she decided to enter her first local contest having not competed in the past 14 years. It was an emotional experience for Lucy to return to competition, especially reconnecting with friends she hadn’t seen since previously competing. Over the years she had developed many meaningful and significant social relationships within the powerlifting community:

*“It was like coming back to a family in so many ways. My other family. I was seeing people I hadn’t seen in years. It was very emotional. It was wonderful”.*

Furthermore, Lucy felt a different connection to the sport now that her children were older and able to appreciate the level of athleticism involved in competing. Lucy’s identity was always as a powerlifter, even throughout her two retirement periods, but it was only when she showed her children the spirit of competition where her identity was able to be fully realized by her family.

*“My daughter watched the Worlds online when she was younger but to see me in person lifting for the first-time was in 2009. It was so cool because she had never seen me compete, she had only heard about it and seen it in the old pictures. But she never knew that part of her mother. So to hear her screaming at me ‘you can do it’ was such an emotional experience. I was able to share with her this whole process. It was just so exciting to show her who I used to be and that this still is inside of me. She gets to see the young woman I once was, maybe not in body, but in spirit”.*

Just like when Lucy previously competed in powerlifting as a younger athlete, the commitment to train and compete in powerlifting was an all-or-nothing experience. For Lucy, she had to be fully involved and dedicated toward achieving her personal best every time she trained and stepped onto the competition platform. Lucy described the feeling of competing again:

*“It’s like a pull. It’s like an addiction that you don’t have any control over. So it’s all or nothing because you can’t stop. You just got to see what’s next. I don’t know how to do anything halfway. Sometimes that can be frustrating. But most of the time it’s very rewarding”.*

Lucy also reflected on the adrenaline rush that occurs from competing, which is one of the factors that has drawn her into the sport over and over again. Lucy described how the adrenaline rush through competing is an experience you can feel regardless of age, and is a way for her to reconnect with her youth:

*The adrenaline and experience of competition is supposed to be so reserved for the young. But to get out there and feel that again, it’s magic. It’s a slice of my youth”.*

Lucy also spoke about the competition experience in more detail and said, even as an older adult, she still gets nervous before each event. However, she believed these nerves were helpful and productive if properly managed:



*“You get out there and you get the nerves. I don’t care how many times you’ve competed and whether it’s an opens or a World’s, you just get those nasty, ugly nerves. You got to learn how to rein them in and learn how to make those butterflies fly in formation, and hold them back at the gate until it’s time to release them on the platform. You get a little better at that over time, and you get worries when you don’t have the nerves. I’ve never competed and not had nerves though”.*

Over the next couple years since returning as a master athlete, Lucy aligned her training and competition schedule in order to, once again, lift on Team Canada. In 2011, she achieved that goal, and qualified for the World Master Powerlifting Championships. I remember meeting Lucy for the first time just shortly after she qualified for the World’s. The National Championships just wrapped up, and we were sitting next to each other at the awards banquet. Our conversation was focused on the growth of powerlifting in Canada, since at that time our national organization was seeing a rise in membership numbers. She remarked how amazing it was to see so many female athletes competing at the National level. I never knew the history of Lucy’s accomplishments, nor was I aware that she had just secured a spot on Team Canada. However, I took notice of Lucy a couple months later when she was awarded the silver medal in a very competitive weight category at the World Championships. Interestingly, the summation of all the lifts combined was a 15 kilogram personal best, beating all of her previous attempts at the World level as an open-aged athlete. In fact, her total from that World Championships placed her 26<sup>th</sup> on the all-time Canadian Female Rankings irrespective of age. To put that result into context, Lucy is only one of three adults over the age of 50 years old to achieve a top-100 ranking in Canada; it is a list normally reserved for younger athletes.

Lucy continues to lift today, and is still on the competitive track, with many athletic goals she would like to achieve as a master athlete. She has committed herself toward breaking a World Record in the bench press. Unfortunately, however, in the process of achieving this goal,

she has been plagued by injury. In 2013, Lucy was preparing for the World Championships, and just weeks prior to the event she completely tore her rotator cuff in a training accident. In Lucy's opinion, it was an injury caused by being unaware of her current fatigue levels during that given training session. It was a devastating moment, and something that she will never forget:

*"I didn't realize how tired my shoulders were. My elbows rotated downward, and instead of keeping my elbows out, they went down. Of course the bar dropped. But my husband pulled it off of me. My bench in training doesn't have safety racks. It was scary. I was scared. I felt the bar on my neck, but I just felt the metal, I didn't feel the pressure. My husband was fast to grab it. It was a scary experience. I wasn't listening to my body when I was doing that bench press".*

After reflecting on the training accident, Lucy doesn't attribute this latest injury to her age specifically; rather, she affirmed that if a person wants to be a world-class athlete that pushing their body to the extreme is a reality embedded within the process. Therefore, she recognized that in training for a world record, regardless of age, an athlete needs to undergo an extreme process of preparation, sometimes putting the body at a higher risk for injury.

*"I've suffered some injuries over the years, and most people who lift at my level have at some point in time suffered as well. You're pushing the envelope. You're pushing the edge of our capability of that given day or that given time. That's what makes a world-class athlete. Whether you're 20 or 50, that's the kind of training you got to do. So you just have to evolve"*

Lucy's current training regime is centered on rehabilitating her shoulder. She continues to plan her training in order to be physically ready to step on the competition platform again, and eventually, attempt a World Record lift.

*"My game plan is to get healed, get whole again, and come back. I'm not done searching for that World Record in the bench press. I'm so close I can taste it".*

Through Lucy's experiences of training across various stages of her life, she reflected on the many differences and similarities in training for powerlifting as a younger and older athlete. First, Lucy recognized that in order to be successful as a master athlete, there needs to be a modified training program, something that is tailored to being an older athlete. Importantly, the main reason for a modified training program is to ensure enough recovery between workouts while maintaining an injury-free status.

*“When you're younger you're not so susceptible to injury, your recover time is quicker, so overtraining isn't as difficult to deal with as it would be at my age. When I start to over-train I definitely know it. So I know where I got to back off and where I can push ahead. You need to understand you're working with an older body. We all have young blood in old containers”.*

Second, Lucy admitted that a modified training routine is primarily guided by an athlete's ability to stay attuned with his or her own body's needs: what the body can handle, to what extent, and at what times. In other words, older athletes can't neglect fatigue, pain, or injury, and need to be focused on how the body is feeling and responding to training. Lucy has made listening to her body as one of the main training regulators in monitoring physical breakdown:

*“You have to listen to your body and be smart. I wasn't listening to my body when I was doing that bench press and hurt my shoulder. Recovery is a little different. You need more of it. You need to train with your brain and listen to your body”.*

Lucy reflected on being a younger athlete who would simply forge ahead in the face of fatigue and physical pain:

*“You battle joints that have been put through the paces over the years. And now you're starting to deal with that. You can talk to people, even in their 30s, and the chicken hasn't come home to roost yet. They are still in their prime. But now, you're old enough to really be dangerous”.*

Third, Lucy only surrounds herself with people who are supportive of her powerlifting endeavors, such as her immediate family and close powerlifters. While this is a step Lucy has always maintained to be important for her success, even as a younger athlete, it's equally important as an older adult because she has been faced with some resistance from those around her who don't believe older adults should be involved in powerlifting. At times, even Lucy has doubted herself in pursuing high-level powerlifting as a Master athlete. However, Lucy is reminded that this self-doubt is usually prompted by those around her and not necessarily based on her own belief system:

*“You need to not listen to those little voices that may be in your head, or people are saying that ‘you can’t be lifting in your 50s’. That’s crap. Anything that’s negative I get rid of. I’m over halfway through my life now, and I intend to live it to the max. Nobody is going to tell me when I have to stop lifting, just like nobody is going to tell me to stop coloring my hair. It’s just who I am”.*

Last, as both a younger and older athlete, Lucy said that it's important to make time for training. She recognized that in order for her to be successful, in any endeavor, that scheduling those various priorities into her daily routine is necessary:

*“If you can’t find three hours in your life every day to give yourself then there is no balance. I need those three hours. I need to get to the gym and do the workout every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday. I don’t care where they are in the day, but they got to be all together. If you can’t find that you need to press the reset button and look at the balance in your life”.*

As Lucy ages, she has found powerlifting to be exceedingly meaningful to her life as an older adult. In particular, powerlifting is an activity in which Lucy continues to derive her

sense of identity. Lucy admitted that she would be heartbroken if she couldn't be involved in powerlifting:

*“If I couldn't go to the gym and workout as a powerlifter that would emotionally devastate me. I just don't know what I would do. This is just a piece of me. It would really break my heart”.*

Powerlifting has also offered Lucy an outlet for stress management. Since 2006, Lucy has worked as a real estate agent, admitting that it is an extremely stressful occupation. However, she is able to manage her stress through maintaining her physical activity:

*“Powerlifting keeps me grounded. I decompress in the gym. A lot of people go to the bottle for decompression. I go to the gym. The payoff when you come home, and how good you feel, is amazing”.*

Furthermore, Lucy has been able to translate many of the same qualities it takes to be an elite powerlifter into her day-to-day life. Most importantly, powerlifting has taught Lucy the skills and attitudes necessary in order to be successful at any given task. First, Lucy demands excellence in any tasks that she takes on:

*“The thought process that goes through your mind as you train for any competition is also the same thought process that goes through my mind when it comes to being a wife or mother or real estate agent or whatever I take on in life. There is a demand for excellence. There is a demand for the best of you. There is a demand for you not to set limits or not to be afraid to change to become something better. Powerlifting teaches you to live outside your comfort zone and not be afraid to do that”.*

