



The Third Act: The Race to Finish Last

Author Ellen Waterston's latest column tackles aging and exercise... and when to say when

By [*Ellen Waterston*](#)

My husband and I originally moved to Oregon to ranch, first north of Brothers and later along the Crooked River. One of the many things I treasured all those years was that staying fit wasn't a separate activity scheduled into the workday or weekends, rather was part and parcel of every day—irrigating and calving in the spring; moving cattle on horseback and putting up hay each summer; gathering off the high country in the fall; winters, feeding livestock. I'd put the pickup in low gear, jump out of the cab and climb on to the bed while the truck lurched driverless across the frozen meadow. Shaggy with winter coats, nose hairs lined with frost, horses and pregnant mother cows trotted along behind, vying for the hay I'd pitch to them. And too, maintaining a household, feeding ranch hands and caring for my three toddlers who came along for every ride.

When I moved to "town," staying fit and making a living became separate activities. While my children shredded the slopes of Mt. Bachelor, I took up Nordic skiing, learned the language of fartleks, mousaieffs, heartrate monitors, interval and strength workouts. Training for ski races

helped me maintain the level of fitness I'd achieved ranching. Instead of chasing cattle down the alley, I'd line up on starting lines, go hellbent and then wait for results calculated to the second.

Sometime in my mid-60s it occurred to me I was still athletic but no longer an athlete. I did all the same activities but less often competitively and discovered I didn't miss the pressure. My focus shifted from competing to, well, exercising. And now? I don't know where I read that every adult should aim for 300 minutes of exertion each week, but I bought into it. There are many days I have to force myself out the door to reach that weekly five-hour mark. But repeating Matthew McConaughey's challenge to "Break a sweat every single day!" gets me going. Actually, anything McConaughey gets me going but that's a separate conversation!

It turns out physical fitness is a daily chore, whether working cattle or working out in a gym. A power-walk, bike ride, run, round of pickle ball, yoga, dance class...you name it! 18,000 seconds and counting! (Friends visiting joked that they couldn't live in Bend. They couldn't pass the physical.) If compromised, your physical therapist, trainer or home-health assistant can be a resource to keep you moving. Check out the options where you live or, in Bend, the amazing array of activities at Bend Park and Recreation District. As a devotee of Alli Jorgensen's "Total Strength and Core" class, I am proud to be a twice-weekly "Alli Cat."

"Move it or lose it!" she declares. And that includes artificial body parts for me and for many, the result of accidents or unregulated athletic zeal in the past. We're now less nimble, less quick, pack more ounce, less bounce. Falling is enemy number one. Balance is paramount and not just for geezer jocks. In the broadest sense, that balance is achieved by not only stretching the muscles but also the mind.

Sanjay Gupta, in his book "Keep Sharp: Build a Better Brain at Any Age" belabors the oft-repeated litany of the top 10 new everythings to try, to learn. In case you hadn't noticed, recipes for health and happiness, especially for oldsters, are ubiquitous. Puzzles! Study a new language! And don't forget, a proper diet!

"Eat Sanjay-style," Gupta says, "breakfast like a king, lunch like a prince, and dinner like a peasant," adding that what and how much we put into our bodies affects brain function as much as physical exercise. Go long on blueberries, salmon, leafy greens and almonds. Ditch the sugar.

Why all the fuss? The purpose at this point isn't to hold it together just to avoid getting dumb and friendly, rather to take seriously the race training required as members of Team Human, each of us an essential player in a healthy, age-diverse community. If possible, this is one race you don't want to finish first.

The unavoidable declension from athlete to athletic to active. Next up? I can see "fit" on the horizon and "still kicking" looming not too far beyond. What then? Journalist Anthony Lane, reflecting on the Tokyo Olympics, opined that, "The future was restored by the sight of Athing Mu, aged nineteen, who was born and raised in Trenton, New Jersey, whose parents emigrated from Sudan, and whose long, commanding stride brought her a gold medal and a new U.S. record in the eight hundred meters. Afterward, she tweeted her reaction: 'Lol, I think it's funny

that we literally run so fast and just stop once we get to the line.' Why stop then?'" Indeed, maybe the end is just the beginning.

—Poet and author Ellen Waterston is a woman of a certain age who resides in Bend. "The Third Act" is a series of columns on ageing and ageism.