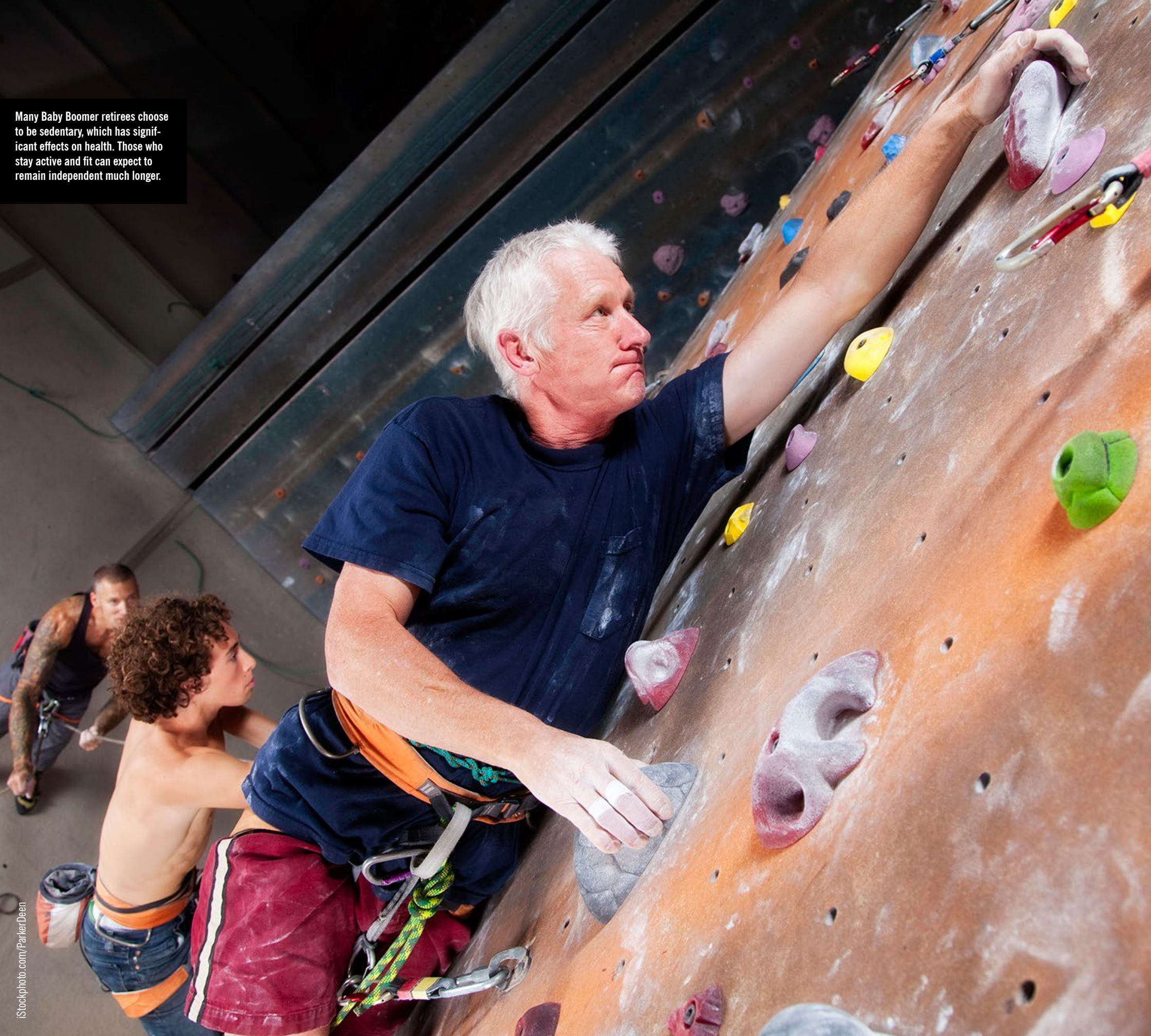


FITNESS: A CHOICE FOR THE AGES

Far too many retirees avoid exercise and doom themselves to decrepitude and loss of independence during the Golden Years.

BY LON KILGORE





Many Baby Boomer retirees choose to be sedentary, which has significant effects on health. Those who stay active and fit can expect to remain independent much longer.

For most of us who were born before NASA, color TV, McDonald's, Walmart, Disneyland, Bannister's four-minute mile and the polio vaccine, we have an emerging problem: We decide not to go to the gym.

We are making this choice far too often, and it has a direct effect on how functional we are in our later years and how many of those years we have.