Second, powerlifting has taught Lucy how to be reflective and adaptable:

*You look at what is working and what isn't. You do that in your training program and you do that in work and life.*

Third, being successful at powerlifting has provided Lucy with the self-confidence necessary to complete any task in her life:

*“Limits is where you set them. I would have never taken on real estate if I didn’t have the confidence in myself that I gained through becoming a world class powerlifter. If I can do ‘this’, then I can do ‘that’. It’s harder to pull 367.5 pounds than it is to figure out a game plan for this business”.*

Last, through powerlifting, Lucy has realized that achieving dreams are possible at any age. She believed that being an older adult shouldn’t be a barrier toward self-improvement:

*“Some people are droolers and others are dreamers. If you got a dream, and it’s large in your heart, you have to answer the call. You can’t just say “well, I can’t do it”. I think most people think that they aren’t capable of doing stuff like this at our age. They are not capable of pursuing these dreams of being an athlete. Well, why the hell not? If you’re not sick, if your joints are good, and you have the energy and passion, then jump in. Most people I find that are sedentary or semi-sedentary think that their time has passed, and they don’t have the right to dream like that or chase those dreams. Well, absolutely they do. You’re dead a lot longer than you’re alive, so don’t waste it”.*

Since returning to competitive powerlifting as an older adult, Lucy has taken on roles outside of being an athlete. She has created a fundraising initiative to help promote awareness around the sport, as well as raise charitable donations for various needs in her community. In particular, in 2013, Lucy started the Raise the Bar fundraiser, which used her physical strength and competition performances as a way to raise money for building a new hospital within her community.

*“I thought wouldn’t it be cool to use my talents for something other than bringing home hardware. Let’s bring the sport some publicity and raise some money for a hospital at*

*the same time. It's a great idea and I'm surprised no one else has taken it and run with it".*

At the same time, Lucy has inspired other women to become involved in powerlifting, and now Lucy has taken on a coaching role to support these newer athletes:

*There were a couple girls at my gym that I talked into trying to do the sport. They both lost a ton of weight and went from being sedentary and out of shape to being athletes. One is in her 30s and the other in her 40s – they're strong! It brings me a lot of joy watching them light up when they do things that they didn't think they would ever be able to do in their lives. It kind of brings me back to the 21 year-old I used to be".*

In summary, since Lucy began powerlifting in her early 20s, she has always assumed an identity around the sport. Her retirement from competition was due to prioritizing other aspects of her life, including finding a career outside of the military and building a family. In addition, Lucy has always viewed competing in powerlifting as an all-or-nothing activity, needing to compete internationally, and to the best of her ability, but at times she couldn't afford the cost of travel. However, even though Lucy had retired from powerlifting twice throughout her career, she maintained her powerlifting training, continuing to develop her physical strength. Lucy was one of the first females in Canada to compete at the international level, competing at a total of eight World Championships; six as an open-aged athlete and two as a Master athlete. As Lucy ages, she recognizes the importance of: modifying her training program based on fatigue, listening to her body, reinforcing positive self-talk, scheduling time to train, surrounding herself with supportive individuals, and being resilient in the face of injury. Powerlifting has allowed Lucy to preserve a sense of youthfulness, realize self-confidence, achieve dreams despite her age, create and maintain significant social relationships, and act as a form of stress management. More recently, Lucy has used her knowledge and passion for powerlifting to fundraise for

charitable causes, as well as act as a trendsetter and coach for other women starting their powerlifting journey.

*Story #3: Judy – 53 year old powerlifter, a relative newcomer to the sport*

Judy began strength training in her early 50s after researching ways to maintain optimal health and well-being into later stages of life. Judy's research led her to understand that strength training can significantly improve a number of age-related disabilities. Specifically, Judy was concerned about the onset of osteoporosis. She suffers from Crohn's Disease, and while osteoporosis is something that many older adults encounter, people suffering from Crohn's disease have a higher risk. In 2010, Judy's annual bone density test, unlike previous years, showed that she had borderline osteoporosis. Therefore, the main impetus behind researching healthy aging was to understand how to offset the degenerative effects of osteoporosis. Although Judy's doctor discouraged her from participating in strength training, saying "*I don't want you to get hurt*", for Judy, the most effective and natural way to build bone density was through getting stronger.

Since Judy had never previously engaged with strength training activities, she realized she would need to find a coach to show her how to exercise properly. While Judy had always maintained an active lifestyle, strength training was going to be a new endeavor. Thus, Judy contacted a coach at a gym located close to her workplace, someone who she believed was knowledgeable in strength training; specifically, strength training for older women. She communicated with her coach, Laura, about her health issues and the need to build bone density:



*“When I first started training with my coach my specific need was to build bone density, and the way that my coach designed the program was to do the three lifts you do in powerlifting: squat, bench press, and deadlift. I didn’t start training specifically to get into powerlifting, I got into training for my bone density, which the training incorporated the powerlifting movements”.*

Laura was Judy’s personal coach, but she also coached a powerlifting team in which a number of other female athletes trained competitively. Through Judy’s training, Laura would speak regularly about her involvement with powerlifting; about upcoming competitions and the athletes she was coaching. Ultimately, Judy’s desire to start competing in powerlifting initiated when Laura was speaking about preparing some of her female athletes for an upcoming competition. At that point, Judy asked for more information about the process required to compete, and expressed interest in competing herself. Judy also felt she was capable of competing in powerlifting because Laura was coaching two other female master powerlifters for this competition. For Judy, knowing that there would be other older women at the competition made her feel confident in her decision to compete. Over time, Judy began training with the other female athletes that Laura coached. When asking Judy why she decided to make the step toward competing, she said:

*“It was to push myself to do something different. I was doing all this training, and all the movements anyways, so why not see how strong I was and go into a competition”.*

Judy’s first competition was about 18 months after she initially started strength training. Judy noted that while she was confident in her athletic ability, she was nervous about lifting in front of an audience. Previously, Judy only lifted one-on-one with her coach or with the other female powerlifting athletes. Judy reflected on lifting in her first competition in front of an audience:

*It was a bit unnerving that you're out in front of all these people who you don't know. You're going to lift this weight, but you're anxious, and you're in front of people in this funny costume that you're not comfortable wearing.*

However, despite Judy's initial hesitation, she found the powerlifting community to be very supportive:

*"Everyone was so supportive – saying 'You can do it'". It was just a brief moment in time, but it was really surprising to me; how supportive the powerlifting community is for all of the competitors. The people who are waiting to compete and the people who are out there watching. It's a supportive community. It was really surprising".*

It was at Lucy's first competition in 2012 where I met her. I was the referee for her lifting session. I remember seeing her standing tall and slender in the queue waiting to be weighed in with the other female athletes. She was quiet throughout this process and stayed close to her coach and teammates. Many people took notice when she deadlifted 180lbs, including myself, because this is an above average feat of strength for someone in her age and weight class. Following the competition I congratulated her, and subsequently saw her compete on two other occasions in 2013. I also remember being impressed at Judy's most recent competition, as she made the qualifying standard to compete at the National Championships.

In every powerlifter's career there are moments when lifting maximal weight can be an intimidating experience. Judy expressed that the main challenge in training for competitive powerlifting is to overcome the anxiety around lifting heavy weights. However, she builds confidence in her abilities to lift heavier weights with the support of her coach:

*"For me, when you get to certain weights, they are heavy. They look heavy. They feel heavy! So there's that mental thing. I think one of the things I've struggled with is talking yourself through that anxiety. I stand there with the weight on my shoulders for a*

*bit and tell myself 'I can do it'. I also think that my coach wouldn't put that weight on the bar if she doesn't think I could do it. I have trust in my coach".*

Judy claimed that she is able to persevere through many challenges due to the supportive role of her coach. In fact, Judy believed that she wouldn't be able to powerlift competitively without a coach. She is able to find success in her powerlifting abilities because she trusts her coach to structure the training environment to be safe. Judy said:

*"There is a lot of safety built into the workouts. My coach shows me what I do if I get down and can't stand up. It's a safe environment, so that helps".*

As well, Judy spoke about the integral role her coach plays in her personal development as an athlete:

*"I'm not sure I would get the same results if I trained on my own. I wouldn't know how to train. She knows how to set up the training program. From the results I'm getting she's doing a great job. I want to see progression, and if I'm not, then I got to find another coach. But I don't think I could do it on my own. That's for sure".*

Judy believed there are many reasons for her continued engagement with powerlifting. First, Judy's strength is validated by seeing the numbers on each of her lifts improve. She finds having an external measure of success to be very rewarding, since lifting more weight equates to getting stronger:

*"Being in a competition is really helpful in terms of your goals, as well as managing your progress, particularly for me with my bone density. You don't really have an external way to measure that (bone density), but how you're progressing with your strength, you have that external measure. Competition helps for that external measure".*

Second, Judy is motivated to stay strong since she has a fear of not being able to live independently as she ages. Judy recently had family members relocate to assisted-living facilities due to their lack of strength and mobility. Through this experience of watching others lose their independence, and how it impacts quality of life, she views the strength acquired from powerlifting as a means to achieve independence in later years of life.

