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It's not about the bike: a holistic view of the lifelong benefits of sport

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ABSTRACT

Globally, modern Australia is well-known as a 'sporting nation'. Despite this reputation, much of Australia's sporting culture is grounded in international elite level performance. In Australian society, high performance, winning, and competition are framed as the pinnacle of sport. This article seeks to disrupt these societal views towards sport through providing evidence from the Australian Masters Games and a regional Australian program for Ezidi migrants that used sport as a vehicle to build social inclusion. The outcomes of this research advocate for the holistic benefits of sport across the lifespan mentally, socially, and emotionally. We demonstrate how underrepresented populations such as older adults, and migrant groups can obtain these benefits without focusing on competition and high-performance skill development. Ultimately, when it comes to sports participation 'it's not about the bike' and should increasingly be promoted as a recreational activity for all.

KEYWORDS

Lifelong physical activity;
healthy ageing; Australia;
sport; social inclusion

Introduction

From the early twentieth century onwards, modern Australia has been well-known for its sporting nationalism. A 'paradise of sport' (Cashman 1995), Australia's abundance of built and natural facilities has led to both real and assumed global perceptions of sporting dominance. It has been argued that there is no other nation on Earth whereby four different codes of football (Soccer, Rugby Union, Rugby League, and Australian Rules) simultaneously compete for the population's attention (Georgakis 2011). Cashman (2024) posits that sport has been one of Australia's key social agencies, prominent in popular culture and integral to the lives of many Australians. Despite this, in recent decades, we argue that Australia's obsession with high performance sport has led to reduced focus on the broader population reaping the benefits of this strong sporting culture. In part, this is due to Australia's ongoing relationship with the Summer Olympic Games since 1896 and international sporting success in several domains. This was reflected at the Paris 2024 Olympics with Australia collecting a total of 53 medals, equating to one medal per 516, 313 Australians and a world ranking of ninth per capita (Medals per Capita 2024).

Various theories have arisen around contributing factors to this gradual trend in Australia's modern history towards performance-based sporting outcomes. As a colonial nation born of convicts and invasion of First Nations Country, post-Federation Australia sought to build a new identity and outgrow the baggage of its origins. Sport was viewed as a 'yardstick' upon which comparisons could be made to the mother country, Britain (Ferguson 2006). The notion of 'Muscular Christianity' was also a strong driver among elite, private schools, and university-educated young men during the late-nineteenth century onwards. Expected to assume positions of power and privilege, sport was viewed as a site for healthy Christians to realise their athletic potential and develop other admirable character traits (Cashman 2011; Deane 2024). This ideology was grounded in beliefs that sport led to the development of Victorian-era ideals of 'manliness' including physical robustness, self-reliance,

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chivalry, and patriotism (Crotty 2000; Adair 2010). Muscular Christianity was also linked to notions regarding the value of amateurism in sport (Deane 2024) and preparing young men for war *via* Physical Education lessons (Georgakis 2011).

The post-World War II years brought marked increase in the growth of Australia's sporting culture and disparity to countries in the northern hemisphere. Relatively unaffected by direct consequence of war, Australia moved into an era of post-War prosperity and growth ahead of many European nations (Ferguson 2006; Gordon 2014). The introduction of a 5-day working week in 1948 allowed weekend sport to become a possibility for many Australian workers across social classes. During this period, typically only the privileged elite in other countries had sufficient leisure time to engage in sport (Kell 2000). Furthermore, these events led to a boom in built community sport facilities at the grassroots level including swimming pools, tennis courts, cricket pitches, football fields and golf courses (Dickson and Stewart 2025). Often supplied by local councils for free or a low fee, this inclusive community access to sporting facilities contrasted to exclusive access in other countries. In contrast, sport in other countries often required high fee memberships that excluded people from working class backgrounds (Waters 1976). The high density of swimming pools in Australia exemplifies this accessibility. Of 150 ocean pools in the world, 50 per cent are scattered across the New South Wales coastline (70 pools), with 30 located on Sydney's coastline (University of New South Wales (UNSW) Water Research Laboratory 2024). Thus, based on these origins of build and natural facilities, sport has always been intended as an investment by the government for all Australians, regardless of their background, age, or ability.