Generational Malaise?

The most senior of us belong to the Good Warriors, a disciplined, self-sacrificing generation comprising those born between 1909 and 1928, while those slightly younger are members of the Lucky Few, a smaller group born 1929-45 and characterized by a higher rate of white-collar employment. These groups are often considered a single generation—the Greatest Generation—that endured hardships including World War I, the Great Depression, World War II, the Korean War and the Vietnam War.

Regardless of the name, the last of this generation reached retirement age (65) in 2010, and most have long transitioned to their version of retirement, living out the remainder of their lives in peace and comfort—the rocking-chair retirement.

The subsequent generation—and once the most plentiful generation at 77-78 million strong—is the Baby Boomers. Born between 1946 and 1964, members of this post-World War II generation are often divided into two sub-generations: the Hippies and the Yuppies. Hippies were born earlier and wanted to change or save the world; the Yuppies were born later and have been described as party-hardy career climbers.

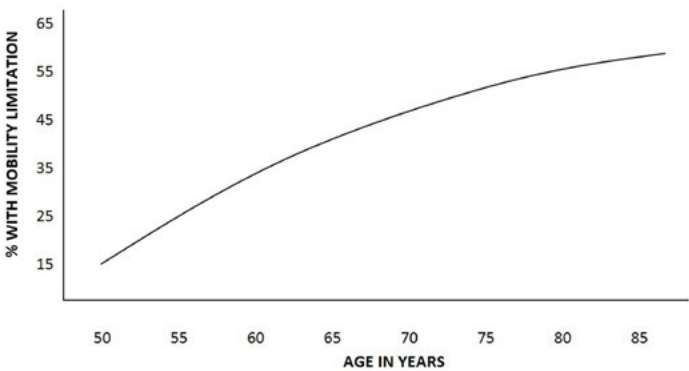
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The Baby Boomers are in the process of exiting the work force, with the oldest of the generation having reached retirement age in 2011. (The legal retirement age after 2000 is 67, which may have delayed Boomer retirement until 2013; it is also estimated that at least 33 percent of Baby Boomers delay retirement

beyond statutory dates for financial reasons.) Retirement for this group generally does not include the rocking-chair approach of the previous generation. Rather, there tends to be a desire to do things that were prohibited in early life due to familial obligations and work responsibilities.

It is here that we see a divergence of intent and reality. Activity levels drop significantly after retirement: Many Baby Boomer retirees choose to be sedentary. Up to 48 percent of Baby Boomers are sedentary, up to 92 percent have dietary shortcomings, and, unfortunately, over 70 percent of Baby Boomers are currently not planning to make changes in their lifestyle habits (4). The choice to be sedentary is problematic. It may not be an in-your-face problem—at least for now—but it is a problem nonetheless.

Did you know that 2001 data demonstrated that 15.4 percent of those over 50 and 36.2 percent of those over 70 have some degree of mobility problem (5)? Did you know that by 2009 17.3



Loss of mobility with advancing age is largely avoidable. At 50, a little over 15 percent of the population has a limitation, but by 85 over 55 percent are limited (graph derived from 5,6,7).

percent of adults aged 55-64 had difficulty walking one quarter mile, and this limitation in function affected 56.1 percent of the population by the time they were 85 (7)? Did you know that half of the over-65 population now has difficulty stooping, bending or kneeling (6)?

These documented and progressively worsening examples of mobility problems with aging are not an effect of disease or inevitable decrepitude. I contend that they are outcomes resulting from the choice to be sedentary, from the belief that 30 minutes of low-level activity on most days will magically deliver fitness, and from the use of every easy-out approach and product promising to deliver fitness.

Simply, these problems come from a lack of physical fitness.

A Choice of Dependency

For the Baby Boomer generation, a looming and sobering problem exists: In 1945 there were 12 older adults per 100 working-age adults in the U.S.—a 12 percent dependency rate. In 2010, that rate had grown to 21 percent, and in 14 years (2030) it is expected to be 35 percent.

It is often discussed that this increased growth in dependency will strain the economy of medical care with respect to disease management. What is not often considered is that if 35 percent of the population chooses to be sedentary and allows mobility to decay to the point of nonexistence, no one will be available to regularly assist with functions related to independence. Functional impairments or dependency could be absorbed by family and care facilities in preceding generations with lower dependency ratios, but not now, and not in the future.

We know that exercise training in older populations can enhance physical fitness and support functional levels similar to those of younger, physically active populations, so it is imperative for older adults to train to improve fitness—strength, endurance and mobility. Being physically active might help retirees avoid disease, but fitness is imperative for quality of life in later years.