*“In the long term, as you age, it’s not a matter of how long you live but it’s a matter of living independently for as long as you live. If your bone density becomes an issue it affects how long you can live independently”.*

In addition, Judy believed that if she neglected her own physical strength that she would become dysfunctional and unable to perform simple, daily tasks. Judy was able to make the connection between physical strength and the ability to effectively perform activities of daily living as she ages:

*“You either use it or lose it. I believe that happens. You need to be using your muscles. In everyday life, sitting in an office, you’re not using your muscles the way you need to in order to be, by the time you’re 75, carrying groceries, managing slippery steps, managing sidewalks, carrying laundry up and down, and generally do the things you need to do to function independently”.*

Third, Judy has maintained her attraction to powerlifting because feeling strong as an older female is unique. She often takes pride in telling those around her about the most recent competition she has competed at and what she lifted. As well, she recognized that not very many women her age are competing in powerlifting, and this unique sense of identity drives her to maintain her engagement:

*“I’m able to say ‘do you know what I can deadlift’ and having them say ‘YOU!’, and me saying, ‘ya, ME!’. That’s amazing. It surprises me what I can lift. And I expect it surprises them. So why not give them a little surprise”*

Furthermore, Judy values her identity as a powerlifter, and confessed that more women ought to view physical strength as an important part of their life:

*“The appeal comes from not seeing women as being strong or capable of being strong. Like, why wouldn’t a woman want to be strong? It’s important for a woman to maintain her strength as she ages.*

Last, Judy recognized through her training the effects of being physically strong in other activities outside the gym. There were specific stories that Judy recalled where she experienced the benefits of having a proficient level of strength, and being able to complete challenging and physical tasks confidently. For instance, Judy noticed she was capable of performing difficult hiking treks where she would have previously not thought possible. Furthermore, while Judy expressed that her family enjoys many outdoor activities, such as hiking, she had always had a fear of falling and hurting herself. However, Judy began to disregard that fear as she got stronger.

*“I did a hike recently when I was on holiday that involved scrambling up a volcano. It was a two hour scramble on my hands and knees. And I don’t like heights and this was the first scramble I’ve ever done. I felt strong in my legs and arms, which helped me overcome my fear of falling. I knew I wasn’t going to fall because I knew I was strong enough to keep doing it”.*

Furthermore, Judy has always been an avid skier, and more recently, she has gained confidence in trying more challenging ski runs:

*“I’ve been skiing for 25 years but I only started when I met my husband. He’s a double black diamond skier. It’s been a challenge to get to the point to actually ski with him. We were just out skiing on Saturday, they had a huge dump of snow. I was skiing in the trees this time, skiing in the powder. I felt confident. I was connecting my turns. I was*

*reacting quickly. And I was focused on maintaining my balance and using my core. So the powerlifting that you do gives you more body awareness with the other sports you want to do”.*

Broadly speaking, Judy expressed feelings of empowerment as she acquired more strength. Attaining greater physical strength was a gateway for her to try new activities, as well as re-engage with activities she used to take part in when she was younger:

*“In my younger days I was a risk-taker. So I think powerlifting has helped me get back to some of those things I used to do. I see more opportunities to do different things and then feel the competence and strength to do them”.*

Engaging in powerlifting activities as an older female hasn't been without resistance though. Judy has experienced her own self-doubt in pursuing powerlifting. She claimed this self-doubt was caused by societal norms around what activities are deemed appropriate for an older female to partake in; stating that powerlifting for an older female is contrary to these norms. In speaking about gender norms for older adults, Judy said:

*“There is your own voice in the back of your head that tells you what's appropriate for a woman your age is supposed to be doing. It's dealing with that. It's like 'well, why shouldn't I be doing this? Shut up voice in the back of my head. This is okay. I'm getting stronger. This is a good thing for me to be doing'”.*

Judy expressed further about the resistance she faces:

*Society sets a lot of expectations around a lot of behaviors based on age and gender that you know rationally are ridiculous, right? And this is one of them. So I like to think of myself who doesn't follow social conventions just for the sake of them being the way society says you're supposed to do certain things or behave a certain way. It's reminding myself that's how I like to see myself, that I question social conventions. I question why we do things the way we do things, why we do them the way we do them, why does society have this expectation or perception of how a woman my age should behave, and what's appropriate for a woman my age to do”.*

Judy also voiced that the majority of her friends outside the powerlifting community don't understand why she does such an activity; since it's not a mainstream leisure pursuit in which older females participate:

*"I think most people don't get it. They really don't understand why you would do it. 'Why would you compete?' They get it if I put it in the context of the bone density, but still, 'why would you bother going into powerlifting' – they say. Even when you explain to them why, there is still skepticism – 'at your age?' So you just tend not to talk about it with them".*

Judy believed her support network within the powerlifting community, her coach and teammates, including other older female powerlifters, have helped her reject those societal norms around what's expected for an older female, and the activities she chooses to participate. Judy's powerlifting group is centered on physical strength, and working toward that common goal allows her to reinforce her own individual capacities as an athlete.

*"We're training with other women, and we're all powerlifting and competing. So there's a group of women who have similar interests that's very different from other women our age. It's around strength. It's around physical activity. It's around training. So focusing on an area that women my age don't tend to focus on, strength training, is something that I don't get outside of powerlifting".*

As well, Judy is able to reject notions of self-doubt by continuously searching for ways to progress and focusing on areas of self-improvement. For example, Judy said:

*"I reflect on what I need to get stronger. I have to try and fit these aspects into my training. But right now I think I need to get more flexible. I have poor flexibility. I'm not very flexible. So one of my goals is to always work on my flexibility".*

Judy has found her commitment to training for and competing in powerlifting to be more manageable as she ages since she isn't required to prioritize other family commitments over her own leisure activities. She conveyed:

*“It has become less challenging now that my daughter is out of high-school and there is a less of a need to get her to activities. She is driving and that sort of thing. I train after I'm done work and I don't have to rush home. It definitely makes it easier to train rather than trying to fit it in elsewhere”.*

In summary, Judy started powerlifting as a way to manage her degenerative bone density. In order to strength train properly, she hired a coach knowledgeable in coaching older women. Judy's relationship with her coach has been paramount in developing her own physical strength, especially by modeling proper technique, maintaining a safe training environment, and encouraging her to compete in powerlifting. Judy has sustained her engagement with powerlifting for many reasons, including having: an external method to measure her success, a drive to maintain her independence as she ages, a unique sense of identity through competing, and the ability to express her physical strength in activities outside the gym. While Judy has encountered resistance in participating in powerlifting, she offsets those feelings of self-doubt by being part of a supportive training group, as well as focusing on areas of self-improvement. Judy is able to commit more seriously to her chosen leisure activity as she ages, since her children don't require as much support.

As Judy looked into the future of her involvement with powerlifting, she said:

*One of the worries that I have is whether I'm going to reach that point where I'm not going to get any stronger. When will that be? How do you deal with it? I was getting worried, maybe I'm already there. I don't feel like I'm getting stronger, especially in the bench press”.*



## **Concluding the Narratives**

Three stories were told highlighting unique perspectives of master powerlifting. There was one older male and female athlete who began their powerlifting journey as an open-aged athlete, and continue to be involved in the sport today, and one older female athlete who, only in her early 50s, started competing in powerlifting. Each story provided a window into the experiences of the participants; stories that were distinctly their own. While these stories aren't generalizable, in the sense that they can't be applied to a broader population, the narratives can certainly provide insight into three individual cases of older adults who powerlift as a serious leisure pursuit. I represented each interview as an intact story in order to preserve its authenticity and impact rather than reducing each narrative into categories. While each story certainly revealed dominant narratives, the categories were integrated into each story as a whole, and quotes from the participant were used to support the overall narrative.

Throughout each story there were a number of insights and issues that can be highlighted. For example, each of the participants was attracted to the sport of powerlifting for various reasons, as well as chose different ways to engage and continue their involvement as they progressed throughout their careers. Furthermore, each master powerlifter detailed, through their experiences, the ways in which powerlifting shaped their aging process, providing both positive and negative insights. Importantly, however, the stories revealed each participant's perspective on the meaningful role that powerlifting played in their lives. The next chapter will discuss these ideas further within the context of the stories presented above and connect them to prior literature.

## Chapter 5: Discussion

Embedded within each story were a number of insights and issues that can better inform the research community in promoting health, leisure, and successful aging among older adults. In discussing these insights and issues, this section will have multiple goals. First, I will outline the issues and insights connected to participants' initial attraction to powerlifting. In here, it becomes apparent that individuals choose to engage with powerlifting for various reasons. Second, insights and issues will be discussed in the context of the aging process and serious leisure. The issues and insights to be discussed here are: reconnecting to one's youth, modified training and pain management, identity formation, resistance toward older female powerlifters, powerlifting as a context for self-improvement, career stages over the life-course, social interactions and relationships, and successful aging.

The aim within these discussions is to connect the experiences of the master athletes in this study to prior research. This discussion will draw on specific experiences within a single story, as well as experiences that were seen across all three stories. Importantly, these experiences should not serve to generalize the findings to a broader population, but only elucidate experiences that were poignant to each of the participants involved in the study. The experiences that are forthcoming in the discussion have been deemed important based on the shared values between me and the participant. Moreover, these are the insights and issues that were revealed through the data analysis process using NVivo10 and concept mapping as being integral experiences to one's personal story. Furthermore, throughout this discussion, I will suggest areas of future research. Since powerlifting is a relatively novel context in discussing

older adults' leisure, these suggestions serve to initiate a dialogue among the researcher community, health promotion stakeholders, and sport and leisure organizations.

To finish this section, I provide remarks aiming to serve as practical application for other master athletes, and aging adults in general, which draw on the experiences of the master powerlifters interviewed for this study. In essence, this advice section will serve to answer the question: how can the experiences of the master powerlifters in this study inform my values and beliefs about aging? This advice is further advanced by my own introspection as a member of the powerlifting community.

