



Move It or Lose It

We're pleased to present a series of articles by a certified trainer in response to reader requests for exercise information. Among other benefits of exercise, it can help you control diabetes, hypertension and being overweight, all risk factors for heart disease. To ensure only good results from your efforts, see a physician and professional trainer before starting any exercise program.

Get to First Base with Senior Softball

By Holly Rudin-Braschi, MA, ACSM

Talk softball with Rainer Martens, 61, and he becomes as enthusiastic as a 10-year-old who, at a major league game, just caught a foul ball in his catcher's mitt. Martens played semi-pro softball through college and continued playing for fun until age 45 when he gave up the game to give specialized care to his wife who was seriously ill with diabetes. "When she passed away ten years later," explains Martens, "a friend asked me to come out and play softball. After the first game, I realized how much I missed it. I was hooked and have been playing shortstop ever since, a fun position with a lot of action."

Sports have always been a vital part of Martens' life. An internationally recognized sports psychologist, Martens has coached at the youth, high school and college levels. He received his PhD in physical education from the University of Illinois at Champaign-Urbana in 1968 and was a member of its faculty for 16 years. A past president of the American Academy of Kinesiology and Physical Education, Martens has been recognized for his contribution to sports by the National Recreation and Park Association and was inducted into the National Association of Sport and Physical Education Hall of Fame.

The founder and president of Human Kinetics, a publisher of professional health and fitness books, Martens also started the American Sport Education Program, the largest coaching education program in the United States. The author of 15 books and a world-renowned speaker on coaching, Martens took time from his busy schedule to share his enthusiasm for his favorite sport.

Most seniors who love baseball are devoted fans, but they rarely consider participating because they think they are too old. What would you tell them to change that perception?

Go out and try the game. The best example I can give is my own story. When I first started playing softball again at age 55, I played like all the other members of the senior league I joined. We hit the ball lightly to a shallow outfield and didn't run too hard or throw too hard because we were in our 50s and were convinced that we

should act our age. That was in Champaign, Illinois. Soon after, I moved to Daytona Beach, Florida, where I now spend most of the winter. I was surprised to see that the older athletes in the Florida leagues were playing much harder and much better than I'd grown accustomed to playing. I thought, if they can do that, then I can, too! So I began working on my game. Since then, I've played in the National Senior Olympics at the Wide World of Sports at Disney World. As a member of the world champion 60+ Florida Legends League, a self-organized group of older people who make up 180 teams across Florida, I've been named to six all-world teams.



Playing softball, a long-time favorite sport, Rainer Martens follows through on a swing.

Why is softball a good choice for seniors?

Softball has become popular with seniors because it's a game that can be played on a variety of levels. Recreational softball can be played at a relatively low level of fitness or physical conditioning. In Champaign, we have a terrific senior summer league with players who range in age from 55 to 80 who all play together to have fun. But seniors who want to work at the game can play at a semi-pro level in a senior baseball league. Other sports that seniors may have played when they were younger, such as football or wrestling, don't offer the same opportunities.

My favorite softball game for fit seniors is slow-pitch softball. It doesn't require as high a skill level as baseball and it offers more action than traditional baseball. Slow-pitch softball requires the ball to be pitched in an arch of a minimum of 6 feet to a maximum of 12 feet. This makes the ball easier to hit, so it's unusual for anyone to strike out. As a result, the ball is always being hit, defense always has plays to make and the batters are always running the bases. All the constant action makes the game very enjoyable.

Do you recommend softball for both senior men and women?

Yes. In fact, there are both senior softball leagues and national championships for women. Women play for all the same reasons men do; they enjoy the sport and the competition, the game keeps them active and they like the socialization.

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What health benefits does softball offer to seniors?

Softball itself is not physically demanding. It requires strength and agility, but you can't make a strong case that it develops cardiovascular or muscular fitness. Softball does provide the motivation, though, to engage in cardiovascular and muscular fitness activities in order to stay in shape for playing the game. If you decide to take senior softball seriously but don't keep yourself in shape, you won't last.

