

# The forgotten world of coaching masters sport in Portugal: implications for research and practice

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## ABSTRACT

Master (adult) sports can contribute to healthy ageing and increase the quality of life. Nonetheless, few efforts have been deployed to identify and reflect on guidelines for quality master sports coaching in Portugal that can contribute to these outcomes. Therefore, the purpose of this critical commentary is to provide insights into the current status of master sports in Portugal, as well as present implications for researchers and practitioners. In Portugal, eligibility for competition is based on age. Master sports is a structured and competitive physical activity that is associated with teams or individuals with a strong emphasis on formal competition across provincial, national, and/or international championships. There exist efforts by the government to have adult sports play a role in contributing to holistic athlete development throughout the lifespan and towards healthy ageing. This is not incompatible with competition, which is a critical component of the Portuguese sports culture. However, competitions may need to be carefully organised and used as a resource for holistic athlete development, focusing on adult athletes' health and well-being. Moreover, adult sports may also be positioned as non-structured physical activity, as well as by diverse types of competitive events and activities. Moving forward, there is a need to initiate dialogue between all actors of the sports system and identify alternative ways to position, imagine and use master sports in a challenging contemporary landscape.

**KEYWORDS:** adults; policy; culture; athletes; healthy ageing.

## INTRODUCTION

In Portugal, there are approximately 10 million residents. Specifically, there are more than 4 million adults ranging between the ages of 20 and 64 years old. The data available highlights the population in Portugal will continue to age substantially over the next decades (PORDATA, 2020b). However, while in 2018, there were 87,167 adult athletes formally enrolled in masters sport; in 2021, the number has fallen to around 75,230 master athletes (PORDATA, 2020a). Such data showcases a decrease in adult sports participation, which follows the current trend of physical inactivity across Portuguese society (Pizarro et al., 2023). Indeed, Portugal is one of Europe's top countries with high physical inactivity rates (Magalhães et al., 2023; Pizarro et al., 2023). Beyond physical inactivity, there has been an increase in several risk factors, such as alcohol, tobacco and drug consumption, which can

impact physical and psychological health. To overcome these trends, physical activity, particularly sport, when appropriately framed, can contribute to healthy ageing and increase the quality of life (e.g., Malcolm et al., 2023; Oliveira et al., 2023). Indeed, research on well-being has highlighted the need to value meaningful experiences that satisfy individuals' interests, motivations and beliefs (Deci & Ryan, 2008). Thus, partaking in sports as an adult may need to be prioritised, which reinforces the importance of moving beyond performance metrics and winning. Nonetheless, few efforts have been deployed to identify and reflect on guidelines for quality master sports coaching that can contribute to healthy ageing and wellness in Portugal (Batista et al., 2017; 2021a; 2021b).

The purpose of this critical commentary is to provide insights into the current status of master (adult) sport in Portugal, as well as present implications for researchers and

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practitioners. Masters sports can be defined as structured (i.e., coach-lead) physical activities that may be promoted by provincial sports organisations for individuals typically aged 35 years or older (Callary et al., 2021). Most evidence-based practices and recommendations for master sports have been generated by research in English-speaking countries such as Canada, the United States, Australia, and the United Kingdom (e.g., Callary, Belalcazar et al., 2024; Callary, Eagles, et al., 2024; Hookway et al., 2024; Tayrose et al., 2015). However, there are different challenges across countries, such as attaching health to the purposes of master sports and the lack of cultural relevancy of master sports. These challenges influence efforts to develop knowledge and meaningful practices and to promote quality master sports in Portugal. Furthermore, these challenges warrant attention from sports administrators, coaches, and researchers, among other actors involved in sports systems (see Dorsch et al., 2022, for a system-level approach towards sports). Therefore, this paper aims to instigate reflection (a) on the current status of master sport in Portugal, which can resonate with readers across diverse socio-cultural contexts, and (b) towards potential and alternative steps and efforts that can be deployed by researchers and practitioners moving forward.

## CONCEPTUALIZING MASTERS SPORT IN PORTUGAL

### The current status

In Portugal, eligibility for competition is based on age and not ability. Masters sport as a structured physical activity is associated with teams or individuals that formally compete across provincial, national and/or international championships. This is similar to definitions of masters sport in Canada, USA, and Australia, whereby masters sport is rule-governed, wherein masters athletes prepare (train) to participate in competitive events (e.g. leagues, tournaments, events; Callary et al., 2021). For those sports organisations in Portugal that have masters groups, there are competitions (games) all year round. For example, in football, Portugal's most popular sport, there is a two-phase championship and a league cup (Federação Portuguesa de Futebol, 2024). In basketball, there is a championship, a league cup and a super cup (Federação Portuguesa de Basquetebol, 2020). Masters surfing is another popular Portuguese sport, including surf and bodyboarding; there is one national championship and multiple provincial events (Federação Portuguesa de Surf, 2019).