Despite positive intentions for widespread sporting participation in communities across Australia, this ease of access to facilities inadvertently became an initiating factor in Australia's post-World War II international sporting success. Amateurism was key in high performance sport, with minimal fiscal assistance from any level of government (Bloomfield 2003). Many amateur Summer Olympians became household names and were viewed as 'heroes and heroines' including Shirley Strickland, Marjorie Jackson, Dawn Fraser, Lionel Rose and Latvian migrants John and Isla Conrads. Largely, this was due to several of these athletes being 'people like us' including 'battlers' from the bush, Aboriginal people, migrants, and people from working class backgrounds (Cashman 2002; Gordon 2014). All in defiance of Pierre De Coubertin's ideals of the modern Games where he was quoted as saying 'The only true Olympic hero, as I have always said is the individual male adult. Therefore, no women, no sports teams' (Gordon 2014, p. 295). In this era, Australia came to enjoy winning, and the success of an 'underdog' sporting story. Accordingly, it must not be forgotten that it was ordinary citizens from culturally and socioeconomically diverse backgrounds who paved the foundations for much of Australia's elite sporting success.

Comparatively, the 1976 Montreal Olympic Games where Australia failed to win a gold medal delivered a brutal reality for a nation that had become accustomed to 'punching above its weight' in international sport (Gordon 2014; Dickson and Stewart 2025). This coincided with a historical turning point whereby Australian amateur and community sport became a secondary focus. Internationally, the growing sporting success of the German Democratic Republic, China, the USSR, and Eastern Bloc countries by the late 1970s largely influenced changing attitudes among the Australian government and sports administrators. Accordingly, Australia's first national sporting institute was established in 1981. This was both a strategic measure to maintain competitive pace with countries in the northern hemisphere (Weissensteiner 2022) and a public commitment to elite sport development (Dickson and Stewart 2025).

Over the last few decades, Australian government investment into elite sport has grown substantially. Overall medal count and gold medal tallies at the Olympic Games have moved beyond sporting boundaries. Instead, they now encroach into soft politics and are considered to reflect the political, economic, and reputational standing of nations internationally (Freeman 2012; Nygård and Gates 2013; Liu 2020). Australia's current high-performance talent development system is complex, comprising networks of National Sporting Organisations (NSO's) funded by the Federal government and State Sporting Organisations (SSOs) (Weissensteiner 2022). Inversely proportionate to these trends, along the same timeline it is evident that physical activity levels across the general Australian population have decreased. It has been taken for granted by the government, media, and broader society that Australia will continue to be a 'sporting nation' for all.

This commitment to investment in elite sport was reinforced in 2024 when Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese announced that the Federal government would commit a record \$283 million in funding leading up to the Brisbane 2032 Olympic and Paralympic Games. This is a 50 per cent increase on 2021–2022 high performance funding (Prime Minister of Australia 2024). Winning or podium places to increase medal count, has increasingly been expected of Australia's involvement at the Summer Games. Participation or becoming an Olympian is no longer viewed as sufficient. A failure to win medals, break world records or lose medal opportunities through athlete injury after this funding investment, is viewed by the Australian media, government and public to be a 'farce', 'ominous' a 'conundrum' or a 'nightmare' (CODE Sports 2024; Herald Sun 2024; Seven News 2024; The Guardian 2024) as demonstrated by pre-Olympic media headlines for Paris 2024. These events contradict Pierre De Coubertin's ideologies of the Summer Olympic Games. As De Coubertin's famous words suggest, 'The most important thing in the Olympic Games is not to win, but to take part, just as the most important thing in life is not the triumph but the struggle. The essential thing is not to have conquered but to have fought well' (Todt 2022, p. 39). Accordingly, there is little surprise that the ordinary citizen, including those from migrant backgrounds and older adults seldom have role models and their interests reflected on the national sporting scene.

In recent decades, there has been a global trend towards insufficient physical activity across the lifespan in 163 countries, particularly for women and people over 60 years of age (Strain et al. 2024). Comparatively, Australia's sports participation trends in recent years have seen Australians 15 years and over experience a statistically significant decrease in weekly sport and physical activity engagement (Australian Sports Commission 2023). Meanwhile, informal sport is a growth area of participation, with potential public health benefits (Jeanes et al. 2024). This fact receives relatively little attention from the Australian government, media, and broader society in contrast to elite sport. Accordingly, these trends in sport and physical activity participation have led to the analysis of research underpinning this paper. We argue that there is a crucial and timely need to redraw the focus towards the benefits of participation in grassroots sport for regular Australians including older adults and migrants. Whilst High Performance sport will continue to be a priority over the next decade as part of the Sport Horizon – National Sport Strategy 2024–2034 (Australian Government – Office for Sport 2024), our position provides evidence for the beneficial outcomes of providing equal government commitment to the Inclusion and Participation priority areas of this Strategy.

