

Promoting Successful Aging through Competitive Sports Participation Insights from Older Adults

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Abstract

In this study we explored the experience of competing in the Senior Games and the resultant contributions to the successful aging of older adults. We used in-depth interviews with older adults who participated in the National Senior Games. Analysis of the data produced five central themes: (a) perseverance, (b) career development and significant effort, (c) personal and social benefits, (d) unique ethos, and (e) identification as a senior athlete. We found that participating in the Senior Games as a form of serious leisure enhanced the well-being of older adults and could be utilized as a means by which to maintain a healthy lifestyle.

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Successful aging as a multidimensional construct has been espoused by Rowe and Kahn (1998) as a means by which older individuals engage in meaningful activities while maintaining physical and cognitive functions. In a broader sense, successful aging includes components such as life satisfaction, mental and physical well-being, and a robust quality of life. These activities provide meaning, and include circumstances where individuals express creativity, feel a sense of achievement, obtain competence, and experience pleasure, often in the form of leisure (Eakman, Carlson, & Clark, 2010). Leisure, by most accepted definitions, is time separated from the normal routine of work, business, and chores. As a means by which individuals realize meaning, leisure encompasses a wide spectrum of activities that are physical (i.e., gardening, playing sports), cognitive (i.e., reading, playing chess), and/or social (i.e., social conversations).

As an outlet for meaningful activities among older adults, research on the positive aspects of leisure at an advanced age demonstrated positive benefits (Everard, Lach, Fisher, & Baum, 2000; Menec & Chipperfield, 1997; Stathi, Fox, & McKenna, 2002). As in previous studies, these findings also indicate that involvement in leisure activities contributed to the quality of life of older adults. Kelly, Steinkamp, and Kelly's study (1987) on older adults' activity typology correlated leisure activities, such as travel, cultural activities, social activities, and sports, with higher life satisfaction. The authors concluded that the frequency of engagement in diverse leisure activities was a significant predicting factor of life satisfaction. Bevil, O'Connor, and Mattoon (1994), in similar fashion, investigated retirees' leisure activity and life satisfaction, noting that variety, frequency, and perceived benefits of leisure activity participation were positively correlated with older adults' life satisfaction. The authors, at the outset of the study, suggested that older adults should be actively involved in planning leisure activities that fit their preferences and capabilities to help enhance their well-being.

Further review of current perspectives suggested that serious leisure requires vigorous engagement in leisure activity, typically involving a form of amateurism, hobbyist pursuits, or career volunteering (Stebbins, 1992). Stebbins' succinct definition describes serious leisure as "the systematic pursuit of an amateur, hobbyist, or volunteer activity sufficiently substantial and interesting for the participant to find a career there in the acquisition and expression of a combination of its special skills, knowledge, and experience" (1992, p. 3). Serious leisure has been an area of inquiry in various fields, such as volunteering (Cuskelly, Harrington, & Stebbins, 2002; Orr, 2006; Yarnal & Dowler, 2002), football fandom (Gibson, Willming, & Holdnak, 2002; Jones, 2000), youth sports (Siegenthaler & Gonzalez, 1997), kayaking package tours (Kane & Zink, 2004), and sports tourism (Green & Jones, 2005).

Research on the topic of serious leisure has provided insight into the behaviors of runners (Major, 2001; Shipway & Jones, 2007), shag dancers (Brown, McGuire, & Voelkl, 2008), people with disabilities (Patterson, 2000; Reynolds, Vivat, & Prior, 2008), older golfers (Siegenthaler & O'Dell, 2003), and event participants (Mackellar, 2009). Participants in these aforementioned studies experienced individual or social benefits from the activities they were involved in, a noticeable characteristic of serious leisure. Underpinned by a number of studies, Stebbins (1992) identified several distinctive qualities of serious leisure: perseverance, careers, personal effort, durable benefits, unique ethos, and identity pursuits. Each of these qualities is also identified by a distinct set of occurrences.