Sports policies at the national and provincial levels have supported the creation of multiple competitions that resemble

high-performance sports contexts – league cups, super cups and championships with multiple phases. In contrast to other countries where masters sport does not always or necessarily require a coach (Callary et al., 2015), masters teams are required to have a coach as competitive events are highly formal and include certified referees and police officers, and all formal rules and regulations apply. Conversely, adult sports as non-structured physical activity can be athlete-led (e.g., climbing). In these settings, there are no requirements to have a coach and/or partake in competitions.

While there is a focus on competition, the main premise of master sports, even in Portugal, in principle, is to include all individuals who wish to partake in sport activities to become physically active and achieve other objectives such as personal development, well-being and positive mental health (Kontro et al., 2022; Portuguese Institute for Sport and Youth, 2024). Such a mandate aligns with a 'sport for all' approach that has been stipulated as a priority across countries (Hoekman & Scheerder, 2021). Sport for all is an approach towards programming and policy that aims to create inclusive practices and opportunities in sport, targeting all population cohorts and fostering equity. Sports for All aims to include the most vulnerable (e.g., underserved youth) and most in need (e.g., adults). In Portugal, through the Portuguese Institute for Sport and Youth (2024), the government annually provides funding from sports organisations and higher education institutions that deliver programs that aim to increase sports participation across population cohorts, including concerns towards healthy ageing. It is known that sport for all can enable the creation of opportunities and affordances for master sport participation to become a feasible quest for many individuals (Matolić et al., 2023).

In theory, sports policies aligned with a sport-for-all mandate can enable an important cohort of the population to increase physical activity levels, health and well-being. Matolić et al. (2023) conducted a study with representatives of 536 sports organisations from 36 European countries and highlighted that increasing levels of physical activity is a key public health priority in Europe, which involves coordinated actions across researchers, promoters, and policymakers to improve the promotion of health-enhancing physical activity through sport. Therefore, from an applied standpoint, physical activity levels are a public health concern, and master sports participants could be seen as role models for physical activity in adulthood (Geard et al., 2017). However, the current model of masters sport is, in certain cases, highly focused on competition and a professionalised competitive structure with many similarities to high-performance contexts (see Santos et al., 2024 for an overview of Portuguese

masters sport coaches' perceptions). The coaches of master sports, therefore, sometimes prioritise athlete performance in competitive events, and they may feel pressured to manage their teams and athletes per the social norms of performance sports wherein the best athletes need to play (Santos et al., 2024).

Dominant norms and structures in master sports in Portugal may, in some cases, be centred around high-performance sports, which are not accessible to everyone at the present time. Such a tendency would also help explain decreases in physical activity levels amongst the Portuguese population (Pizarro et al., 2023). For example, an individual who is 35 years old and, therefore, eligible to compete may be excluded from a master's sports team due to the lack of ability to perform to the standard set in that context. This may represent one of the potential pitfalls of highly formal competition in master sports. In this way, master's sports programs may not contribute towards helping with European health priorities. Batista et al. (2017; 2021a; 2021b) conducted a series of studies to better understand Portuguese master athletes' perceptions concerning the relationship between basic psychological needs, motivation, well-being and life satisfaction. Findings highlighted the need to foster autonomy as a strategy to increase master athletes' well-being and life satisfaction. Moreover, motivation appeared to mediate autonomy. Therefore, Batista et al. (2017; 2021a; 2021b) noted an evident need to move beyond ego-driven climates that focus on performance development and winning. Efforts may need to be deployed towards fostering a positive climate where master athletes become intrinsically motivated for sports practice and satisfy their needs for autonomy. Thus, several questions may need to be posed: Should more emphasis be given to the recreation and participation aspects of sports for adults within an informal structure?