Method

This manuscript is a hybrid representation of two studies involving unique populations within Australian sport and physical activity contexts: 1) older adults and 2) migrants. Both studies received University ethics approval prior to the commencement of data collection. The combination of two studies encapsulated a mixed methods research design by connecting and comparing quantitative findings from Study 1 and qualitative findings from Study 2. Both studies investigated the benefits of participation in organised sport and physical activity for these populations in regional Australia. Study 1 focused on the 16th Australian Masters Games conducted in regional Tasmania in October 2017 and Study 2 entailed a two-year (2021–2023) sporting program for Ezidi People in regional New South Wales. The hybrid structure of this manuscript triangulates quantitative findings from Study 1 and qualitative findings from Study 2 to thematically identify outcomes related to the benefits of participation in sport and physical activity. Triangulation of data incorporates rigour, depth, breadth, enhances the quality of research by ensuring completeness and capacity to make generalisations, and strengthens validity (Ajemba and Arene 2022). The research design of drawing data from two independent cohorts fosters the ability to make estimates and conclusion with greater precision when compared to a single cohort, to explore heterogeneity that can be replicated across different settings, and promotes broader applicability of theoretical models relevant to life course research (O'Connor et al. 2022). This unique approach provides a structure to offer new insights towards underrepresented populations and their participation in sport beyond those within the literature that have relied upon single cohorts.

Study 1 context and data collection

The 2017 Australian Masters Games (AMG) was hosted on the north-west coast of Tasmania: the first time the Masters Games was held outside a metropolitan city. Events were held across seven days, involving 47 sports, and 5107 adults over the age of 18 years participated. A total of 5% of this AMG cohort ($n=248$ athletes) agreed to participate in a study of motivations to be involved in sport. Of the 248 participants, 89% were aged between 30–69 years of age, with one-third (31%) representing the 50–59 age category. All AMG participants were sent study information electronically one week prior to the event commencement, and throughout the event daily. The 248 respondents included 148 women and 100 men from most Australian states and territories, with the mean age of participants being 54.17 years (± 11.94 years).

Motives for participation in the AMG were obtained through the Physical Activity and Leisure Motivation Scale (PALMS; Molanorouzi, Khoo, and Morris 2014). The PALMS is a 40-item scale consisting of eight subscales (affiliation, appearance, competition/ego, enjoyment, mastery, others' expectations, physical condition, and psychological condition), with items rated on a five-point Likert scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). The eight subscales reflect motives for participation in sport and physical activity that are categorised as features of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation based on self-determination theory (Deci and Ryan 1985). Previous research indicates good internal consistency for the PALMS ranging from 0.78 to 0.82 and good test-retest reliability for the subscales ranging from 0.78 and 0.94 (Molanorouzi, Khoo, and Morris 2014). Participants took on average 12 min (± 2.32) to complete the questionnaire.

Study 2 context and data collection

The Driving Social Inclusion through Sport and Physical Activity (DSISPA) program was a collaboration established at the authors university, in partnership with twenty local sport, education, health and settlement service providers. This program was funded by the Australian Government Department of Health. The DSISPA program was framed upon the key principles of social inclusion, community participation, belonging, holistic health, resilience, and friendship. Activities included: child and adult swimming lessons, social volleyball and soccer, gym memberships, roller-skating, ten-pin bowling, Australian bushland and beach safety workshops for new migrants, alongside a women's only recreational swimming group. Collectively, these activities aimed to be culturally safe for women, after-school hours for children and incorporate weekend activities for families. Majority of these activities were embedded within existing community programs whereby the Ezidi People participated alongside the general community. Across 2021–2023, these activities facilitated more than 3000 occasions of engagement in physical activity across the lifespan from pre-school through to retirement age. Community word of mouth, a community advisory group, a community-facing Facebook page and the local Ezidi What's App group were utilised to promote uptake of these physical activities.

Evaluations of the benefits of participation in the DSISPA program were collected through interviews ($n=8$) and focus groups ($n=2$) with Ezidi People who were program participants and key community stakeholders from settlement and sporting services. Majority of the interviews were conducted over Zoom with professional community stakeholders, whereas the Ezidi People had preference for in-person focus groups. The choice of focus groups was based on the preferences of the Ezidi community and aligns with Ruppenthal, Tuck, and Gagnon's (2005) research which highlights the benefits of focus groups when working with people from migrant and refugee backgrounds. This is due to strong oral traditions in many cultures, including among Ezidi People, alongside authentic small group cohesion when participants share similar backgrounds. Participant Information Statements and consent forms were in Kurdish Kurmanji (Arabic script), with interview schedules in Kurdish Kurmani audio recording as per University ethics requirements and settlement services recommendations. In practice, many Ezidi participants already spoke English or had interpretation assistance from friends fluent in English.

In total, there were 22 participants including 15 Ezidi People and seven community stakeholders. This was a gender balanced group with 11 women and 11 men providing their viewpoints. These interviews and focus groups were approximately 30 min in length. Some sample questions include: ‘What have been the main successes and challenges of the program?’, ‘How would you describe the effectiveness and contribution of the program towards wellbeing?’, ‘What were your goals coming into the program?’, ‘What contribution do you perceive the program to have had on the Armidale community?’.