Perseverance is usually accompanied by some form of distress, such as stage fright, embarrassment, anxiety, fatigue, and, at times, injury. Participants in serious leisure often persevere through these

difficulties prior to experiencing satisfaction from the activities of their choosing. Careers describe the development, tendencies, choices, and actions among amateurs, hobbyists, and volunteers. These individuals continuously pursue improvement, maintenance, and advancement of their knowledge and skills. Personal effort is a quality of serious leisure, based on knowledge, training, and skills. It is expected that when individuals take the initiative to participate in a leisure activity, much of the skills and knowledge are acquired through self-directed learning.

Durable benefits as a result of participating in serious leisure include self-actualization, self-enrichment, self-expression, recreation or renewal of self, feelings of accomplishment, enhancement of self-image, social interaction and belongingness, and lasting physical products of the activity. In addition, self-gratification or pure fun can be seen as a benefit of serious leisure just as much as it is a benefit of casual types of leisure. In finding a unique ethos, amateurs, hobbyists, and volunteers create their own worlds that explicitly distinguish their subcultures of beliefs, norms, events, values, traditions, morals, and standards from other groups' subcultures. Individuals in casual leisure do not perform in this manner. Finally, a distinctive identity can be found in serious leisure. Participants are willing to pursue and express an identity that can be obtained or strengthened through the leisure activity. Most serious leisure activities are indicative of a distinctive identity.

Stebbins' later critiques (1997, 2001) would move beyond his initial identification of qualities to a more robust comparison of serious and casual leisure. Whereas serious leisure requires participants to "have a substantial investment and involvement," casual leisure allows them to experience diverse forms of an "immediately, intrinsically rewarding, relatively short-lived pleasurable activity requiring little or no special training to enjoy it" (1997, p. 17). Representative of the majority of leisure activities, casual leisure includes play, relaxation, passive entertainment, active entertainment, sociable conversation, and sensory stimulation. Encompassing the six qualities mentioned previously, serious leisure is a particular form of leisure behavior, represented in this study by competition in the Senior Games.

The Senior Games are state and national athletic competitions for individuals aged 50 years and older. Each state in the United States hosts annual senior athletic events dedicated to encouraging older adults to lead a healthy lifestyle. Those who qualify at the state competitions are eligible to participate in the national games, which occur biannually. Prior research on older adults participating in athletic events indicates that such interaction provides both personal and social benefits (Siegenthaler & O'Dell, 2003; Smith & Storandt, 1997). Despite a steady increase in the number of older adults participating in the Senior Games since 1987 (National Senior Games Association, 2012) and abundant research on senior athletes (e.g., Dionigi, 2006; Lyons & Dionigi, 2007; Shaulis, Golding, & Tandy, 1996), limited focus has been given to helping this population define the meaning of participation in competitive sports and its contribution to their successful aging.

Serious leisure has been recognized as an important aspect of understanding the leisure behaviors of older adults. As previous studies have highlighted, competing in the Senior Games reflects serious leisure participation that offers a new insight useful in the promotion of healthy lifestyles. Thus, we examined the experience of older adults competing in the Senior Games as a form of serious leisure to determine how this experience contributes to the successful aging of older adults.

Methodology

With the cooperation of a state Senior Games organizer in the Midwestern United States, we contacted potential study participants. Using purposeful sampling, we selected the participants based on the following criteria: (a) participation in the Senior Games at the national level, (b) demonstration of high athletic achievement and significant investment in their sport(s), and (c) residency in the United States. We conducted 10 in-depth interviews between January and March 2010. The average age of the study participants was 63 years (range 52 to 71). Of the 10 participants, 9 were White and 1 was African American. Six of the participants were men, 4 were women. Five of the participants were retired at the time of the study, and the other 5 were still employed. The events that the interviewees participated in at the Senior Games were tennis, volleyball, track and field, cycling, swimming, shuffleboard, table tennis, and race walk.