It's quite interesting watching 40- to 50-year-olds play softball. They can be substantially overweight and still play. But the weight eventually gets to their joints and, if they don't lose the weight, it prevents them from playing. There are competitions for players in the 70- and 80-year-old age class. If you watch them play, you'll immediately notice that they're leaner and fitter than some younger senior players. Serious players watch their weight or lose it because they realize that being overweight impairs their playing ability. It isn't that you're burning so many calories when you play, but you have a reason to keep yourself fit because you want to do well in the sport. So, when players aren't on the baseball diamond, softball gives them motivation to get off the couch to train.

What is the biggest challenge for seniors who want to take up softball but haven't played in years?

Don't overdo it at first. Generally, all of the people who play senior softball played softball or baseball or were athletes of some sort when they were younger. Even so, they need to take it easy at first because their physical conditioning will be poor and they'll be out of practice in the technical skills of the game. I often see people who haven't played in the last 10 years start at the all-out level they played when they were younger. Typically, they pull a muscle and are out of the game for several weeks until it heals.

What kind of exercise program do you suggest for out-of-condition seniors who want to play softball?

If you aren't in good shape and haven't been active, I recommend consulting your doctor to have a complete physical before starting any exercise program. After you have clearance from your doctor, I suggest building an aerobic base. Softball is a sport that requires bursts of activity so, for conditioning, you should start with some sports-specific aerobic activity, such as jogging, biking or rowing.

You should also include a resistance program to improve your muscular fitness. You should build strength in both your upper and lower body, which is needed for hitting, catching and throwing the ball. To help prevent the back problems that are common for senior softball players, you should include back strengthening and stretching exercises in your program. Stretching keeps muscles pliable. People who like a structured exercise program may want to get their stretching through a yoga class or home video tapes. Beginners should also remember that it's just as important to stretch after playing as it is before playing. I see that most seniors are serious about stretching before they play but not many of them stretch afterwards, which is an invitation to injury, aches and pain.

What kind of program do you suggest for fit seniors who want to play softball?

Many of us seniors who are fit still have to listen to our bodies when we prepare for strenuous sports. I recently tore a *meniscus* (fibrous

cartilage) in my knee which is starting to show some arthritis. But I do some physical activity every day to keep myself fit for the game, such as light jogging, fast walking or biking. I am also very blessed to be married to my second wife, Julie S. Martens, who is the world's number one softball fan. She also holds a PhD in sports psychology and helps me stay on top of my game by pitching to me three times per week.

Does softball have any effect on brain functions?

There's more and more evidence that physical activity of all kinds improves brain function. In our society, there's a lot of criticism about competition, particularly when it becomes excessive. However, the stimulation of competition and the physical stimulation of training and playing are positive for mental alertness, concentration, clear thinking, information processing, problem solving, learning tasks, creative thinking and reaction time. The brain is like a bicep that you must exercise. If you don't use it, you'll lose it. My work as a publisher is extremely challenging and preoccupies me. Softball refocuses, refreshes and rejuvenates my mind because it's so different from my profession.

What type of softball program would you suggest for inactive seniors?

This is a relatively easy sport to take up for someone who has reasonable motor coordination. Affiliate with a team. Don't jump into competition without practicing or you'll get frustrated. Start in a very low-level recreational league. Find the right level of competition for your skill level. Even if you're slow, can't hit the ball well and can't field well, there's a team out there to fit your skill level. As you improve, find your level of play in more advanced leagues. Many leagues use a ladder system. If you're skilled, you'll play in the first ten teams in the league.

Internet Resources:

- Amateur Softball Association – www.softball.org
- International Senior Softball Association – www.seniorsoftball.org
- International Softball Federation – www.internationalsoftball.com
- National Softball Association – www.playnsa.com
- National Softball Association of the Deaf – www.nsad.org
- Senior Softball USA – www.seniorsoftball.com/index.php
- Softball Nation – www.softballnation.com

Books:

To order, call Human Kinetics at (800) 747-4457; write them at P.O. Box 5076, Champaign, IL 61825-5076; or visit them at www.humankinetics.com.

- **Softball, Steps to Success** by Diane L. Potter and Gretchen A. Brockmeyer
- **The Softball Handbook** by Susan Craig and Ken Johnson
- **Sport Stretch: 2nd Edition** by Michael Alter

Holly Rudin-Braschi is an American College of Sports Medicine certified fitness instructor and a journalist who specializes in topics on exercise, health, fitness, nutrition and cooking. Visit her at www.grillpower.com.

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