Data analysis

In the current manuscript we adopted a mixed methods approach to analyse and interpret the data from Study 1 and Study 2. Patterns and trends identified by Study 1 descriptive statistics were reported as means and standard deviations for each of the PALMS subscales. These were calculated by summing the five items of each subscale between a minimum score of 5 and maximum of 25 (Zach et al. 2012; Molanorouzi, Khoo, and Morris 2014). Overall reliability for this self-report measure was reported using Cronbach’s alpha coefficient (α). Intra-class correlation coefficients and 95% confidence intervals were calculated for the mean values of each of the PALMS subscales. Based on the descriptive statistical analysis of the subscales, patterns, and trend relevant to the motives for participation in the AMG were established and recorded.

A hybrid approach to thematic analysis was taken towards Study 1 and 2 based on DeJonckheere et al. (2024) integrative data analysis approach. Collectively, this process allows for in-depth exploration of multiple perspectives through the findings. Study 2 qualitative data from participant interviews and focus groups, were aligned with Study 1’s top four PALMS subscales outcomes to provide a mixed-methods triangulation of data from the two studies. The integrative data analysis approach (DeJonckheere et al. 2024) is guided by six overarching phases. In Phase One, the authors familiarised themselves with the data by conducting a review and noting inceptive ideas and thoughts. Phase Two involved generating initial coding through further identification of meaningful segments of data and coding. Further synthesis of codes and associated data occurred in Phase Three leading to the formulation of themes. Phase Four involved reviewing the full data set within the identified themes, specifically assessing alignment between the data and themes. Further refinement of the themes in Phase Five led to the naming and definition of each theme, with Phase Six being the selection of quantitative and qualitative data within each theme. This then led to the production of results in alignment with study aims and relevant literature within the field.

Findings

Study 1 and 2 findings were analysed collectively, and the below findings briefly outline high-level outcomes from each study. This was followed by focused discussion around the alignment of the mixed methods results. AMG participants in Study 1 reported that the primary motive for participation in the AMG was enjoyment. Across the sample, the PALMS subscales of Enjoyment and Physical Condition ranked the highest, with Affiliation and Mastery third and fourth. Participating in sport to fulfil others’ expectations was the lowest ranked subscale. Qualitative analysis of the participant interview and focus group data from the Study 2 DSISPA program presented five key themes relevant to the benefits of participation in the DSISPA activities. These themes were: i) fun and enjoyment, ii) health benefits, iii) opportunities to be social – affiliation, iv) opportunities to learn new skills – mastery, and v) sense of belonging.

Table 2 presents mean, standard deviation, and 95% confidence interval (95% CI) values for each of the eight PALMS subscales. A ranking order for the PALMS subscales is also provided.

In combination, the results of Study 1 and Study 2 will be presented in order of prevalence based on the top four key themes found within the Table 1 PALMS subscales, with inclusion of an additional prevalent theme from Study 2. Collectively, the following section highlights shared trends from both studies (Table 2).

Table 1. Study demographic information.

Study	Participants	Event	Focus	Timeframe	Method
Study 1	248 participants	Australian Masters games	Motives for participation	One week event (2017)	PALMS survey
Study 2	22 participants	DSISPA	Benefits of participation	Two years (2021–2023)	Interviews and focus groups

Table 2. Mean, standard deviation, and 95% CI for PALMS subscales ($N = 248$).

PALMS subscale	Mean	Standard deviation	Motivation rank	95% CI
Enjoyment	21.45	2.37	1	21.15–21.74
Physical condition	21.24	3.43	2	20.81–21.67
Affiliation	19.51	4.04	3	19.00–20.01
Mastery	19.47	3.16	4	19.08–19.86
Psychological condition	17.59	4.64	5	17.01–18.17
Appearance	15.77	4.61	6	15.20–16.34
Competition	13.67	4.32	7	13.13–14.21
Others' expectations	8.45	3.08	8	8.07–8.83

Fun and enjoyment

The primary motive for athlete participation in the AMG was Enjoyment, demonstrated by a mean score of 21.45 out of a possible score of 25 on the PALMS subscale. This suggests that participants were motivated by fun, having an enjoyable time exercising, and maintaining motivation and happiness in their sport over a sustained period of time. These outcomes encapsulate the importance of motivation for sports participants across the lifespan. This reflected similar findings among participants from DSISPA who reflected upon the happiness gained through participation in organised sport activities. Regarding team sport, two male Ezidi participants commented:

...you play as a team, you meet your friends, you cooperate during the game, so it's really fun.