Without a patent safety net of family and care facilities, those of us on the tail ends of our working years need to consider that choosing to be slothful now will—not possibly, will—diminish the quality of every year that remains. Choosing the easy chair rather than the gym now likely means we will be permanently confined to a chair or bed long before we would like.

Investment Choices for Retirement

Getting ready for retirement starts weighing on your mind pretty heavily after the half-century mark. Financial readiness is the subject of thousands of articles. How much money do you need to retire? Where are the best places to retire? When can you afford to retire?

While fiscal preparation is critical, so is physical preparation. Although little guidance currently exists, it would be useful to know the investment required to create a level of physical fitness and resulting functional capacity that will support a quality lifestyle and independence long after retirement.

The level of investment certainly isn't zero—a sedentary life leading up to and during retirement. It also can't be a minimal investment of haphazardly accumulated minutes of physical activity. Physical activity might assist in staving off some diseases, and it's certainly better than nothing, but it does little to maintain and improve physical function in later life. That narrows our choice: The level



The choice to avoid exercise and let fitness decay will have dastardly results that limit function, mobility and quality of life.

of investment involves actually doing physical exercise—regular and progressive exercise—if we want to get the most out of our later years.

Exercise carries with it the intent to improve physical fitness, and physical fitness is the currency of increased quality of life—a currency that becomes more valuable with every passing year.

Acquiring Physical Wealth

There is no easy way to acquire higher levels of physical fitness. Doing so requires true effort and dedication, two things modern social structures rarely ingrain in children, youths, adults or older adults.

We often believe readiness for a long and active life begins with physical education in school, but the reality is quite the opposite: As little as 3.8 percent of all U.S. elementary schools, 7.9 percent of middle schools and 2.1 percent of high schools deliver daily physical education to students for complete academic years (1). In fact, 2008 data indicated that up to 22 percent of U.S. school systems do not require students to take physical education at all (8).

Physical education and the development of fitness have taken a back seat to other disciplines for more than a half-century, and funding physical education has been a low priority in virtually all school systems. If physical education has been first on the chopping block in every academic budgetary crunch, and if it's not required in schools, what does that tell students—and even adults—about the value academia and government place on childhood fitness? Baby Boomers grew up in this environment: They were told fitness has value, but the actions of school systems and governments made it very easy for the public to dismiss fitness as a crucial element of life.

Physical education for boys in the '50s and '60s was quite robust, but this changed as the Boomers matured and passed through school systems. Boomers saw physical education reduced in value or omitted from requirement by “budgetary” constraint or a host of other reasons. Even those who did take physical education in school generally spent more time learning the rules of sports than acquiring knowledge about how to increase health and fitness for the rest of their lives. (Read more about physical education's fail-ures [here](#)).

Baby Boomers matured into adulthood during the era of commercial fitness in which the major emphasis in research and exercise prescription was identifying the minimum amount of exercise needed to deliver a health benefit (absence of disease), not fitness.



Fitness is an investment: Time spent training to be fitter will likely result in greater vitality and more independence later in life.

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The situation decayed further as research sought to determine the minimum amount of physical activity, not formal exercise, to stave off select diseases. About 30 minutes of gardening three or four times a week seems like a rather pathetic attempt to preserve any aspect of quality of life.

The commercial fitness industry tried valiantly and in many ways succeeded in attracting Baby Boomers to the gym to exercise, but it failed to do much with the majority of those who stepped into the gym. Shiny machines and submaximal-effort target-heart-rate treadmills were convenient and easy, leading to another mixed message and another Baby Boomer accepted belief: You can train easy and in the same way over and over and become fit. We know this isn't true; basic biology argues against it. But everyone wants to believe the easy way works, and we tend to avoid the hard path to anything.

Baby Boomers have seen more scientific and technological change over the course of their lives than any other generation. They are receptive to and voracious consumers of science and technology advances. Equipment that appears high tech or science based, even when it isn't, feeds into their penchant for convenience and ease. Old-school exercise, however, cannot be replaced by any new technology. Shortcuts simply don't exist, but that doesn't stop people from trying to convince themselves and others that there is an easy way to fitness.

One **recent headline** touted having a glass of wine each day to be equivalent to an hour at the gym. However, if it sounds too good to be true, it probably is, and this was definitely true of the glass-of-wine article, which misrepresented scientific findings. It's been about 30 years since the first “exercise pill” was postulated, and to date no pill, drink or device has proved to be shortcut to fitness and the other benefits of exercise.