### **Insights and Issues Connected to Participants Initial Attraction to Powerlifting**

The older adults who participated in the study revealed distinct and exclusive reasons for their initial attraction to the sport of powerlifting. It is important to further understand the reasons and conditions that promoted their engagement with the sport of powerlifting. In this discussion, each of the stories will be reviewed for insights and issues into their early involvement and participation.

#### *Earl*

Earl suggested two reasons for his initial involvement. First, while he believed going to the gym to work on his physical fitness was important, it was hard for him to maintain his motivation without the challenge and commitment required in working toward a specific goal. Thus, Earl saw competitive powerlifting as a context where he could set goals, and continuously set new goals as old ones were achieved. Earl's experience of needing a requisite goal to become motivated, or in his words "have challenges", was similarly seen as a key contributor to

the level of engagement that shag dancers portrayed after learning challenging footwork (Brown et al. 2008, p. 82). Second, Earl was inspired by competitive powerlifters. Earl viewed the strength acquired through powerlifting as motivational, since regardless of a person's size, anyone could achieve incredible feats of strength if committed. In this way, Earl found role models in his early career that contributed to his attachment to the sport of powerlifting.

### *Lucy*

Alternatively, Lucy began her powerlifting journey by accident, only starting to learn the powerlifting movements after seeking physiotherapy for an ankle injury, and subsequently connecting with local powerlifters. However, Lucy was hooked after seeing the initial gains in strength acquired through powerlifting training. While Lucy was powerlifting, she discovered talents that she didn't previously think possible. As Lucy got stronger, she viewed herself as someone who could be successful; something that motivated her to progress through the various levels. Stebbins (2007) suggested that having an activity that allows a person to achieve personal enrichment can be connected to motivation to pursue that activity. With this in mind, even though Lucy had been an athlete in other contexts previously, it was only through powerlifting that she experienced the type of growth and enrichment to sustain her interest and involvement.

### *Judy*

On the other hand, Judy started powerlifting with the intent to offset the degenerative effects of osteoporosis. Judy was concerned about her ability to maintain her independence in later life as a result of not having a proficient level of strength to perform simply daily tasks. Furthermore, Judy had a desire to continue engaging with other forms of activities with her

family, such as hiking and skiing, and needed a proficient level of strength to do so. However, she was concerned that her lack of bone density would make her more prone to falling as she aged. As discussed in Chapter two, older adults need to maintain their strength as they age in order to perform activities of daily living as well as prevent unexpected falling episodes (Hunter, McCarthy, & Bamman, 2004; McMahon & Fleury, 2012). Through Judy's own research and agency, she decided to begin strength training, as this method was viewed as the most natural way to build bone density. It should be noted that Judy was motivated by the measurable effects of her strength gain through tracking the weight lifted in each of the powerlifting movements. As Judy tracked the numbers she lifted, she realized that she was working toward her goal of building bone density; ultimately, knowing that her training was paying off and contributing to feelings of accomplishment. The leap from mere strength training to competitive powerlifting happened when Judy recognized that there were other older women participating in the sport. While it is unknown whether Judy would have taken the steps to compete in powerlifting in the absence of this recognition, Stebbins (2007) suggested that integrating and feeling accepted within a social community can provide the motivational antecedents for participating in an activity.

### *Common Threads*

In each of the above cases, it was noted that having a supportive training group was fundamental to success early in the powerlifting career. In fact, it would be hard to write their stories differently in the absence of a supportive training group. The participants' early engagement was built around relying on others, those who were experienced in the sport of powerlifting, for success. The training group offered, in some of the cases, but not all: a way to learn the powerlifting movements, a safe atmosphere, encouragement to compete, and real

examples that other older adults are involved in the sport. While competitive powerlifting is enacted individually, one person lifting a barbell, it was evident having a network of supportive individuals was always at play behind the scenes, especially in the early stages. In Earl's and Lucy's case, the training groups were informal, a few individuals who worked out together, but in Judy's case, the training group was a formal club, with a coach, and affiliation status with the provincial powerlifting organization. Of note is that when Earl and Lucy began powerlifting, there were no formalized club structures within the sport. However, in today's powerlifting context, clubs can register with the governing body. Future research ought to investigate the role of a training group in the lives of older adults who take up competitive sporting activities as leisure pursuits, and whether these groups increase a person's engagement and attrition. It was noted that over time the social community around powerlifting developed a strong importance to the lives of these older adults. While I can only speculate, one of the main elements holding each of the participant's engagement within powerlifting was the social aspect built around training for and competing in powerlifting. Furthermore, these informal or formal social groups ought to be studied for their impact and ability to recruit older adults into physical activity contexts.

### **Insights and Issues Connected to the Aging Process and Serious Leisure**

Each participant expressed views on how powerlifting shaped his or her own aging process, as well as how the aging process shaped experiences within powerlifting. Furthermore, in some cases, participants contrasted themselves to other older adults of similar age who weren't involved with powerlifting as a serious leisure pursuit. The following will provide insights and issues related to the interconnection between powerlifting and the aging process.

### *Reconnecting to one's Youth*

Powerlifting was a context in which each participant was able to reconnect with experiences from their youth. In particular, competing in powerlifting, and lifting heavy weights, was an adrenaline rush, as noted by Earl and Lucy, an experience typically reserved for the young. However, despite age, both Earl and Lucy were able to recreate the same emotions as if they were competing as a younger adult. Lucy described the feeling of lifting a heavy weight in competition as “magic”. The serious leisure benefit of “regeneration of self” can be defined as the “capacity of the activity to divert the practitioners mind from work or from the other events and problems in life that absorb attention” (Stebbins, 1992, p. 95). For Earl and Lucy, they were able to realize feelings of happiness and contentment through powerlifting. Overall, these feeling contributed to a sense of youthfulness, promoting their overall life satisfaction.

Alternatively, Judy voiced that the strength she acquired through powerlifting gave her the confidence to try new activities outside of the sport. Judy recalled that in her younger days she was more of a risk taker, and as she got older, lost that sense of adventure. However, through getting stronger, Judy was able to take advantage of various opportunities that she otherwise wouldn't feel physically competent in doing, such as difficult hiking and skiing activities. Staying connected to physical activities as an older adult has shown to be an important contributor to maintaining one's personal health and potentially aging successfully (Rowe and Kahn, 1997; Crowther, Parker, Achenbaum, Larimore, Koenig, 2002; Vaillant, 2002; Knight and Ricciardelli, 2003; Brown, McGuire, and Voelkl, 2008). In essence, powerlifting was the vessel that allowed Judy to become physically competent to pursue other activities of interest outside the gym. Furthermore, by showing a serious commitment to gaining strength

through powerlifting, Lucy was able to engage with these physical activity opportunities with her family, which was an important aspect of maintaining her quality of life.

### *Modified Training and Pain*

As of the interview, Lucy was rehabilitating a shoulder injury that was caused from a bench press training accident. While Lucy doesn't attribute her injury to age, as she believed all powerlifters pursuing elite competition are susceptible to injury, she did voice that her training program needed to be more responsive to her day-to-day physical needs and current level of fatigue, which was addressed to be more important now as an older adult. As Earl noted, adequate recovery had been a major contribution to how he modified his training program. He reflected that as a younger adult he could spend more time in the gym, performing more exercises at higher intensities, but now, he needed to focus his efforts on the major powerlifting movements and nothing more. As for Judy, she didn't have previous experience as a younger adult in powerlifting to understand how training programs ought to be modified for older adults, since she only took up powerlifting at a later age. She did, however, rely on her coach to manage the training program, and because her coach had experience training older adults, she believed the training program offered adequate recovery since she hadn't experienced any major pain or injury. It is important to note that Judy was the only powerlifter who had a formal powerlifting coach, whereas both Earl and Lucy had simply relied on their prior knowledge of training to construct their training program. While it can't be said for certain whether or not Earl or Lucy would experience less pain and injury with the guidance of a formal powerlifting coach who had experience training older adults, it certainly is an area worth exploring in future research.



As noted in Chapter two, strength training can contribute to a wide range of health benefits (Seguin & Nelson, 2003). The current recommendations for older adults engaging with strength training activities is performing major muscular movements two times per week, with repetitions between 8 to 12, using weights that result in fatigue at the completion of each set (CSEP, 2011). However, there might be a threshold in which strength training at certain intensities could offset some of those benefits for older adults. Those athletes involved in powerlifting aim to increase their one-repetition maximum, that is, increasing the amount of weight they can lift for one rep in the squat, bench press, and deadlift movements. This sort of training requires athletes to go above-and-beyond the recommendations for older adults, performing repetition ranges between 1 to 5, and often using loads between 80-100% of their maximum weight in order to create a substantial training effect. Competitive powerlifting is a specific brand of strength training that requires future research to understand the most effective dose and intensity for older athletes. Currently, there are no recommendations for older adult powerlifters. Future research should explore this area so that competitive and recreational older adult powerlifters can implement effective training protocols and guidelines to avoid pain and injury, while taking into account individual differences and personal histories.

### *The Powerlifting Identity*

Each participant documented that his or her identity as a powerlifter impacted how he or she viewed him or herself as an older adult; however, the way in which identity impacted the aging process varied between participants. Furthermore, each participant framed his or her identity around a particular piece of powerlifting. For Earl, his identity as a powerlifter was a symbol of being unique. He noted that the physical skill he possessed was not something that other older adults his age were able to perform, or in his words, “willing to perform”.

Furthermore, and more importantly, Earl identified with being the “sport administrator”. He attached substantial value to the past and current roles he has played in growing the sport, as evident by his willingness to stick to the administration of the sport over the past 25-years.