Making new friends, and also they [Australian athletes] are nice with us. We play games...it's just enjoying sport.

These responses demonstrate that social connections in sport are integral to perceptions of fun and enjoyment. A focus on the sporting process and environment are illustrated here, opposed to a focus on outcomes such as winning or point score.

Physical, mental, and emotional health benefits

The PALMS subscale Physical Condition is underpinned by elements of physical fitness, maintaining a physically healthy body, improving cardiovascular fitness, and keeping healthy across the lifespan. Participants ranked Physical Condition as the second highest motive, indicating that being fit and healthy, and maintaining this status were motives for the achievement of being physically active through sport.

Participants from the DSISPA program expressed that participation yielded benefits related to physical, mental, and emotional health. One male community member reflected on the importance of physical health as relevant to positive ageing in the future: *'Volleyball and soccer are very good for your health. If you didn't do anything healthy, the future is hard when you get older'*. Even more than the physical benefits, however, were the perceived mental and emotional benefits for DSISPA participants following the experience of trauma. One woman from the Ezidi community reflected: *'It is good for our brain and helping us emotionally...it is good to be away from bad memories and just have something for fun'*.

On a related note, two male Ezidi community members commented on the program providing motivation and cognitive benefits, and that participation contributed to a mental clarity that relieved stress: *'It was very good to get out of the house every week, so you would relax. It really helps with mental health'*. *'Sport has benefits for your brain as well. When I play soccer my mental health is getting better'*. These responses reflect that the inclusion of sport into the weekly schedule for adults, especially migrants with traumatic backgrounds, was viewed as a health promotion tool to support

emotional health and mitigate existing mental health conditions. Again, there is a focus on process-driven benefits of engaging in physical activity, rather than seeking specific sport-based outcomes.

Opportunities to be social – affiliation

AMG participants reported Affiliation as the third strongest motivator, indicating that sport promotes social opportunities, interaction, and brings people together. The PALMS survey denotes Affiliation as spending time with others, engaging in activities with others, and having a shared interest with friends. Participants in the DSISPA program also recognised social factors including being part of a team, establishing friendships, sense of community, and affiliation as integral to their continued involvement. As noted by a male Ezidi community member, team sport can be a valuable catalyst for being welcomed into the Australian community and the forming of relationships: *‘We see our community, the Australian community [are] so friendly... we love that’*.

This response emphasises the importance of friendship and mutual respect in the sporting environment as key factors for motives to participate in social team sport, especially for young adults. Similarly, one Ezidi woman identified recreational swimming as a platform to bring people together and overcome perceived barriers for social activity: *‘[Swimming] is a good place to meet and engage with each other which is maybe not happening in any other place’*. Such responses highlight that sport, especially in a regional community can be a valued opportunity to unite diverse groups over a shared hobby such as sport and physical activity. Sport may be the core site within a number of communities where these new connections and relationships are able to be forged, that would not occur elsewhere.

Opportunities to learn new skills – mastery

Mastery was ranked as the fourth strongest motivator among the AMG cohort. The PALMS survey recognises Mastery as maintaining and improving current skill level, alongside obtaining new skills and personal bests. These findings suggest that through sport, adults hold interest and motivation in being challenged, in personal development through improvement in skills, and in learning. Several DSISPA program participants emphasised the novel experience of swimming in a pool and how aquatic activity presented new experiences. Comments from Ezidi women participants included: *‘I haven’t been in water [pool] before, so, this is very good [to relax and try new things]’*. *‘Ezidi and Iranian women have never been in [a] swimming pool, but after a year some of them, now they can swim. So learning and not underestimating people’*.

One Iranian woman volunteering at the women’s recreational swimming group extended upon the benefits of swimming in groups by considering the challenging of gender stereotypes, and how this positively influenced younger family members: *‘I think this is great for the Ezidi women as there is still a lot of gender stereotypes happening, but now coming to this [women’s swimming group]... I think it is going to be positive for their kids to see that Mum is now swimming’*. These comments indicate that learning new skills and mastery across a range of sporting activities can occur at any stage of life. It is never too late to become more physically active or engage in new movement options. A supportive social milieu and access to the right facilities in culturally safe contexts have potential for immediate individual and ongoing impacts that have the potential to influence others.