As previously noted, in some cases, Portuguese sport may be centred on competition, performance and, most evidently, results (Camiré & Santos, 2019; Santos et al., 2023a; 2024). Unfortunately, if the emphasis in master sports programming and policy is placed solely on winning, it inherently can, in some cases, create a subculture around 'winning at all costs', which is associated with many risks such as increases in violence and dropout (e.g., Autoridade para a Prevenção e o Combate à Violência no Desporto, 2022). Violence in sport is on the rise: In a recent report concerning the 2022/2023 sports season, the Autoridade para a Prevenção e o Combate à Violência no Desporto (2023) stated that there were 6,099 registered violent episodes in sport compared to the 4,135 verified in the previous season. Peixoto et al. (2024) conducted a study to identify the prevalence of violence in sports. This

study involved a sample of 247 athletes that were, on average, 32 years of age. Findings showed that one-third of athletes feared for their safety while practising sports. There have been some reports in master sports environments that showcase the existence of cases of violence between coaches, athletes and referees (e.g., Correio da Manhã, 2012). Public records also highlight the obsession with records and winning (e.g., Peixoto et al., 2024). While the scarce evidence on masters sport specifically available in Portugal limits the types of interpretations that can be made, from what is available, it appears that masters sport perpetuates a deeply entrenched stigma that can place health and human development as decontextualised and mostly unnecessary athlete outcomes (see Santos et al., 2024).

Interestingly, the dominant norms in Portuguese master sports are in contrast to research conducted in master sports in other countries, which describe quality master sports experiences as encapsulating quality relationships, empowerment, validation, fun and fitness, intellectual stimulation, mastery, and also competition (see Callary et al., 2015; 2018; 2020; Motz et al., 2023; 2024; Rathwell et al., 2015). Would Portuguese masters sport benefit from such holistic sports motives to be more inclusive of various personal motivations and interests in being involved in the sport into adulthood?

## Implications for research and practice

Based on the arguments put forward, at this stage of the manuscript, efforts will be deployed to provide implications for researchers, policymakers and practitioners in Portugal to promote an inclusive form of master sport that at once satisfies competitive orientations and also supports 'sport for all' to promote public health initiatives. These implications will be provided in the form of questions that may serve as prompts to reimagine alternative contemporary ways to frame master sports.

## Is a focus only on winning the biggest loss?

Winning may be a poor indicator of healthy ageing, quality of life, and positive mental health, among many other outcomes deemed relevant for master sports settings (Geard et al., 2017; Horton et al., 2013). For instance, winning a game or competitive event may translate into losing health and vitality as a result of an injury, which is critical for individuals engaging in master sports. Masters sport in Portugal can be positive (Batista et al., 2017; 2021a; 2021b), but it can also be a harmful experience, which requires attention and concern (Santos et al., 2024). Simply making sure there are

masters sports programs, competitions, and certified coaches (i.e., *the hardware* for many masters sports programs to exist) may be insufficient to ensure and increase the quality of the master athletes' experiences (i.e., *the software* for masters sport to contribute to athlete development). Reconciling competition with other facets of holistic athlete development is indeed challenging (Kramers & Camiré, 2024). There have been successful efforts to produce coach education tools and programming that align with holistic and quality master sports experiences out of Canada (Callary, Eagles et al., 2024; Motz et al., 2024).

Historically, there has been a lack of support for sports organisations to deliver sound programming, take action and reimagine coaching due to slow and minor changes in sports policy (e.g., Carvalho, 2022), which have led to a winning-at-all-costs subculture to emerge in certain Portuguese contexts (e.g., Santos et al., 2023a; 2024). Therefore, sports policy, coach education, and associated mechanisms may need to be activated in Portugal to make master sports a meaningful experience. For instance, the issue of accountability is a pressing one – it is not clear how master sports organisations are fulfilling their mandates and using state funds appropriately. This is the case because governing bodies and higher education institutions have yet to conceive a plan to systematically monitor how sports organisations deliver master sports programming, which could be a relevant next step. There is also a lack of evidence to describe the status quo in these contexts. Indeed, governing bodies are currently simply providing broad recommendations and suggestions for sports (Carvalho, 2022).

Such a bystander effect has taken over sports policy, which can impact practice. For instance, the Portuguese Football Federation developed a walking football program to engage older adults in sports participation in a safe and developmentally appropriate environment (Barbosa et al., 2020). However, football clubs may choose to deliver such programs in their communities or not. Thus, under these conditions, winning and competition, constant variables across contexts, may, in some cases, continue to become the most relevant outcomes in the Portuguese sports system. Therefore, efforts could be deployed towards mandated (policy) broadening master sports offerings across contexts and funding associated research efforts.

To move beyond winning and winning at all costs, there may be the need to value master sports programs for their contributions towards achieving a broad array of outcomes associated with healthy ageing, such as positive mental health and physical fitness (Gard et al., 2017). This does not mean that winning is a problem for master sports in a

given socio-cultural context. Instead, winning may need to be reconciled with other meaningful experiences and outcomes that can contribute to athletes' positive development and overall health. The creation of an accountability system, as well as contextualised strategies and policies, may also be needed steps so master sports programming can become sites for continued positive development. Such an accountability system may include the aforementioned mandate that sports organisations deliver master's sports programs and allocate (increased) funding to quality master's sports programs, as well as create compulsory master's sports coach training that attends to athletes' holistic development.