For Lucy, even during her retirement periods, she always identified with being a powerlifter by subscribing to its training principles and having a will to get stronger. She voiced that it was a special moment when her older children were able to see her competitively powerlift since powerlifting was always a part of her life despite not always being at the forefront during her children’s upbringing. Lucy’s passion was fundamentally framed around being the best athlete she could be at various stages throughout her life, and by continuing to pursue these goals as an older adult, she was able to feel proud of each of her accomplishments and milestones achieved. Lucy also noted that her identity as a powerlifter was extremely important; admitting that without a powerlifting identity she would be “heartbroken”.

For Judy, having a powerlifting identity was about identifying with being strong, not necessarily ‘being the best athlete’ as in Lucy’s case. She believed that strength was something to be valued as a woman ages due to maintaining optimal health and wellbeing into later stages of life. The strength she acquired was not an end in and of itself, but rather a way in which she could maintain her engagement to other activities, as well as become independent in her older age.

Whether an identity was associated with being unique, subscribing to its training principles, or valuing strength, each identity perpetuated the participant’s engagement to the sport as a result (Stebbins, 2001). Forming an identity can typically be associated with traditional institutions, such as gender, race, religion, politics, or work (Green & Jones, 2005, p.

169); however, leisure has also been a unique context in which older adults have framed their identity. Identity formation around serious leisure pursuits for older adults has been seen in previous studies in lawn bowling (Heuser, 2005) and running (Shipway, Holloway, & Jones, 2005). In the current study, powerlifting also proved to be a context where older adults could find an identity, validate their feelings, and share their successes and failures within a social community.

Further, however, the identity formation around being a powerlifter, in the case of each participant, also warranted negative experiences. For example, both Earl and Lucy's identity impacted other realms of their lives, including the ability to balance their leisure with their family commitments. In Earl's case he struggled with finding a balance between the administration of powerlifting and his personal relationships. For Lucy, she suggested she had two families, her immediate family involving her husband and children, and her powerlifting family. She often struggled with balancing both of these families through her identity as a powerlifter, as well as her identity as a wife and mother. Furthermore, in a sport that is typically seen as a male domain, each of the female participants had negative experiences associated with her identity as a powerlifter, arising from a perceived or actual resistance toward the older female.

### *Resistance Toward Older Female Powerlifters*

While developing an identity around powerlifting seemed to contribute to each of the participant's continued motivation to pursue the activity, Lucy and Judy noted that having a powerlifting identity as an older female was contrary to social norms. Both participants recognized that it wasn't merely about being older or female, but that the combination of being

older and female was the impetus for encountering resistance. Lucy and Judy expressed that there had been instances where those around them said older woman shouldn't be powerlifting, since it's not an age-or-gender appropriate activity. Encountering this resistance had, at times, created a sense of self-doubt. However, both participants expressed the need to surround themselves with positive influences in order to combat this resistance; in Lucy's case, she was always supported by her family, and in Judy's case, this influence was generated by her immediate training group who included other older female powerlifters.

The intersection between sport, gender, and aging has been studied previously (Siegenthaler & O'Dell, 2003), albeit not in the context of powerlifting. However, future research ought to further understand the experiences of older female athletes, in particular, those who are involved in powerlifting or other strength-based leisure pursuits. While other physically active leisure pursuits are viewed as age-appropriate, such as golfing and running (Shipway, Holloway, & Jones, 2012), powerlifting continues to be viewed as a sport reserved for younger male athletes, despite the large number of master-aged powerlifters in Canada. I recommend an action-research approach in studying older female powerlifting, with the intention to change the dominant discourse and perception around those who engage in powerlifting. Social norms and mores around what's deemed appropriate for older women have the ability to contribute or hinder women's involvement within a particular activity, even if that activity has shown to have broad-reaching health outcomes.

### *Focus on Self-Improvement*

The training for and competing in serious powerlifting endeavors allowed these older adults a means to pursue and express areas of self-improvement. Earl connected the notion of

self-improvement with being a youthful quality, often recognizing that older adults who stop improving, or focusing on developing personal capacities, have “old attitudes”. For Earl, even though he expressed an overall degradation in his physical performances as he became older, he noted he was still able to compare himself with other similar-aged master powerlifters, allowing him to continuously improve within the master categories. For Lucy, she always had a drive to get stronger through powerlifting training, even during her retirement periods from the competitive side of the sport. Lucy illustrated that the desire to get stronger, and improve her physical performance, was a way to continue dreaming despite her age. Lucy noted that achieving dreams are possible at any age, in any context, but powerlifting was the context of choice in which she was able to pursue her dreams. Just like Earl noted, Lucy found the master-age categories important for her to be able to achieve specific milestones, such as the Master World Record in Bench Press, and continue to feel that she is improving. Alternatively, for Judy, focusing on improving her strength through powerlifting was a way for her to build confidence in the face of those who resisted her leisure activity. In fact, one of the ways that Judy handled resistance toward her powerlifting endeavors was to reflect and focus on areas of her physical development. She noted that her current area of focus is on flexibility training, as that was the limiting factor in seeing more gains in strength. Furthermore, since Judy had never previously competed in powerlifting, and only started training as an older adult, she continued to see novel strength gains.

When these older adults were provided with an activity, in this case competitive powerlifting, to focus on self-improvement, they were more seriously engaged and committed to that chosen pursuit. Valliant (2002) suggested that leisure pursuits offering older adults opportunities to engage with lifelong learning have shown to be more rewarding and meaningful

than activities absent of such qualities. Many of the activities that provided learning opportunities were those leisure pursuits that required effort, concentration, and skill. For the older adults in the current study, the effort, concentration, and skill required to powerlift were viewed as ways in which they could achieve feelings of self-improvement.

Of note is that while these older adults were able to find ways to continuously self-improve despite their age, there is a significant number of powerlifters who cease their engagement with powerlifting once they are unable to see improvement in their physical performances. For example, Earl noted that there were those powerlifters who competed as an open-aged athlete but discontinue their participation once they believe they reached their physical peak. Similarly, in the case of Lucy, there was a sense of uncertainty around what will happen when she is unable to see an increase in her physical performance. After all, there will be some point in everyone's powerlifting career, or athletic career broadly, where they will be unable to achieve personal best performances due to age-related factors. Future research ought to focus on those individuals who end their engagement with a particular physical activity as they age. An understanding of why older adults end their chosen physical activity, where they once were highly committed, might provide health promotion stakeholders with ways to prolong engagement into later years. For the older adults in the study, they found other ways to engage with powerlifting outside of maximizing their physical strength; as stated previously, one of the contributing elements that maintained their attraction was the social community that was built around their involvement. In future research it will be important to understand the elements that contribute to a person's engagement with physical activity outside of the actual physical benefits acquired through participation.

### *Career Stages in Powerlifting Over the Life-course*

As Stebbins (2001) described, participants within a serious leisure pursuit often find a career that is marked by turning points or stages of achievement. Each participant had demonstrated a long-term career through serious involvement with powerlifting, even though all were at different stages based on their level of competition, type of involvement, roles assumed, and motivation for participation.

For Earl, throughout his powerlifting career, he had often sacrificed his athletic growth for the leadership roles he assumed within the sport. Earl had found it particularly important to be involved in the roles outside of being an athlete as he grew older, since these roles offered him a sense of accomplishment and a means to stimulate his intellectual and mental capacities. Earl discussed his career in powerlifting to be difficult to balance at times throughout his life, since the commitment required to be engaged with powerlifting often meant he didn't have time for other pursuits, including family. As an older adult, Earl spent more time on the administration of the sport than he did training for and competing in powerlifting; a commitment that he viewed as a personal obligation.

For Lucy, while her career had been celebrated by the many World Championships at which she competed, including the first World Championships for women, there were many turning points as an older adult that continuously shaped her career. As an older adult, Lucy began taking on a coaching role, mentoring other women to become involved in powerlifting and encouraging them to compete. As well, Lucy had used her reputation as a world-class powerlifter to raise funds for charitable endeavors within her community. Both of these turning points within Lucy's career as an older adult had offered her a sense of enjoyment through

growing and promoting the sport, and giving back to her community. Furthermore, in the latter part of Lucy's career in powerlifting, she noted that powerlifting provided a means for stress release, something that was important given the nature of her day-to-day work as a real estate agent.

For Judy, her career can be characterized through the continuous development in physical strength. At each competition she had seen her performance increase from the previous competition. Furthermore, she had progressed through various levels of competition, ultimately achieving the national qualifying standard at the latest powerlifting competition. While both Earl and Judy were involved in powerlifting through various roles, Lucy hadn't assumed any major roles outside of being an athlete. However, Baldwin and Norris (1999) suggested that participants within serious leisure activities often fulfill various roles as a career progresses into later stages. While Lucy is still considered to be seriously involved in powerlifting, perhaps her lack of roles outside of being an athlete indicates she is only involved at an early stage of her powerlifting career. That said, various roles assumed within a leisure pursuit are not a requisite characteristic of engagement, and Lucy may be cognizant of the ability to strike a harmonious balance between her serious leisure commitments and other domains in her life. Therefore, future research could investigate the relationship between career stages, role involvement, and engagement.