Sense of belonging

A notable feature of the qualitative comments received by multiple DSISPA participants captured a sense of belonging *via* connection with the sporting activity and others in the community. For the AMG participants, sense of belonging is not directly articulated through the PALMS inventory. According to Pfaff-Czarnecka (2013), belonging is characterised by a position in social structure which is experienced through identification, connectedness, and attachment alongside their associated emotions. Reflections from a community stakeholder from sporting clubs include: *‘They weren’t Ezidi in the club, they were volleyballers in the club. With the soccer, they weren’t the Ezidi players, they*

were some of the best club players'. Respectively, one Ezidi male participant highlighted how team sport enabled them to fit into the Australian community: *'Playing sport, it's really helped us to fit in, which is really nice'*. Collectively, these responses highlight the transformative nature of sport as a cultural phenomenon and context. Sport is so much more than a singular entity with direct processes and outcomes. The positive benefits of sport can influence broader social inclusion, community cohesion, and migrant settlement outcomes.

Discussion

This paper sought to examine the benefits of participation in grassroots sport for unique Australian populations including older adults, and Ezidi migrants. Collectively, our research provides a counter argument to the commonly held societal and media narrative that elite high-performance sport and winning are essential features of building a strong national sporting culture. Our findings reinforced that above all, sport is a site of popular culture that unites diverse groups of people within Australian communities. Although competition, elite performance and winning on a global stage dictate media headlines and government sporting agendas, for the majority of the population, social connections, enjoyment, and fun remain key motivations to become more physically active through sport.

Findings from this study reinforce that enjoyment, mental health, and social connections gained through sport, are stronger motivations than physical fitness for Australians from migrant backgrounds (Australian Sports Commission 2022). Beyond direct influences upon health, the participation of migrants in local sport and physical activity opportunities has multiple benefits. These include building a sense of belonging in a new community, promoting intercultural understanding, new friendships, community belonging and enhancing self-esteem (Australian Sports Commission 2013; Cameron et al. 2022; Young and Block 2023). Correspondingly, the opportunity for migrants to learn new skills through physical activities they may not have had prior exposure to, can facilitate holistic health enablers as demonstrated by Study 2 findings.

Similarly, research focused on the participation of older people 60+ years of age in sport and physical activity has found that there are physical, mental, and social benefits (Van Uffelen et al. 2015; Szychowska and Drygas 2022; Oliveira et al. 2023). Engagement in sport during older adulthood has embedded opportunities to proactively and successfully navigate ageing as a key life transition (Jenkin et al. 2017). Engagement can be motivated by the maintenance of physical and mental health, stimulating physical activities, access to affordable and convenient activity options, socialisation, peer support and self-motivation (Costello et al. 2011; Bethancourt et al. 2014; You et al. 2021). This is similar to the findings illustrated by AMG participants in Study 1. A study conducted by Eime et al. (2025) aligns with this research, by emphasising that motives for older adult's sport participation include social reasons including spending time with friends, alongside health driven reasons like promoting mental health and losing weight. Critically, performance and competition incentives were not recognised as reasons for participation.

It could be argued that we do not stop playing because we get old, we get old because we stop playing. The Australian Department of Health and Aged Care (2024) posits that concepts of positive and healthy ageing are synonymous. They both comprise key tenets of physical activity and exercise, preventative health, mental health and nutrition. Nevertheless, within positive ageing literature there is emphasis placed on individual behaviour relevant to physical activity, exercise, and health broadly which infer connotations associated with competition and performance (Pocock et al. 2023). This is a trend that Pocock et al. (2023) acknowledge in their scoping review, with recommendations that positive ageing policy and research would have greater traction if wider structural environments were considered and used to stimulate real-world change. For instance, considering age, ethnicity, culture, country, residential setting, income, and access to resources. The outcomes of Study 1 provide additional evidence to support broader awareness raising around the importance of remaining physically active during later life.

Regardless, the outcomes of existing research suggest that non-competitive physical activity for general purposes can have strong benefit for the ageing process. This aligns with Jeanes et al. (2024)

findings that demonstrate informal sport participation outside of a competitive club culture, can facilitate social connections and holistic health outcomes for Australian adults. Likewise, the social benefits of sport for children and young people cannot be underestimated. Owen et al. (2024) Australian study determined that participation in sport, particularly team sport, reduces risks of loneliness. This longitudinal study recommends that long-term participation in group and team sports should be promoted to improve physical, mental and social health. Collectively these findings underscore the holistic benefits associated with participation in sport and physical activity across the lifespan, particularly those related to feeling social connectedness. Both Study 1 and 2 involved participants from diverse backgrounds and age groups noting the value of building social connections through sport. These findings suggest that it is not only children and youth whose sports participation should be targeted for these purposes.

Beyond individual social health outcomes, a sense of community built through sharing interests with like-minded people allows for the establishment of social capital (Coleman 1988). This is particularly important in regional Australian communities such as those in which Study 1 and 2 were situated. In such contexts, sport is considered to provide a sense of place, belonging, and enhancement of health outcomes in ways that transcend socioeconomic, religious, and cultural boundaries (Tonts 2005; Atherley 2006; Spaaij 2019). As demonstrated by both Study 1 and 2, sport and its facilities can be a catalyst for creating key meeting places to unite people from across the community, who may otherwise not have the chance to meet. The results of the sporting experiences were not the focus, rather the social interactions and finding common connections.