## Can masters sport become otherwise?

From an applied standpoint, it may be important to reconcile performance with human development and health. Sports organisations hold the agency to create healthy and positive environments for athletes instead of harmful and toxic ones. Therefore, we provide examples of what master sports can become. These examples are simply illustrative of potential pathways for masters sport. However, many other novel, valuable and alternative proposals can emerge once master sports is viewed as an ever-changing and dynamic entity.

Efforts could be deployed to decentralise coaching from dominant social norms that neglect equity and highlight the need for ego-driven environments (Camiré & Santos, 2019). To achieve this, sports organisations may be responsible for delivering events where rules can change per the participants' performance levels and needs. For instance, in football, instead of playing 11 versus 11, there may be events where adults can play 3 versus 3, 7 versus 7, amongst game formats. Researchers have alluded to how developmental experiences (e.g., types of games played and competitive formats) should not be only influenced by age (see Richard et al., 2023). Instead, efforts could be deployed towards providing opportunities for master sports participants to explore possibilities for moving their bodies. In certain cases, participation may be focused on recreation as games may not have a score, referees and the focus can be placed on fun and enjoyment. Games can be played in non-formal spaces such as rural areas and in the middle of the city (e.g., Geffroy, 2016). Such an approach reinforces the need to follow well-being principles, particularly individuals' needs and understandings about what truly matters in sports (Deci & Ryan, 2008).

If one purpose is to foster higher physical activity levels in this population cohort, leagues could include free and unlimited substitutions through a specific area in collective sports such as football to increase playing time. For example,

one might question the need to have limited substitutions in competitions that leave some master sports athletes with no playing time and, therefore, no physical activity. Furthermore, if the purpose is to foster equitable opportunities, a rule could be implemented whereby a team that is winning by many goals decreases the number of players in play to balance the game. Also, if another goal is social interaction, perhaps women and men can play together. Indeed, positive social interactions have been considered critical for a positive master sports environment, as master sports can even become a family event (Larson et al., 2019). For example, there may be a formal meet and greet between teams and their families and a social gathering after the game. Therefore, master sports could entail multiple ever-changing opportunities to promote bodily movements in a fun, fruitful and developmentally appropriate way.

Moreover, women currently need to wait for a sports organisation to open a women's master sports team to have a chance to play a sport. For instance, we were not able to find in the district of Porto (i.e., one of the biggest in the country) any women's football master sports teams (i.e., football being the most practised sport in the country), which should be a matter of concern. The existence of women's master sports teams is not mandated by the state (Carvalho, 2022). Additionally, creating more equitable sports environments could also help non-binary and trans athletes feel like they have a place where they belong and can feel safe playing sports. These are just some possibilities, as many others could be explored and aligned with the socio-cultural context and master athletes' motives and needs.

Within a sport-for-all mandate, these are certainly key concerns that have been acknowledged by several researchers (e.g., Kulick et al., 2019; Robinson et al., 2024). These possibilities imply coaches are encouraged to provide opportunities for all athletes, independent of their identities and positionality, to engage with a maximum range of sports experiences that include varied affordances to develop sports skills, physical skills, social skills and mental health skills, among other outcomes (e.g., Hoffmann et al., 2020). Practices can be carefully designed to infuse fun and enjoyment, develop social relationships, and provide skill-building opportunities. However, coaches may need to learn how to fulfil these roles and responsibilities (Callary et al., 2020). Coach development programs can be tailored to help coaches understand *what master sport entails* and *what master athletes need* (MacLellan et al., 2018; 2019). We note a caveat that funding allocation has also created barriers and challenges to delivering quality programming across the country (Ferreira et al., 2024).

Based on these premises, the outcomes of coach development programs can be to increase the quantity and quality of physical activity levels in this population cohort, facilitate opportunities for individuals to partake in sport for diverse reasons and motives beyond performance development, and create an inclusive and equitable sports environment. To accomplish this agenda, contextualised coach development programs need to be implemented (MacLellan et al., 2018).

As highlighted previously in this section, to bridge the gap between what potentially needs to occur and actually occurs, several steps may need to be considered: (a) sport policy can critically position what masters sport can become in Portugal and the nature of coach development programs; (b) open new possibilities for programming such as recreational programs; (c) highlight the emergence of female and non-binary and trans masters teams; (d) and develop contextualised competitions and rules. These possibilities intend to open master sports to alternative forms, manifestations and opportunities.