With the use of an interview guide, we used a series of open-ended questions to explore the participants' involvement with the Senior Games and issues of successful aging. We coded and later analyzed the data using the constant comparative method (Merriam, 1998). By using the constant comparison method, we were able to locate and identify emerging conceptual categories from the first interview. We compared this information to each piece of data in the subsequent interviews to explore and clarify the themes. In this process, we highlighted key phrases to identify major ideas. Afterward, we merged the codes with similar meanings to identify themes within the serious leisure framework.

Interviews lasted between 45 and 90 minutes. Each of the participants signed a letter of consent that contained the purpose of the study, a confidentiality agreement with regard to the data, and permission to record and transcribe the interviews. After the interviews, we compensated participants with \$20. At the request of the institutional review board, we assigned pseudonyms to each participant to maintain confidentiality during the data collection process.

We used grand-tour questions along with a series of probes to enable the participants to elaborate on their participation in the Senior Games (Spradley, 1979). The grand-tour questions provide an in-depth descriptive sequence that explains a series of events; describes a group of persons; and tells how to engage in an activity, use an object, or reflect on the events during a certain time period. We used the following grand-tour questions to encourage the participants to share their experiences as they were related to participation in the Senior Games: (a) Please tell us about your strategies to maintain a healthy life style; (b) What advice would you give to others who would like to continue their athletic participation as they mature into adults?; and (c) What type of leisure activities do you participate in? We then asked the mini-tour questions, which were used to capture how serious leisure was portrayed through participating in the Senior Games. These questions included (a) What are the benefits of participating in the Senior Games?; (b) To what would you contribute your dedication to your athletic accomplishments?; (c) Were there any difficulties or challenges you faced while participating in the Senior Games?; (d) How important is it for you to participate in the Senior Games?; and (e) What factors influenced your choice of sports and athletic participation?

Results

The older adults interviewed in this study demonstrated a measured, direct approach to the Senior Games. Their experiences in the Games contained various qualities of serious leisure. From the interviews with the participants, we identified five central themes: (a) perseverance, (b) significant effort and career development, (c) personal and social benefits, (d) a unique ethos, and (e) identification as a senior athlete.

Perseverance

As Stebbins (1992) noted, serious leisure participants often encounter challenges associated with their participation. Such challenges (e.g., fatigue, anxiety, and injury) require participants to develop a sense of perseverance. Some of the participants expressed the need to persevere through injury, as well as survive medical conditions such as cancer. Jill, who had been running for 17 years, remarked,

"Well, I think this past year has been the hardest because in May I was very sick with a gall bladder attack and ended up in the hospital, and you know typical gall bladders are twenty four hours, but I was in the hospital for two weeks. And then the cancer, you know, probably have been my two hardest ones. The cancer has probably been the worst because I've been doing chemo [chemotherapy] since December, so I've just started getting back to training again. Now I've been going to the gym almost constantly, but not doing the intense training that I've done. And you just begin think, "Well, I'm going to do some intervals, then it's time for the next chemo." And so for me right now it's going to be, the next downfall is going to be for a week or so, and then I'm going to have a double mastectomy. You just pick up and go from it."

Despite her illness and the resultant therapies she experienced, Jill foresaw positive feelings about training. Jill's statement implies that her success as a runner, along with meeting goals in this endeavor, enabled her to pursue the activity with persistence. Aaron's experience as a cyclist who traveled the world to compete for more than 30 years is typical of behavior exemplified by an active sport tourist (Gibson, 2005). His desire to persevere was expressed in his need to maintain his chosen pursuits, regardless of the consequences:

"Well, I've been hit by a car six times, you know. The more miles you put on your body the higher the probability of something happening. I've been pretty lucky. There's always the question of money. We aren't sponsored. You travel, and next thing you know spending four days in San Francisco, and after your hotel and food and race you've spent a couple thousand dollars. Part of doing this is figuring out how to get the money to continue racing. Very few of us are sponsored."

In Aaron's case, his need to persevere was not only a physical necessity, but was also born of financial constraints. The costs of his equipment and tours made being financially stable crucial. Family support, an often overlooked aspect of these athletes' participation in competitions, was also of particular importance when considering the numerous out-of-town trips cyclists must make for competitions.

