

Changing the rules to get older people *Back in the Game*

Increasing participation in physical activity through community sport and active recreation

This project is part of a VicHealth funding program known as PICSAR, which aims to increase participation levels in community sport and active recreation among people with disabilities and those from low socio-economic, Indigenous and new-arrival communities.

The organisation

Council on the Ageing – Victoria (COTA Victoria) is the peak body representing the wide-ranging needs and interests of older people in Victoria. COTA Victoria's mission is to mobilise older people, and assist those who work with them, to age well in a just society.

COTA Victoria aims to increase the proportion of older people participating in sufficient (time, intensity and range of) physical activity to improve health.

They do this by: increasing awareness and understanding of the benefits of physical activity; increasing opportunities to be physically active; and changing community attitudes towards older peoples' participation in physical activity.

The project

Back in the Game is a pilot project led by COTA Victoria, working with relevant municipal councils and stadium managers. The project was developed as a new opportunity for older people to return to 'sport' or to attract new people to participate in physical activity options.

It is suitable for people over 55 years who want to participate in a 'friendly', non-competitive environment, where the emphasis is on participation and fun. Sessions are based on games which are familiar, but have been modified for safety.



A balloon is lighter, travels more slowly and will not cause injury to participants. Dorothy Trezise gets some coaching from Brad Roberts, Stadium Manager of Leisuretime Activity Centre in Geelong. *Image courtesy of Council on the Ageing–Victoria.*

Specially modified sports program exercises muscles and spirits

The story

Stiff joints, old sporting injuries and a lack of match fitness are no longer reasons for older people to think they will always be relegated to sporting sidelines. A new physical activity program developed by COTA Victoria aims to connect older people to fun social sports and games.

The organisation's original PICSAR project looked at creating partnerships between older people and sporting clubs, to create new opportunities for this age group to be more active. Over time it became clear that this approach wasn't working and after extensive consultation it became apparent that most older

people weren't interested in participating in the traditional offerings of sporting associations. Those who were tended to become involved in Masters sports, where they could continue to participate in high-level competition if they desired.

Many barriers to participation in sporting clubs were perceived and reported to COTA Victoria. These included: difficulties associated with involvement in contact sports; difficulties playing against younger, fitter or more competitive opponents; and the need to modify equipment, rules and playing areas.

Individual concerns were expressed in relation to specific sports.

More information about Participation in Community Sport and Active Recreation (PICSAR) is available on the VicHealth website at: www.vichealth.vic.gov.au/picsar

"I played cricket in my youth, but I cannot run to the boundary to field a ball any longer, and I certainly could not throw the ball in from the boundary. I would need a smaller playing area."

"I played volleyball, but I have osteoporosis and my bones are not able to withstand the impact of a ball. I would like to play again though, if there was a lighter and slower moving ball."

Other concerns related to a lack of social confidence.

"I have enrolled in activities before and stopped going after a short period of time. This was because I did not get to know the other people and I didn't feel that they cared about me or would miss me if I stopped going."

COTA Victoria also found that, in general, older people were not interested in participating in competitive sport. They preferred to be active in order to retain their independence, enjoy the company of others, maintain good body function and a degree of physical fitness.

Armed with this valuable feedback, COTA Victoria decided to restructure the program. Working with stadium managers, who are employed largely by local governments, a new multisport model has been developed. Its focus is on fun and social contact and incorporates all of the modifications that older people had indicated were necessary for sustained participation.

Jan Bourke, COTA Victoria's physical activity project officer and architect of the program, says it was specifically developed to target older people who would normally be at home and who weren't sure of the types of sports or activities that appealed to them.

The program, known as *Back in the Game* provides a taste of a number of different activities. Sports such as table tennis and basketball sit alongside belly dancing and indoor soccer. An important process

during program development, Jan says, included thinking about which aspect of the activity was going to provide the participants with a good laugh!

The nine-week program offers different groupings of modified activities. Groupings include: *Serve and Volley*: volleyball, badminton, indoor tennis and squash; *Bat and Bowl*: various versions of indoor cricket with modified rules and plastic equipment; and *Bend and Stretch*: gentle exercises such as yoga, pilates and tai chi.

The games are adapted to the ability level of the group, playing areas are the size of an indoor court and sessions always incorporate social time and laughter.

Socialising over tea and coffee is an essential component of each session helping to develop friendships and mutual support. These social connections, COTA Victoria hopes, will help ensure sustainability of the program and increase the participants' levels of confidence and ability.

Back in the Game has flexibility and diversity built into it, which allows for each group to be self-managing and to develop its own program based on the interest and expertise of the members of the group.

COTA Victoria believes the trial programs currently running in selected metropolitan and regional sites will provide them with a clear picture of what does and doesn't work in engaging older people in fun, physical activities.

PICSAR

Sport and active recreation organisations are well placed to assist VicHealth in addressing the health inequalities that result in poorer health outcomes for many groups in the community.

They have a tradition of providing opportunities for individuals and groups to:

- participate in physical activity,
- connect with other members of the community,
- feel part of their local community, and
- develop knowledge and skills that can be used in a range of contexts.

The Participation in Community Sport and Active Recreation (PICSAR) Program comprises three funding programs:

- State and Regional Grants
- Active Participation Grants
- Active Club Grants

The first two programs are long-term investments that work with State Sporting Associations, Regional Sports Assemblies, statewide peak agencies and regional organisations to increase participation in physical activity in specific target populations.

A learning snapshot from the independent evaluation being conducted by Monash University/ARTD Consultants shows that:

1. partnerships are perceived as beneficial to program delivery
2. it is important that staff (paid or voluntary) have the required skills to implement activities
3. sports at all levels should consider adapting policies and activities to provide greater flexibility to promote inclusion.

For more information on COTA Victoria go to: www.cotavic.org.au
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