It is important to note that there were some apparent struggles with both Earl and Lucy in balancing their careers in powerlifting with other life events. For Earl, he noted that his relationships with significant others were often a detrimental due to his high-level of involvement with powerlifting. He recognized the importance with striking a balance between his roles in powerlifting and other relationships and activities, but struggled in maintaining a



harmonious balance. For Lucy, she had noted that there is an all-or-nothing component to competing that drew most of her attention away from other aspects of her life, referring to this experience as “fighting the demons”. Throughout various stages of Lucy’s career, she seemed to manage the balance between powerlifting and other aspects of her life by intermittently retiring from competing. Stebbins (2001) noted that the seriousness of an activity can vary along a continuum, using the terms “devotees”, “participants”, and “dabblers” to describe the degree of seriousness. Based on both Earl’s and Lucy’s systematic and continual involvement with powerlifting, they can be viewed as “devotees”, which begs the question: at what point does high level of engagement translate into an obsessive passion, versus a harmonious passion, causing more harm than good? Future research ought to continue to understand the notion of serious engagement as it relates to meaningful leisure, as well as delineate the serious leisure continuum.

### *Social Interactions and Relationships*

Significantly, all of the participants shared the importance of being part of a community that offered social interactions. Stebbins (2007) noted that a durable benefit from an activity can be the social interaction/belongingness a participant receives through membership. Furthermore, Knight and Ricciardelli (2003) suggested that forming close personal relationships as adults aged was a key element in maintaining quality of life and living meaningfully.

For Earl, he noted that his day-to-day life was quite isolated. However, powerlifting was a context where he derived many social interactions. He expressed that social media was an important way for him to stay connected to the community, as well as attending powerlifting competitions. In fact, Earl described traveling to competitions as his “favorite time of the year”, solely because he was able to be part of a community.

For Lucy, she continued to stay in contact with the same female powerlifters who were part of the original Canadian Team at the first World Championships. These were individuals that became lifelong friends with Lucy. Furthermore, while Lucy might not have seen these individuals in person frequently, she described the emotional experience of returning to powerlifting as an older adult and reuniting with some of these individuals. Lucy had also attached significant meaning around the relationships she has started with many new powerlifters, especially female powerlifters who she now coaches. Furthermore, Lucy's relationships with younger female powerlifters offered her an ability to engage with the sport through those other athletes, an experience she denoted as "bringing her a lot of joy" and "bringing her back to the 21-year old she used to be".

For Judy, she found it important being a member of a group that values strength. She noted that her social community gave rise to feelings of commitment in the face of resistance. When Lucy encountered self-doubt, her group would give her the confidence to continue self-improving as a powerlifter. While it was already said that viewing other older women in the sport allowed her to make the transition into powerlifting more easily, she became an integral part of the social community through training regularly with these other older women.

#### *A Note on Engagement, Successful Aging and Serious Leisure*

Researchers have suggested that high levels of engagement with a meaningful leisure activity can be a contributor in aging successfully (Rowe and Kahn, 1997; Crowther, Parker, Achenbaum, Larimore, Koenig, 2002; Vaillant, 2002; Knight and Ricciardelli, 2003; Brown, McGuire, and Voelkl, 2008). Through the stories of each participant it was seen that powerlifting provided a context in which to achieve high levels of activity engagement. We saw

this through the commitment to training and competition activities, focus on individual improvement, self-identification, attachment to a broader social community, and translation of physical strength to activities outside the gym environment. While this study can't conclude with certainty that serious leisure promotes high levels of engagement in all cases and contexts, it was certainly experienced through the stories of each participant in the current study.

Further, however, there were some noticeable drawbacks to being highly engaged with powerlifting. Most significant, Earl and Lucy experienced pain and injury associated with their continued and prolonged engagement with high level competition, which may play a factor in deteriorating rather than enhancing physical functioning. As well, Earl noted that he was unable to balance other aspects of his life due to his commitment to powerlifting, and in particular, his roles as an administrator. While Lucy told a similar story of the need to strike a balance, she actually needed to withdraw from her engagement with powerlifting in order to prioritize her family and career. Furthermore, both Lucy and Judy experienced resistance for their high level of engagement with powerlifting as a result of being older and female and choosing an activity that was contrary to preconceived societal norms. By facing this resistance it was recognized that Lucy and Judy experienced emotional turmoil associated with how people perceived them in relation to powerlifting. While Lucy and Judy found sanctity in their social groups to combat these notions of what's considered age and gender appropriate, other older adults engaged with powerlifting might not have the same supportive foundation to start or continue with such an activity.

It should be noted that this study did not set out to prove or disprove whether serious leisure promotes successful aging. Rather, this study aimed to provide a window into the experiences of those who engage with a serious leisure pursuit, and further, understand the role it

played in participants' aging process. What this study can say about successful aging is that there is no one way to describe the term, and even more, it is a complex term to study.

Depending on the operationalization and meanings that a researcher uses to define successful aging, the outcomes can be broad and varied. Importantly, to reduce successful aging to a series of constructs that are subsequently measured for accuracy will only serve to detach people's experiences from their context, as well as devalue individual differences. Knight and Ricciarelli (2003) remind us that "seeing successful aging in terms of others' expectations is ignoring that it is likely to represent different criteria for different people" (p. 224). In other words, while some might argue that the participants in this study aged unsuccessfully, for example, due to their pain and injuries, others may view their experiences positively because of their personal relationships formed through extended participation. As Peterson and Martin (2014) suggested, perhaps success could include both positive and negative experiences. Furthermore, success is "only one link in the chain of developmental trajectories that carry individuals across the life span into old age (p. 7). Moving forward, researchers must ask whether their notions of successful aging are appropriate, especially "if it cannot speak to a wide range of older adults' experiences and/or our own worldviews on aging, or if its underlying ideology serves to facilitate reductions (Dillaway & Byrnes, p. 719).

**Practical Application: How can the experiences of the master powerlifters in this study inform my values and beliefs about aging?**

Through the experiences of the master athletes in this study, we can take away many valuable lessons that can inform our personal beliefs about aging. This advice can serve to inform other master athletes in their chosen pursuit or aging adults in general. The lessons that follow are: taking agency over one's health, viewing challenges as a pathway to self-

improvement, finding inspiration in the social group associated with a particular activity, developing a passion, and becoming empowered by physical strength. While many lessons might be present in the stories, depending on the personal experiences and location of the reader, the lessons highlighted ring true for me as I reflect on my own trajectory in powerlifting as a serious leisure pursuit.

Through Judy's story, we learn the importance of taking agency over our own health. Judy recognized that many older adults, in the absence of maintaining their physical functioning, lose their independence in later life. Judy wanted to set a difference course for her aging, one that was defined by being physically strong. While this desire to be strong was particularly relevant to Judy based on having risk factors for osteoporosis, older adults can broadly understand, on a basic level, the need to have agency over acquiring a proficient level of strength to maintain activities of daily living in late life and reduce the incident of falling. Judy was in her early 50s when she decided to participate in strength training, showing that it's possible, under the right conditions, to start new endeavors at any age. I admire Judy in being brave enough to take control of her own health situation, and subsequently finding the powerlifting community in which she was able to express her physical strength.

Both Earl and Judy remind us the importance of overcoming challenges in pursuit of a greater goal. In fact, inherent within any task worth pursuing are challenges that need to be faced and overcome. Earl and Judy perceived the challenges as a way to improve, and not as a roadblock to success. The outcome for Earl and Judy in overcoming adversity was heightened feelings of accomplishment and a sense of self-improvement. Instead of shying away from activities that pose challenges, aging adults ought to realize the benefits of persevering through an activity as a means of personal development. As I reflect on my own future in powerlifting, I

recognize that there will always be challenges in training for and competing in powerlifting. As I overcome one challenge, I know that another will present itself, offering opportunities to test my personal capacities.

One of the important ways to overcome challenges, especially in the early stages of engaging with an activity, is to find a supportive social group. We see the importance of a social group throughout each of the stories told above. By having others who share a common activity, individuals are able share their successes and failures, high and lows, and hopes and struggles. In the absence of such a group, it can be hard to share and relate one's experience, especially the nuances and idiosyncrasies associated with a specific activity, with others not involved in a similar pursuit. Ultimately, being in the presence of others who are involved in the same activity can be a powerful and meaningful experience in and of itself that can enhance commitment and levels of engagement. For me, I have created many long lasting friendships as a result of my participation in powerlifting. Ultimately, being involved in powerlifting allows me to meet people from various backgrounds, and to connect and share in similar experiences regardless of age.

Lucy reminds us that dreams and setting goals are not relegated to the young. She believed that no matter how old someone is that he or she should keep dreaming, and not let anyone devalue that pursuit. Lucy believed that aging adults need to make a mental switch between thinking they don't have the right to dream to answering the call if it's large enough in their heart. While Lucy's dream was to pursue high-level powerlifting, she recognized that this dream is only personal to her and not for everyone. She suggested that others ought to dream within their own individual context, and whether that dream is small or large, it should be valued and something worth pursuing. Lucy voiced that aging adults can often feel like their 'time as

passed', however through the stories presented above we learn that achieving dreams are possible at any age. As we age, dreams may shift and modify based on one's personal context, but ultimately, the important message is that people need to keep believing that dreams are achievable. For instance, Earl and Judy suggested the importance of the master-aged categories as a way for them to still achieve excellence and keep dreaming. I recognize that as I get older I might not have the ability to achieve certain physical accomplishments that I previously attained as a younger adult. Thus, it's important to remember that dreams need to be situated within a personal context.

It should be noted that many individuals struggle to find a passion in life. Passions can develop differently throughout the life-course. Above all, we see that in each of the stories the participants found a passion in the sport of powerlifting at various times throughout his or her life. For example, Earl and Lucy developed their passion for powerlifting in their early 20s, which continued with them into older age. On the other hand, Judy only developed a passion for powerlifting in her early 50s. While powerlifting might not be a context in which everyone chooses to find their passion, the lesson to be learned is that finding a passion in an activity can provide self-enrichment, feelings of accomplishment, and an identity wherein a person can be associated with a broader community. Whether my passion continues to be as an elite athlete in powerlifting as I get older is unknown; however, I know that I will always be able to shift my passion for powerlifting from personal achievements to coaching others. Just like Lucy, I derive an incredible amount of gratification in the athletes in which I coach, which is something I'm able to continue regardless of physical ability.