Significant Effort and Career Development

Developing a specialized knowledge base with specific skills associated with an activity is a significant effort. Serious swimmers, for example, must complete a series of strokes and connected movements that require repeated practice and discipline to master. Success in serious leisure pursuits requires participants to commit to career development that moves them from novice to expert. Through this journey, participants gain independence, become leaders, and are empowered as they gain prowess.

Jim was another cancer survivor who, at the time of the interview, had played tennis for 50 years, beginning as a junior in high school. At his mature age, he used tennis as a means to maintain a healthy lifestyle and consistent routine:

"[I] came out every morning at five and rolled the courts and watered them. Actually put down real chalk, like they do on the baseball lines. And we would get out there and play for hours. I play at just about all of the clubs here in town. Wherever there is a game."

Frank had been involved with the Senior Games for 10 years. In his interview, he noted that his experiences playing volleyball since his childhood laid a foundation for continued participation as an older adult:

"I played a little bit as a kid, but I think seriously for maybe twenty years. I took an adult education [class] at [school] called Adult Volleyball, and it was really mainly playing. But the group I played with there, some of us got together and entered tournaments and played a little more serious. After that some of the folks that played there and some other places ended up getting together."

Most of the participants in this study spent time each day in sport-specific training, whether as teenagers or adults. Regardless of when they first began involvement in their sport of choice, a common thread among the participants was a devotion to significant effort toward the activity. Jill described her dedication to her chosen activity as follows:

"I think it's when I really started competing with the race-walking. Now as I said, when I was a young, married girl, thirty or so, my husband and I would get out and jog five miles three or four times a week, and then I really got involved at the YMCA [Young Men's Christian Association] with a group of women."

Susan, an avid swimmer and holder of numerous records, commented on the effort she had invested despite her injuries:

"Now fifty years ago, fifty-five years ago, I was a swimmer, and I picked swimming in 1958. I was a butterflyer, I was freestyle, backstroke. I held city, state, and national records. So I started working very hard and diligently at all my strokes, and I went over there at five thirty in the morning, and I swam, and then I'd get ready to go to work. Along in April sometime I started having a shoulder problem. And it got more and more uncomfortable, but I kept going and going."

During the course of the interview, Susan added that for years she was not able to participate in swimming because of her shoulder injury. Hesitantly, she switched to bowling for a while, later returning to swimming because of her passion and affinity for the activity. Aaron, in his comments, had similar emotions, evidenced by his explanation:

"It's a lifestyle, so we're training twelve to fourteen hours a week. For instance, now the season is going to start, so there's always something to worry about. Every day, rain, snow, and after class I would ride around. My physique and leg strength went up. I started doing tours, and all of a sudden I was riding up at the front of the tours and all the guys up there were saying, "Where did you come from?""

Personal and Social Benefits

Participating in the Senior Games matched the categorized benefits presented by Stebbins (1992). Personal and social benefits were of note, including social networking, physical fitness, enhanced self-image, and pure fun. Ted, a 53-year-old bodybuilder and participant in the shot put and discus, spoke of his ability to set goals and the health benefits he gained as a result of training for the Senior Games:

"I had a goal within myself to reach forty-three feet. I realize I'm not going to win my age group. The fellow who won threw fifty feet. I'm not going to beat that distance. It's more of a competition within myself. Of course I'd like to win it. I like to place as high as I can. But what I try to do is be the best that I can be to compete within myself. For me it's very important. It gives me a time I have to be ready. It adds to the enjoyment because you know that event is coming up and you might train for it, so it might make you train a little more diligently."

The Senior Games also helped Jill set goals in her life:

"I did like a twenty-nine:fifty-six [29:56] 5K, so doing less than a ten-minute pace in my late fifties was the pro, pretty much what you did. You can get it down, so after I did that with her I said, "Well, I want to get faster." She gave me an application to a race, and I was hooked. I'm a little bit on the competitive side, so I said for me to get faster I've got to get more efficient. I found a group, and that's just history. I've been very involved with them, and many of us go to the Senior Games and that kind of thing, so that's where I'm at."