This valuing of sport in Australia not only occurs at the community level but has also been reflected historically in the formation of national identity post-Federation. In modern Australia, the country's population has been considered passionate about sport through both participation and as spectators (Clearinghouse for Sport 2021). This culture has led to concepts such as Australia 'punching above its weight', at international sporting competitions and 'triumphing in the face of adversity'. Thus, contributing to a cultural tradition related to competition, performance, and a vision of success based on winning (Barclay 2016). An unexpected finding from this study was the lack of recognition of competition as a motivator amongst the AMG participants in Study 1. Uniquely, this shows that competing to win and monitoring performance levels were not primary motives for many adults to participate in the AMG. This is despite many of these athletes investing both time and money to compete at the Games. Such findings do not align with previous research on Masters athletes, which acknowledged competition as a chief motivator, highlighting this as important motivation for training based on rivalry with themselves and other athletes (Horton et al. 2019; Cannella et al. 2022). Although Study 1 did not entail a representative survey, it could be speculated that emphasis placed upon competition, performance, and winning may in fact negate adult participation in sport. In turn, this may potentially counteract motives that facilitate participation across the lifespan. This is supported by recent research on Australian sport participation by Eime et al. (2020, 2025) who reported that the development of less competitive community sport options is recommended to attract and maintain adult participation.

Amongst the multiple known benefits of sport and physical activity for Australians from migrant backgrounds and older people, there are several barriers that inhibit successful participation in sport and physical activity especially in traditional structured club sport. These barriers can be individual, environmental, societal, or institutional (Spaaij 2019; Bantham et al., 2021). Notably, factors such as cost, cultural attitudes to sport, lack of culturally safe facilities or local clubs, fear of racism and discrimination, a lack of information, language, cultural capital, or confidence needed to access Australian sports facilities have an influence. Furthermore, low levels of health and physical literacy, lack of social support, management of chronic health conditions, time constraints, lack of motivation, lifetime physical inactivity, competing family and caring priorities or fear of injury in older age are all commonly cited reasons (Rai et al. 2020; Bantham et al., 2021; Liu et al. 2021; Wang et al. 2023; Young and Block 2023). Comparatively, creating a culturally safe space with gender segregated provisions, understanding of target groups needs and culture, low financial cost, geographic proximity within the community, flexible delivery, and engagement of the whole family are known facilitators

of physical activity for people from migrant backgrounds (Robinson et al. 2019; Mohammadi 2022). These are all features that were found among the sport and physical activity options provided in the Study 2 DSISPA program, especially the children's swimming lessons and the women's recreational swimming group which emphasised the real-world value of these recommendations.

Rai et al. (2020) suggest that raising awareness of physical activity guidelines, normalising moderate-to-vigorous physical activity (MVPA) throughout the lifespan, increasing the availability of affordable programs and creation of specific initiatives, can motivate participation of older people. This parallel pathway provides an alternative to competitive community club-based sport that suits changing societal trends towards use of leisure time and fosters positive behaviours towards lifelong physical activity. Recommendations from both of these studies could relate to a number of population demographics across the lifespan and highlight the role that community initiatives have in stimulating physical activity levels for migrants and older adults.

For these reasons, we argue that 'it's not about the bike'. Sport is so much more than a series of physical acts that model the peak of human physicality. Instead, ongoing appreciation of the lifelong benefits of sport for general community populations, and removal of barriers (real and perceived) to access is where more of the media and government focus should be. This entails funding health promotion, strategy and public messaging related to these findings moving forward. The recent Sport Horizon – National Sport Strategy 2024–2034 (Australian Government – Office for Sport 2024), holds some hopes for this by alluding to Inclusion and Participation as key priorities alongside High Performance. However, the extent to which this commitment is successfully implemented is unknown and ongoing. Concurrently, the power of grassroots collaborations as illustrated by sporting cultures among the Study 1 AMG participants and the Study 2 DSISPA program should not be underestimated.

We propose that targeted intersectoral efforts are required to reduce insufficient physical activity levels in order to meet the Sport Horizon 2034 goals. The Study 2 DSISPA program in regional NSW clearly highlighted that collaborative symbiotic partnerships across sport, education, health and settlement services were key to increase the physical activity engagement across the lifespan for newly arrived Ezidi migrants. More than 3000 occasions of individual engagement in sport and physical activity were stimulated over a two-year period through this community grassroots program. Although this program received government funding, it was solely implemented using local expertise to meet bespoke community needs. The DSISPA program highlighted that a one size fits all approach cannot be taken towards increasing physical activity levels for unique groups of everyday Australians. For instance, this exact program may not have been as successful if replicated outside of regional Australia in a capital city due to the differing community partnerships, needs and resources that may exist in these locations.

