

## **MEDIA COVERAGE OF NEW ZEALAND MASTERS GAMES**

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The way in which sport is represented by the mass media can have a powerful socialising influence on our beliefs, attitudes and values about ourselves and others, and the world around us. The media coverage and portrayal of sport through selective narratives, images and activities can also influence people's choice to participate, spectate, and support certain sporting activities, as well as the level of sponsorship that the event may attract.

Limited research has been conducted on the media coverage of Masters sport globally, with no evidence of any research undertaken in the New Zealand environment. Exploration of the 2009 World Masters Games (WMG) held in Australia (Kennelly and Thomson, 2013) suggested that the amount of media coverage by the official media partner was not proportional to the size and significance of the event nor did it represent the participant profiles. The central themes focussed on age and celebrity athletes. With the next WMG scheduled to be held in Auckland in 2017 this study is a good precursor as to how the New Zealand media might portray the event.

The aim of this exploratory research was to understand the nature of sport media coverage arising from the 2014 New Zealand Masters Games (NZMG). Specifically, (a) to explore how Master athletes are portrayed in the media, (b) to examine if, and how, the media coverage reflected the philosophies of the Masters Games, and (c) to examine if there were any similarities, or differences, in the central media themes used during the New Zealand Masters Games compared to existing literature.

The NZMG were held in Dunedin over nine days (1-9 February) with more than 5,200 competitors, from 11 countries around the world, competing in over 70 different sports. A content analysis of sport coverage in the local provincial newspaper, the Otago Daily Times, was undertaken focusing on the sport section, and the front and back pages of the newspaper. In keeping with the methodologies previously used in New Zealand sport media studies, the key unit of analysis was the sport article (text and/or graphics). All advertisements, horse racing and sport results were excluded from the survey, as were any sport stories published elsewhere in the newspaper.

The analysis indicated that the sport media coverage attributed to the NZMG was reflective of the significance of the event at a provincial level but not at the national level. The central themes in text and images reflected the "Sport for Life" philosophy of the Masters games, with a strong focus on (a) participation (longevity in, and/or return to, sport); (b) comradery and fun; (c) competition and success; and (d) the benefits of being active. While the age of competitors were indicated in the sport articles, there was no evidence of trivialisation or negativity towards older athletes in the New Zealand sport media coverage.

While the NZ Masters Games continues to grow in size and significance the research highlights the need to develop a marketing strategy to increase the public awareness and national profile of the event.