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Peak Performance and Age Among Superathletes: Track and Field, Swimming, Baseball, Tennis, and Golf

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to identify the age of peak performance in a broad range of athletic events incorporating multiple, diverse biological

systems, learned skills, and motivation. Although many researchers have noted that the absolute levels of peak performance among superathletes have improved dramatically in the last 100 years, to date no one has answered the question of stability of peak performance age over this time period. Analyses of Olympic track and field and swimming data show that the age at which peak performance is achieved has remained remarkably consistent. For both men and women, the age of peak performance increases with the length of the foot race, and women generally achieve peak performance at younger ages. The pattern of increased age with increasing distance is reversed for female swimmers, where younger ages are associated with increasing distance. For most categories of performance in baseball, the peak age of performance is equivalent to that of a long distance runner, about 28 years of age, while top tennis players reach their highest levels of performance at age 24. Golfers, in comparison, peak at about 31 years of age, although recent data suggest movement toward younger ages. A task analysis of each event is carried out, and the relative roles of biology and learning are discussed as determinants of peak performance.

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