The bottom line is that we need to skip all the silliness, glitz and gimmicks and just exercise to develop the physical capital needed for higher later-in-life physical function, higher quality of life post-retirement and more post-retirement years.



In CrossFit gyms, many athletes over 50 are fitter than inactive people who are decades younger.

Just Get to the Gym

We would like to say it would be best for every Baby Boomer and member of older generations to simply find a local CrossFit box and start working with credentialed trainers who provide broad-based functional fitness training **scaled to individual need**. Although this might arguably be the fastest way to develop fitness, two operant issues prevent such a blanket recommendation.

First, over two-thirds of the over-65 population have at least one chronic disease (2). These people are not apparently healthy, and trainers, by virtue of their scope of practice, work with disease-free, apparently healthy populations. Those Baby Boomers with diseases need to rid themselves of the condition or be medically declared capable of unrestricted exercise before a trainer can work with them.

The other issue is that not everyone wants to do CrossFit, although most potential older clients would be hard pressed to describe the kind of exercise they need to do in order to develop fitness. This is a difficult issue to sort out. Those who are healthy would do well

to become active—the sooner the better. Those who are unhealthy would do well to consult a physician or trained professional who can advise them on appropriate physical activity.

As for exercise choice, fitness personality Covert Bailey stated at his seminars that the best exercise and exercise system for any individual is the one he or she will actually do.

Some people like to run. Some like to bike. Some like to lift. Some like to swim. You cannot make people voluntarily do what they don't like for any significant amount of time: Individual desire must be part of fitness development for anyone, not just those of us at or nearing retirement age.

The good thing about CrossFit is that any exercise can be included—it's a system that encourages variety and regular playing of different sports.

CrossFit trainers can teach and support CrossFit training proper along with more specialized training in running, weightlifting, powerlifting, strongman, gymnastics, kettlebells, rowing and more. In fact, of the exercise types listed in the 2015 American

College of Sports Medicine **top trends in fitness**, CrossFit gyms can, in general, deliver them all: body-weight training, high-intensity interval training, strength training, yoga, and functional-fitness training.

Choices

Anyone nearing retirement age needs to understand that inactivity will have a dramatic negative effect on quality of life. We live in a world where medicine provides lifespans that challenge biology and bring the consequence of “frailty” to the forefront in social consideration of aging (3).

Our decisions to do nothing now create the consequences of frailty, decrepitude, loss of health and—very importantly—loss of independence in later life. Choosing to be physically active, but not fit, extends our lives without carrying forward our ability to thrive in the face of the world's constant challenge.

For those of us who make the choice to be physically active in later life, it is a very good thing. A choice to try to be disease-free as long as possible is brilliant. But we can do better.

Dylan Thomas wrote:

Do not go gently into that good night,
Old age should burn and rave at the close of day;
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

To rage against aging is to choose to actively seek fitness, to logically

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and progressively train to reap the promise of a spectacular return on your physical investment—health, independence, vitality, and longevity. There simply is no substitute for sweat equity earned with time in the gym—time spent training hard to progressively improve fitness and quality of life to last a lifetime.

The other choice is to sit back and wait for time to rob you of your quality of life and longevity.

The couch may be comfy, but you need to choose wisely for the benefit of yourself and those you care about. ■

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Fitness can be improved at any age. By training—not just “staying active”—older people give themselves the best chance to lead long, fulfilling lives.

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About the Author Lon Kilgore earned a Ph.D. from the Department of Anatomy and Physiology at Kansas State University's College of Veterinary Medicine. He has competed in weightlifting to the national level since 1972 and coached his first athletes from a garage gym to national-championship event medals in 1974. He has also competed in powerlifting, the first CrossFit Total event, wrestling and rowing. He has worked in the trenches, as a qualified national level coach or scientific consultant, with athletes from rank novices to the Olympic elite and as a consultant to fitness businesses. He was co-developer of the Basic Barbell Training and Exercise Science specialty seminars for CrossFit (mid-2000s) and was an all-level certifying instructor for USA Weightlifting for more than a decade. He is a decorated military veteran (sergeant, U.S. Army). His illustration, authorship and co-authorship efforts include several best-selling books and works in numerous research journals. After a 20-year professorial career in higher academia, he currently delivers vocational-education courses through the [Kilgore Academy](#), provides online [commentary and analysis](#) of exercise-science papers, and works as a writer and illustrator. He was born in the 1950s and as such he has a vested interest in maintaining fitness and function over the coming decades. He doesn't really plan on retiring—from anything.