Finally, the common thread tying each of the participants together, including me, was that we all valued physical strength. Powerlifting is only a specific kind of strength training, and

proficient levels of strength can be achieved through other forms of exercise. Thus, while competitive powerlifting might only be pursued by a small percentage of the older adult population, acquiring strength through various physical activities is still considered important. Fundamentally, aging adults should not take for granted their physical strength, as being strong can offer opportunities to engage with life more broadly. For example, we saw that Judy translated her strength into spending more time with her family on various physical activity adventures, where she admitted in the absence of being strong she wouldn't be able to manage these activities. Older adults should view physical strength as a gateway to optimizing health and wellbeing into later life.

## **Conclusion**

This study sought to understand the lived experiences of older adults involved in serious competitive powerlifting. The study used open-ended interviews, where the meanings around participants' experiences were co-created using my first-hand knowledge of the sport of powerlifting, as well as my already established relationships with each participant. The study utilized the serious leisure perspective as a guiding framework to provide context and connections to existing research in sport and aging.

The stories within this study are not to be understood as generalizable results. Each narrative was unique to the particular participant and provided a window into their experiences. My hopes in portraying the results as intact stories was to uphold their emotion, merit, insightfulness, and authenticity, in order to enhance the reader's connectedness to each participant.



My research presumes to add to the literature base for successful aging, physical activity and sport, and serious leisure by using powerlifting as the context. This study offered a number of points for future research, which require both quantitative and qualitative understanding. A better understanding of the connection between serious leisure and aging will allow sport and leisure organizations, government departments, and health promotion stakeholders to better cater to the needs of older adults in their physical activity pursuits.

# Appendix

## Appendix A: Participant Consent

You are invited to participate in a study entitled “Narratives of Master-Aged Powerlifters: Understanding Aging and the Serious Leisure Perspective” that is being conducted by Avi Silverberg.

Avi Silverberg is a Master’s of Science student in Kinesiology at the School of Exercise Science and Physical Health at the University of Victoria. As a graduate student, I am required to conduct research as part of my program requirements. This research is being conducted under the supervision of Dr. John Meldrum.

### Purpose and Objectives

The purpose of this research project is to gather qualitative data on your experiences with powerlifting as an older adult. My inquiry is led by four questions: (1) What are the experiences of older adults who engage in competitive powerlifting? (2) How do older adults view powerlifting as part of their own aging process? (3) What events in older powerlifters’ lives enable them to take up or maintain engagement in competitive powerlifting as a serious leisure pursuit? (4) What makes powerlifting, as an activity for older adults, meaningful and important to their lives?

### Importance of this Research

As adults age, they spend less of their leisure time in strenuous physical activity and more in sedentary activities such as reading and watching television. Research indicates that 70% of adults over the age of 50 years old do not meet the national guidelines for regular physical activity. Since there is a decrease in leisure-time physical activity in later life, there is a pressing need for researchers to understand the leisure context, and experiences that give rise to long lasting and engaged physical activity endeavors.

Many forms of physical activity exist, but strength training, specifically, has broad ranging positive health outcomes. In particular, older adults who partake in strength training activities are better able to cope with the many physical challenges in later life, such as performing activities of daily living and reducing the incidence of unexpected falling episodes. Competitive powerlifting is a sport that uses strength training to help increase levels of maximal strength and build a person’s capacity to lift heavy weights.

### Participants Selection

Participants for this study are selected based on: being a Canadian citizen, a member of the Canadian Powerlifting Union, speaking English, self-identifying that powerlifting is a serious leisure pursuit, and actively competing in powerlifting within the past two years. I seek to recruit between 2-4 participants over the age of 50 years old. Specifically, I seek to recruit at least one person who has been involved with competitive powerlifting since competing as an open-aged athlete (ages 23-39 years old) and continues to be involved with powerlifting today; and at least one person who only began competitive powerlifting as an M2 (ages 50-59) or M3 (ages 60-69) athlete. Based on my experiences as a powerlifting athlete, coach, and sport administrator, I have identified you as someone who fits the selection criteria above.

### What is involved?

The study will involve a 60-90 min interview, conducted either in-person or on the phone, scheduled at your convenience. The interviews will be recorded using an audio-recording device. If you reside in the same geographic location as me you may choose to have the interview conducted in person at a private location of your choice. An open-ended interview questionnaire has been designed where you will be asked to describe your experiences in powerlifting as it relates to your aging process. I will transcribe the audio recordings from the interview. Following my review of the transcriptions, I may contact you to check the transcripts for clarity or pose follow-up questions. If this review or follow-up is necessary, ongoing consent will be obtained electronically, and I will either send you a copy of the transcripts via email or ask to speak with you over the phone.

### Inconvenience

Participation in this study will be of little inconvenience. The only known inconvenience will be finding time to conduct the interview, and potentially reviewing the transcripts for clarity or allowing for follow-up questions.

### Risks

There are no known or anticipated risks by participating in this research.

### Benefits

Insights in your experience may inspire other older adults to engage in the sport of powerlifting. Furthermore, by understanding the experiences of older adults who engage with powerlifting, researchers might gain valuable knowledge about the connection between strength-based sports and successful aging. As well, from a practitioner's standpoint, a better understanding of the role of powerlifting in the lives of older adults will allow sport and leisure organizations, government departments, and health promotion stakeholders to cater to the needs of seniors in their physical activity pursuits.

### Voluntary Participation

Your participation in this research will be completely voluntary. Whether you participate or not, it will not affect your status as an athlete or member of the Canadian Powerlifting Union; your relationship with myself or the Canadian Powerlifting Union; or any future services that you choose to access from myself or the Canadian Powerlifting Union. At any time you can withdraw from the study with no consequences or explanation. If you do withdraw from the study, your data will not be used for the study's purpose and all of the audio recordings and transcripts removed and destroyed at your request.

### Researcher's Relationship with Participants

I have been involved with competitive powerlifting for seven years. I am a 3-time world powerlifting competitor and medalist, national champion and record holder. I was also selected as the National Team Head Coach for the 2012 World Bench Press Team and 2013 World Sub-Junior/Junior Powerlifting Team. I am also a member of the Alberta Powerlifting Union Executive Council, a volunteer position that aims to grow the sport of powerlifting in Alberta. Due to these various roles within powerlifting, the participants may know or be known to the researcher.

### Anonymity

As the researcher, I will know your identity throughout the research process; however, through the use of a pseudonym, your identity will be protected from others in all stages of data collection, analysis, and dissemination of results (E.g. Participant 1, Participant 2, Participant 3, and Participant 4).

### Confidentiality

The recorded audio files from the interview will be held in a password protected files on the researcher's computer. Any paper-based data will be stored and secured in a locked filing cabinet in the researcher's home office.

Although your identity will be protected as described above, the fact that participants are older adult powerlifters will be revealed in the dissemination of results, along with the other selection parameters noted above. As such, the size of the sample from which you were drawn is fixed and limited. For example, there are limited numbers of older adults who competed as an open-age athlete and still compete in powerlifting today as either a M2 (ages 50-59) or M3 (60-69) athlete in Canada. Therefore, your identity may be assumed as a byproduct of participating in the study.

### Dissemination of Results

It is anticipated that the results of this study will be shared with others in the following ways: class presentation, thesis paper, published article, internet sites connected to the research topic, and media outlets (newspaper, radio, TV). After the completion of the project, I will compose a summary of the results to share with you.

#### Disposal of Data

All data relating to the study will be disposed of five years following the completion of the researcher's graduate program. Digital-based data will be deleted from the researcher's computer, and paper-based data shredded and disposed.

#### Contacts

Individuals that may be contacted regarding this study include Avi Silverberg, primary investigator (403-680-4111 or [absilver@uvic.ca](mailto:absilver@uvic.ca)) and Dr. John Meldrum, research supervisor (250-721-8392 or [jmeldrum@uvic.ca](mailto:jmeldrum@uvic.ca)). You may verify the ethical approval of this study, or raise any concerns you might have, by contacting the Human Research Ethics Office at the University of Victoria (250-472-4545 or [ethics@uvic.ca](mailto:ethics@uvic.ca)).

Your signature below indicates that you understand the above conditions of participation in this study and that you have had the opportunity to have your questions answered by the researchers.

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*Name of Participant*

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*Signature*

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*Date*

*A copy of this consent will be left with you, and a copy will be taken by the researcher.*

## Appendix B: Interview Script

*What events in older powerlifters' lives enable them to take up or maintain engagement in competitive powerlifting as a serious leisure pursuit? (consider making this the first questions)*

- Tell me about your career in powerlifting – how did you get started and where are you now?
- What attracted you to powerlifting when you first started?
- What keeps your attraction to the sport as you get older? ?
- Tell me about your involvement in powerlifting through your various roles inside the sport?
  - What are these roles?
  - Why do you participate in these roles?
- What sorts of things maintain your engagement with powerlifting as you get older?
  - I imagine there comes a point where you aren't as strong as you once were, what keeps you driven to compete with this in mind?

*What are the experiences of older adults who engage in competitive powerlifting?*

- Do you share anything in common with other Master athletes in powerlifting?
- Can you define a typical “master powerlifting moment” – where you could say “you would only see or hear this in powerlifting”?
- Are there things in powerlifting that only Master athletes would understand versus other age-groups in powerlifting or people who don't participate in the sport generally?
- What would be some things that two master athletes, who have never met before, would talk about after meeting for the first time?
- How would you describe to someone the feeling of training for and competing in powerlifting as an older adult?

