

Fast and fit after 50

Growing older can lead to limitations on the field of play, but more people are embracing the physical challenges and competing at 50 and beyond.

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Eric Chatman takes a break while cycling at the RAGBRAI.

Photo credit *Eric Chatman*



Written By Angie Chatman

Bob Cantu completed his sixth Boston Marathon 15 years ago when he was in his mid-60s. Although he would eventually stop running Boston's premier marathon, Cantu continued to stay active in sports by participating in tennis matches on the 75-and-older circuit at the Concord Country Club in Concord, Massachusetts.

"(I ran in the Boston marathon) back when my knees were in better shape," Cantu said. "The jolts on the soft tissue between the joints can lead to serious hip and lower back issues, so I stopped."

Cantu knows about the risks of injury that can occur when participating in sports, especially as people age. He is a clinical professor of neurology and neurosurgery at Boston University's School of Medicine, and head of the Cantu Concussion Center at Emerson Hospital in Concord, Massachusetts. Dr. Cantu consults with the NHL, NFL and NBA sports leagues and has authored over 350 papers on concussions and sports medicine.



Bob Cantu plays tennis at the Concord Country Club in Concord, Mass. Photo credit: Tina Cantu

"My first sport was baseball," Cantu said. "I loved having my dad in the stands cheering me on. I was a pitcher. Back then, a pitcher's role wasn't as constrained, so I did a lot of running too. I enjoy running. You don't feel quite right when you aren't doing it. I play tennis a few times a week, but it's not the same."

Rebecca Regan, currently in her mid-50s, echoes this sentiment. Regan was highly active in sports from when she was a teenager and went on to play rugby competitively until she was 50.

“I played lacrosse and field hockey in high school and college,” said Regan, who now prefers to run in 10K races. “After graduating I missed the camaraderie of team sports, so I joined a rugby team. We called ourselves the Olde Girls. I played the scrum-half position for 30 years. You must be quick and strong to play scrum. Once I hit 50 my body no longer recovered as quickly from the physical contact, so now I run. That still feels good.”

Growing up in the Baltimore area during the early 1970s, lacrosse was one of Chris Crowder’s favorite sports through high school and college. He then played club lacrosse for the next 20 years. Following a series of knee injuries and a career move to Sydney, Australia, Crowder decided to switch to cycling. In the summer of 2021, he completed RAGBRAI, the Register’s Annual Great Bike Race Across Iowa, “the nation’s oldest, largest, and longest multi-day touring event in the world.”

The 2021 RAGBRAI route — from the Missouri River western state border to the Mississippi River eastern border — covered northern Iowa towns, which are at higher inclines. The total miles for the route was 454.1, with two of the days accounting for over 83 miles each.



Rebecca Regan during her playing days with the rugby team, Olde Girls. Photo credit: Olde Girls team

Crowder’s high school classmate and lacrosse teammate Eric Chatman joined Crowder on the ride. “It was about the preparation,” Chatman said. “There is no way to finish that ride if you haven’t consistently trained and built up your stamina. It was really good to have to get out of the house during the Covid-19 pandemic yet still be safe.”

Crowder agreed that training plays a major role in competing after reaching a certain age. “You don’t finish if you don’t train,” he said. “At my age, it’s not so much about competing, it’s about finishing. Instead, I channel that need-to-win energy into the kids I coach.” Lacrosse is most popular in the mid-Atlantic states. However, after another career move, this time to Bend, Oregon, Crowder decided to volunteer as a high school coach, helping the sport grow in Bend, as well as Portland, Oregon, Seattle, Washington, and western Idaho. “Another thing about being this age is it’s all about making a difference, paying it forward,” he said. “My coaches did the same for me and I didn’t appreciate it because I was young (then). Now, I do.”

In addition to lacrosse, Chatman played basketball in high school, college and on club teams, competing until he was in his mid-30s. He notes that “once you play competitive sports in high school and college, you will never really stop being an athlete.”

Chatman also coached his son’s and both of his daughters’ basketball teams. “I love coaching,” Chatman said. “There’s such an immediate reward when you help a kid learn life lessons through sports. There’s something about being on a court where the kids tend to listen more. Their parents? Not so much.”

Some who are in the baby boomer generation (born 1946-1964) are still athletic and have found sports that offer both aerobics, strength building, and a sense of community. Cantu provides advice on participating in 10K races and performing athletically over the age of 55. “It depends on the individual, of course,” he said. “It’s a balancing act to maximize performance and minimize (the) risk of injury. With marathons, people tend to push the envelope, ignore the pain, and exacerbate the problem.”

Along with the physical gratification, competing at an older age can be fulfilling by serving as another way to accomplish short and long-term goals.

“To tell you the truth I don’t like (to) exercise,” Regan admitted. “I like how I feel after I exercise and can celebrate reaching the finish line.”