Are You 3-D Fit?

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I have always considered myself an athlete or, at the very least, athletic. While growing up in inner-city Philadelphia in the late 1950s and early 1960s, I enjoyed the usual rotation of baseball, basketball, and football—not much variety, but no shortage of activity. When I was 11, I received my first barbell and set of weights from Sears. Add a chin-up bar, and I was hooked. Sports and exercise became every bit a part of my life as school and friends. Martial arts came next, but I wasn’t introduced to activities such as tennis and skiing until medical school. I became pretty good at tennis and fairly accomplished in martial arts; however, over time I dropped out of these activities I had loved because of a bum knee (an old reminder of football days) and, more importantly, a demanding and hectic work schedule. Instead, I devoted the small amount of leisure time I had to dedicate to staying fit by going to the gym, with basic 1- and 2-dimensional cardiovascular, strength, and flexibility routines. I was consistent and rarely missed a workout. I pumped iron and spent time on stairs that moved and bikes that didn’t. I was a typical gym rat. Thus, I stayed pretty fit, at least in the traditional definition of the term.

Although I have remained fit over the course of my life, I’ve received a very important lesson just recently from my own children. It wasn’t until my 40s that I became married, and so I found myself well into my 50s when I was raising younger children, who drew me back into sports and activities that I had not tried in years. Skateboards, ice skating, and, most importantly, tennis. I was stunned at how much I had lost in terms of balance, agility, hand-eye coordination, and other 3-dimensional (3-D) capabilities I once took for granted and that I now know one cannot get from the gym. The loss over the years must have been so slow that it was seemingly imperceptible. I should have known better having seen it every day in my practice with a wide range of patients, athletes, and nonathletes alike. However, when it sneaks up on you, it’s a totally different story. “If you don’t use it, you lose it” applies to much more than aerobic capability and muscular strength.

Although I will not be replacing Tony Hawk anytime soon, and I don’t lace up the hockey skates much, I rapidly improved in my ability to perform these and other 3-D activities. I was impressed with how reversible the losses were. More importantly, I have fallen in love with tennis again, and, like any great relationship, it has given me back much to appreciate. The improvement in my functional fitness has been dramatic. Although it took a little time and patience, I’m hitting better than ever, and at times, at least in my mind, I’m moving like a ninja. Occasionally, I’ll even hit a shot like my favorite athlete, Roger Federer (Figure 1). Playing tennis regularly has not only enhanced my health and fitness but also my everyday life.

My personal lesson is important for all of us who are committed to optimizing not only our own health but also the health of our patients. In this regard, I was honored to collaborate with Jack Groppel, PhD, in an article in this issue, *Tennis: For the Health of It!* In this article, we explore the myriad health benefits of tennis, including those “3-D” ones I had once lost but have now regained. Our hope is that physicians and other health care professionals will keep tennis high on their mental checklist when promoting and prescribing exercise for their patients. This issue also includes articles by Wayne Westcott, MD, and Juan Colado, PhD, who deal with the specificity of exercise as it relates to achieving optimal physiologic and/or
neuromuscular endpoints. Dr. Westcott documents the significant benefits of strength training when added to complement traditional aerobic activity routines. Dr. Colado notes improvements in both static and dynamic balance in elderly women using a new training device.

As physicians and health care professionals, we must continue to promote and prescribe exercise. Many years ago, *The Physician and Sportsmedicine* first made the observation that “Exercise Is Medicine.” What was once an insightful slogan is now a scientific reality. In fact, exercise is a very powerful medicine. Regular exercise is not only essential in achieving optimal health, but it is a valuable tool in the prevention and treatment of a wide variety of medical ailments. But in order for it to reach full potency, the specificity of exercise must be considered and appropriately applied. I believe the future of exercise programming will take this attribute of specificity into consideration, especially as it relates to our aging population. We will need more scientific work and documentation as well.

No single workout or activity can offer everything to everyone. Cardiovascular, strength, and flexibility training should serve as just the beginning. We should seek out ways to promote activities like tennis that help provide functional 3-D fitness in ways that gym workouts alone can not. Being fit is something we should all strive for, but it shouldn’t be an end goal. Ideally, enhanced fitness should open doors to a greater enjoyment of life for a lifetime. Which is why I’m heading for the courts. Your serve!

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