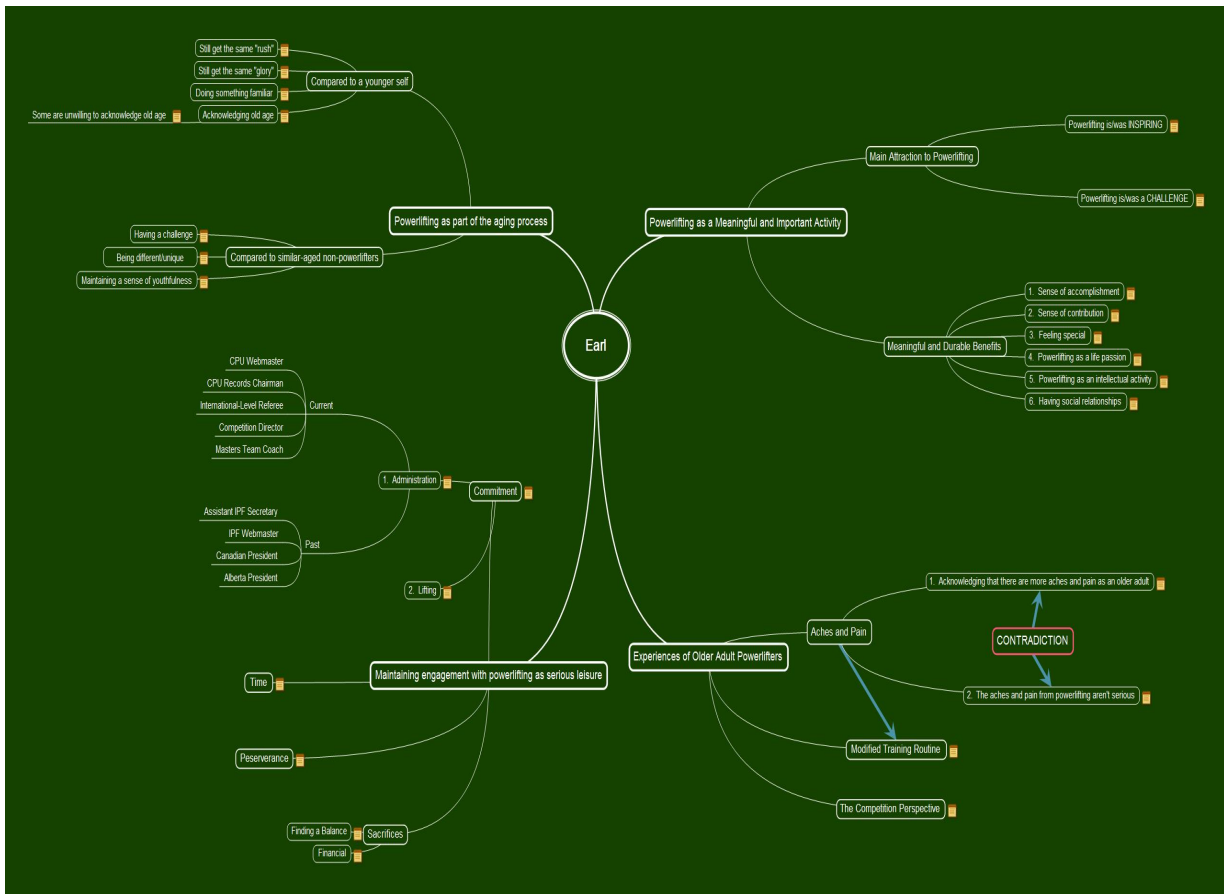
*How do older adults view powerlifting as part of their own aging process?*

- How does powerlifting compare to the things your friends and colleagues your age are doing?
- Tell me about your commitment in powerlifting – what does it take?
  - Has this commitment changed since you first started?
- Describe a typical week of how powerlifting fits into your day and week?
  - How does it impact the rest of your life? Eating? Sleeping? Socializing?
- What are some of the sacrifices you make as an older adult competing in powerlifting?
- What kinds of challenges exist for you during powerlifting training or competing in powerlifting by being a Master athlete?
  - So why do it? What keeps you going?

*What makes powerlifting, as an activity for older adults, meaningful and important to their lives?*

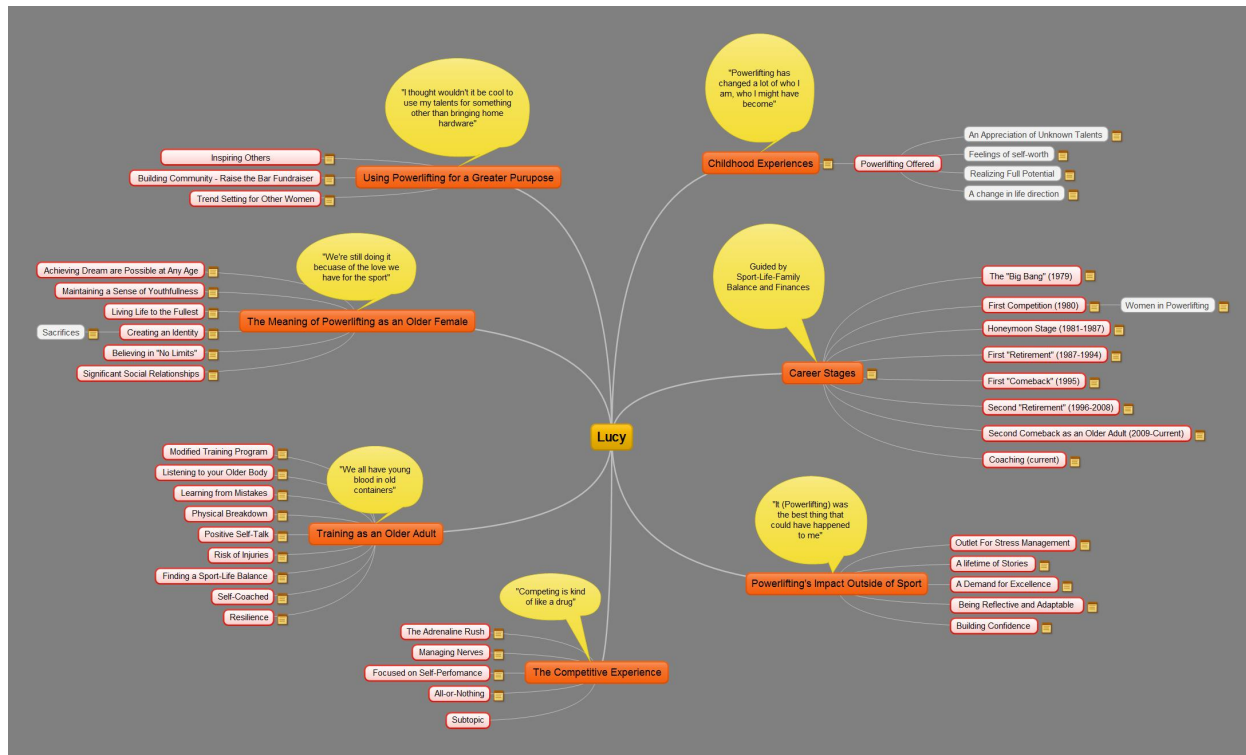
- What is your relationship with other powerlifters (both in and out of the gym)?
- What does it mean to you to be a Master athlete in powerlifting?
- What do you get out of competitive powerlifting that you can't get anywhere else?
- How does powerlifting contribute to your life?
- How would you feel if you couldn't powerlift tomorrow?

# Appendix C: Concept Map of Earl

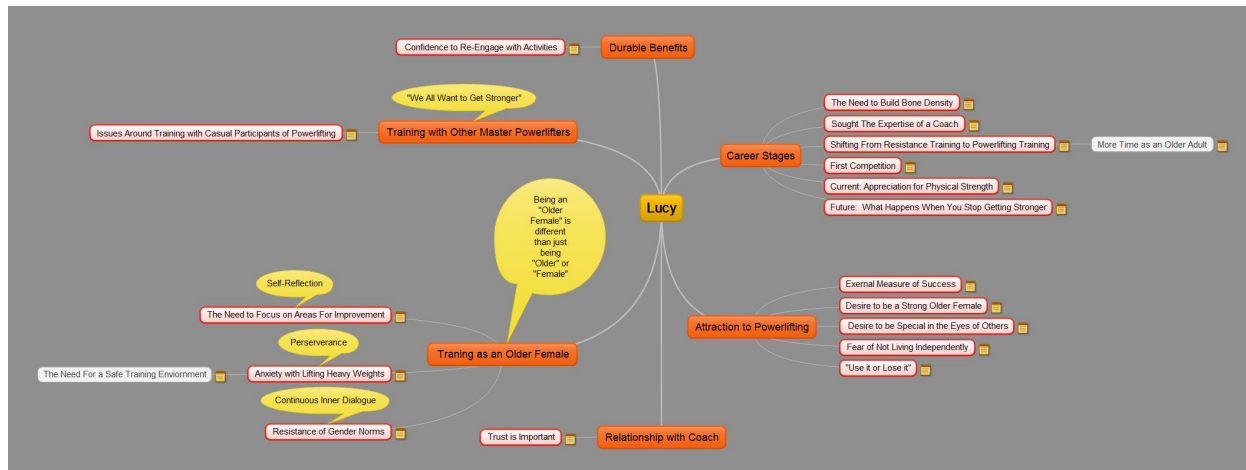




# Appendix D: Concept Map of Lucy



## Appendix E: Concept Map of Judy



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