### Research, research, research... Are you there?

Considering the increased number of individuals above the age of 35 years old and older adults (+65 years old) in Portugal (PORDATA, 2023), it is surprising that master sports remain forgotten, unexplored and ignored in the research. In this state of affairs, research and some other researchers can be considered culpable. Such expressions may resonate with the readers as too harsh and/or simply inappropriate. However, the effects of the current trends in coaching research across Portugal justify and support this statement for many reasons. Most studies have indeed been centred on physical education and youth sports (e.g., Coutinho et al., 2023; Farias et al., 2018). There is also a scarcity of studies that have described and reflected on the challenges of coaching master sports in Portugal, which is cause for concern (Santos & Callary, 2021; Santos et al., 2024). To our knowledge, intervention studies are also non-existent to date. For instance, coach education programs have not been developed in Portugal through appropriate methodologies that respect contexts and the diverse nature of coaching (Santos et al., 2023b). Indeed, coach education remains a requirement to coach masters sport in Portugal (Resende et al., 2016), but more efforts are needed to align coach education offerings with current needs and evidence-based recommendations to coach masters sport (Santos et al., 2023b).

We suggest that researchers should take on the responsibility of providing evidence to eliminate inequities in sports (e.g., Walton-Fisette & Sutherland, 2020). Of course,

disciplinary silos (Whitley et al., 2022), unstable positions within higher education institutions (Rahal et al., 2023), and demands to publish and seek grant funding (MacDonald, 2023) are all considerable pressures. However, researchers hold a relevant position to deconstruct dominant discourses present in sports and help pave the way for master sports moving forward. Precisely, this has driven a research team in Canada to provide evidence and develop workshops in coach education for master sports (see Callary et al., 2015, 2018, 2021, 2023), which has provided a means for coaches to understand and apply adult-oriented practices that meet the varied motives of masters sport participants, including fun and fitness, competition, mastery, validation, empowerment (Callary & Young, 2020). The research team started by understanding master athletes' perspectives on what they wanted from their coaches and then exploring what approaches the coaches were taking. They linked best practices with adult learning principles (Knowles et al., 2012) and developed a self-reflective tool for coaches to use (and for athletes to provide feedback on) to better understand and develop their adult-oriented approaches (Callary et al., 2023). This systematic approach to evidence-based research has ensured that coaching is appropriate and that master sports are well-led and have the potential to thrive.

Based on the need to strategically use research, the Portuguese Institute for Sport and Youth (2023) has launched a grant funding application that includes a line of inquiry associated with sports for adults. Such incentives could be used to further understand the state of affairs, carefully design interventions for various decision-makers and instigate potential changes to the status quo. Nonetheless, this is not an easy quest in Portugal. The Portuguese Institute for Sport and Youth (2023) provides limited funds when compared with European (e.g., Erasmus+ research grants) and even other Portuguese agencies (e.g., Fundação para a Ciência e Tecnologia [2022] research grants) who may be more attractive for researchers that need to attain tangible metrics (Macdonald, 2023). Without a focused effort in political agendas, as well as an increase in researchers' awareness and critical consciousness, as well as critical reflection and action (see Reed & Rudman, 2023; Sakamoto & Pitner, 2005), master sports may not be attractive to researchers.

## CONCLUSIONS

The present paper can serve as a resource to instigate reflection about master sports in Portugal, as well as in other socio-cultural contexts that may face similar challenges. It should be noted that research on master sports and

practice-based recommendations in Portugal is still scarce and underdeveloped, which requires attention moving forward. This is simply our humble contribution to create additional possibilities for what master sports can do for athletes. It is evident that master sports can play a role in contributing to holistic athlete development throughout the lifespan and towards healthy ageing.

From a public health standpoint, it may also be important to increase the possibilities of what master's sports programs can be and can do for athletes. This is not incompatible with competition, which is a critical component of the Portuguese sports culture. However, competitions may need to be carefully organised and used as a resource for holistic athlete development, avoiding a winning-at-all-costs subculture that can harm athletes' health and well-being. To provide alternative insights, researchers and practitioners may need to come together to reimagine master sports programming. Indeed, researchers also have a role to play in contributing to better programming, sports experiences and overall quality of life. Moving forward, we hope this paper can serve as a way to initiate dialogue between all actors of the sports systems and identify alternative ways to position, imagine and use sports in a challenging contemporary landscape.

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