On the note of local supportive environments, a positive and welcoming sports facility culture that fosters a sense of belonging, inclusivity and community should be promoted as key priorities within communities across the country. This is supported by international research from the United Kingdom and United States that acknowledged inclusion in sport fostered social cohesion and the power of belonging, embodied through feeling, seen, heard, and known (Sherlock 2024; Stride et al. 2025). As demonstrated in both Study 1 and Study 2, social connections are a key enabler for supporting physical activity engagement and accordingly should be viewed as a key public health facilitator. Beyond directly being a health promotion initiative for the Australian population alone, these proactive government-community partnership approaches have potential to mitigate declining physical activity levels globally. Global public health and diverse societies could benefit through the broader humanitarian-based advantages that sport brings. In recent years, this has been demonstrated by increasing focus on connections to Sport for Good (Laureus 2024), sport for development and peace (Kidd 2008), the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDG's: United Nations 2023) and Positive Youth Development (PYD) (Fraser-Thomas, Côté, and Deakin 2005). Adopting the underlying philosophies of these frameworks presents a potential paradigm shift regarding both the purpose and associated outcomes of sport. Instead, a broad range of holistic benefits can become a focal point, rather than a narrow focus on winning, competition, and elitism.

Limitations and future recommendations

A limitation of Study 1 was that the PALMS survey completed by AMG participants was not evenly represented across each age group category, therefore the capacity to make comparisons across age groups was restricted. Although this disproportionate spread of age group survey respondents is not uncommon in research (Kalton 2009), drawing conclusions and making generalisations from this study about participation motivation in sport across adulthood should be treated with caution. Despite there being 5109 participants in the AMG, only 5 per cent of athletes from this cohort completed the survey. A further limitation is that gender was not separated in the analysis of data, and it is not known whether the participants were part of a team sport or an individual sport.

Separately, the Study 2 DSISPA program faced limitations through the form of language barriers given data collection involved participation with people for whom English was not their first language. It is likely this study attracted the participation of Ezidi People who had greater confidence with the English language or whose friends could assist with translating on their behalf. 'Ezidi' is a language with oral and aural traditions for which there were no NAATI certified interpreters in Australia at the time of the study. To meet University ethics requirements and the recommendations of settlement services, the closest suitable NAATI-certified language, Kurdish Kurmanji needed to be used instead for all research-related materials associated with focus groups. Across both studies, the methods for data collection entailed self-report by participants and represent their views at a one-off point in time.

To counteract these limitations however, a strength of this study is the mixed-methods approach used to combine quantitative and qualitative methods from two studies whose results triangulate one another. Accordingly, we recommend that future studies aim to access samples that exhibit consistent representation across age categories throughout the adult lifespan. In addition, making comparisons between and within genders, and between individual and team sport participants may potentially provide insight that could benefit the promotion of physical activity and sport globally. In working with migrant populations where language is a barrier, it may be desirable to target participant cohorts who have resided in the country of the study for a minimum period of 12 months to enable communication that provides rich, meaningful, and contextual discernment.

Conclusion

In Australia there is limited research about the motives for participation in sport and physical activity for underrepresented population such as older adults and migrants. Our research has highlighted that motives to participate in sport and physical activity are not always as clear as they seem. Reality may be different to omnipresent mainstream popular culture and societal perceptions that competition, winning and elitism are among key purposes of sport. Mutually, findings from the AMG and the DSISPA program for Ezidi migrants in regional Australia demonstrated that sport yields holistic benefits across the lifespan. Notably, this includes enjoyment, enhancement of mental and emotional health, learning new skills in adulthood, a sense of belonging, and community affiliation. We demonstrate how underrepresented populations such as older adults and migrants can obtain these benefits in the absence of a focus on competition and high-performance skill development.

Against this backdrop, the researchers recommend greater advocacy for national policy, and campaigns towards lifelong sports participation, including targeted messages such as 'it's not about the bike' and that both physical activity and sport should be 'taken regularly, but not seriously'. Such messages could be used to increasingly promote sport and physical activity as a recreational activity for all that fosters inclusivity and holistic health benefits across the lifespan. Ongoing research and investigation are needed to interrogate popular culture narratives and mainstream messaging relevant to the purpose and meaning of sport. Particularly, this entails capturing actual perspectives of participants and non-participants, opposed to broad societal perceptions of these. Thus, a greater focus on empirical research may disrupt societal narratives of sport and contribute insight towards increased motivation towards physical activity in Australia and beyond.

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