

# Big Man, Little Man, Old Man, Woman

Gordo Byrne

This week I am going to write about body composition, age and gender. Should be something to offend everyone...

Before getting to my point, let's define terms. Specifically, what is "big" and what is "old"? There are several ways to look at this and each method impacts the risk/return profile of different training approaches.

- **Absolute weight:** Step on a scale - big starts around 165 lbs (75 kg)
- **Lean body mass:** Get yourself DEXA scanned -- big starts around 155 lbs (70 kg) of lean body mass
- **Check your height:** Big starts around six feet tall (1.8m)
- **Consider your aerobic engine:** Where does your absolute and relative aerobic power stack up - big starts around 5L of VO2

Now a six foot tall, 165 lbs person is not going to look very big walking around the strip in Las Vegas. True, but for the purpose of what follows, "big" people are going to respond to training differently than "small" people.

What's old? Let's make some more friends (!) and define that:

- **Chronological age:** Look at your driver's license -- old starts at 35 years old (40 for the ladies)
- **Athletic age:** Consider your life time years of consistent training -- old starts at 15 years of training
- **Biomechanical age:** Consider your feet, knees, hips, ITBs, back and shoulders -- don't define yourself as young, or old, on this point -- merely consider it

For events that are fuel-constrained (ironman, adventure racing, mountaineering, ultracycling), we often see that the fastest athletes are a little big and a little old.

Thinking about it... maybe I should have said "experienced," rather than "old." Your knees aren't wrecked... they are experienced... ;-)

---

## **Don't Train Like A Woman** (unless you are "experienced" and/or female)

Experienced women, veteran and small athletes can handle much more relative intensity than their younger, larger peers. This past winter I was training with Belinda Granger and Mirinda Carfrae -- I'm absolutely certain that they would drill me into the ground (!) if I tried to keep up with their training. Watching those ladies train was inspiring, humbling and a little depressing... if I am honest! If you are a young, big guy then that this fact can be tough on your ego. As well, nature gives young men so many hormones that they are not equipped to cope with this reality!

It's not just the elite ladies who crush people. The fastest amateur women on our team do a lot of "damage" to the guys in their training groups. Just because they are polite and smiling... don't be fooled! They are crushing you (I see the data).

How are you going to know that you're not coping?

Think back to my question about biomechanical age -- you are going to start feeling "old". ITB syndrome, piriformis syndrome, planter faciitis, chronic back pain, chronic fatigue -- most of the larger men who join our team arrive with one, or more of these chronic issues. As coaches, we spend months providing psychological reassurance that it is OK to back off. It is important to remember that even when a big man backs off, the actual work rate remains high. For example, moving 175+ lbs at ANY speed requires effort. For a larger man, easy training isn't easy!

I also think that this is why coaches who excel with women completely fry their larger men. Even dialing their training protocol down, it is still too much intensity for the guys. *Small, young women get fast from intensity, big men get fast from volume.* The takeaway point -- the higher your absolute capacity for work rate, the more careful you'll need to be with sustained high intensity training.

As a man that is kinda big, kinda old (or should that be "experienced"?) -- most of my training mistakes happened when I was greedy with fitness/speed and tried to train "hard" for an extended period to time.

---

### **Grandpa Is Throwin' Down**

There isn't a lot of information about super-vet athletes (folks that are really, really speedy in their 50s, 60s and 70s) but it's coming. Coaches who "do," like Joe Friel and John Hellems, will teach us a lot by taking their lifelong experience and applying it to themselves. It will be fun to learn from them and I hope they continue to publish!

I've been fortunate to coach one of the fastest men over 65 in the world for the last eight years -- he's in his 70s and won his AG (in Kona) by an *hour* when he turned 70. When I look at Ron's training a few things stand out:

- An exceptional tolerance for mod-hard volume (which was an easy/steady work-rate for him when he was younger)
- Amazing consistency across months/years/decades (low standard deviation training)
- Year round strength training (traditional and functional)
- An element of chance

I'll explain the chance. A long break from exercise in your 20s is a non-event. Even at 40, I took a long break from swimming (when my daughter was born) and was able to come back to quite a good level. With each decade we add, the losses (in specific strength) that result from long lay-offs are tougher to regain.

What does chance have to do with strength training and consistency? Bike crashes!

Tips you can use to "shape your fate":

- Manage personal fatigue (#1, we crash when we are tired)
- Manage route and peer selection
- Maintain access to the best doctors through appropriate insurance
- Stay whole-body strong

The takeaway point -- in the upper age groups, there are characteristics of high performers that differ from what we see with the "kids." Given that quite a bit of sports science is based on short-duration studies of college kids, we should keep our eyes open to the common threads that run through athletes (of all categories) who are long-term performers.