Although a number of personal benefits were gained through participation in the Senior Games, participants in this study agreed that social belonging and interactions with other competitors were of most importance. Dave, who played shuffleboard in the Senior Games, sought to build meaningful relationships with others. This, for him, was indicated as more important than having fun or keeping in shape:

"I watched a three-on-three basketball game of these eighty-year-old women. They couldn't jump, any of them, and they could barely get the ball to the rim, but they were trying their hardest and it was fun to watch them. And it was so motivating just to see these people well into their eighties or seventies out there competing, and some of them quite well! It was still nice to see the camaraderie, and it seemed like everyone got along and it was more, I think most of the people in the shuffleboard area and even the other areas I saw, it was more of a social thing than it was a competitive thing. There was the guy that I met at the State Games that I had never met before. We were just sitting around talking, but I've traded emails with him a dozen times or so since saying that we ought to get together, maybe we ought to be doubles partners in the next year's event."

Dave, being in his 50s, was a member of one of the youngest groups in the competition. Watching other contestants 20 to 30 years older than he served as an inspiration—a tangible social benefit and a glimpse into what it meant to successfully age. Like Dave, Frank and Roy's participation in the Senior Games spanned more than 10 years, through the sport of volleyball. Each commented on the various personal and social benefits of participation. Frank noted, "I'm personally not really oriented toward winning. If I play well, that's the main goal. It's nice to win, it's nice to get the gold medal. If I feel I've played my best, that's what's most rewarding." Roy, who was 71 years of age, continued to play

volleyball despite having had heart surgery. His involvement in the Senior Games was explained as follows:

"You can go out on the court and forget about everything that's going on in your life. I went through a really hard time in my life, and volleyball helped me through it because I could go out and forget about all the traumas. Again, it's the social part of it, on the court. It's something I've been able to do. I'm not the best on the court, but I try to be respectable. I think it's good. You get to know people over the years. There's a lot of core people that I've been playing with for years."

Across all sports, it was evident during the analysis of the interviews that developing camaraderie with the other participants was an important aspect of participating in the Senior Games. Participation for those in the study provided opportunities for interaction from around the country and created lasting friendships. In particular, Chloe felt the joy of camaraderie:

"There were thousands of people there. Now at this meet I think there were about twenty thousand. It was like, wow! So I get there, and I'm just like, "Okay! I've got to run with all of these people!" Maybe it was that. Just when you're in a national competition the feeling is just totally different."

Unique Ethos

During the course of the research, findings suggested that a serious leisure participant could develop a special social world surrounding his or her activities to create a "unique ethos." Stebbins (2001) implied that this unique ethos presents distinguishing ideals, values, sentiments, or guiding beliefs that lead to the development of a special social world and provision of a social network. Through the friendships that older adults developed during the Senior Games, some of the participants began to communicate with each other, share information, and even train together. Ted stated,

"The fact is that there was a competition and something to work toward. I actually made a couple of friends who all participate in the Games and we still all keep in touch—a few emails here and there asking about how training is going and to see if they were going to participate in certain events."

Pat, a 70-year-old table tennis player, commented on the development of the social world surrounding the Games:

"You also have, and especially I think, and you talk with other athletes that compete in different areas, you build a community so that when you go there you meet friends that you haven't seen before, that you haven't seen for a long time. And you kind of catch up, and you have community, and you do things together outside the competition. I just talked with one in California. I just talked with one in St. George, Utah. Then there's individuals on the east coast that I'm very good friends with, so you expand globally. Also, I have a very good friend that we've competed together at the Senior Games that lives in Louisville, and he comes up here and we train together sometimes."

Identification as a Senior Athlete

As a result of being involved in serious leisure, participants often reinforced their identities through their activities. As Stebbins (1992) noted, serious leisure participants are likely to identify strongly with their chosen pursuits, a concept supported by comments from several of the participants. Chloe, for instance, explained what the competition meant to her: "The competition is myself, really. Because, really, what I do is I look at my time and I see what I've done, and I always compare it to see how I can improve on it." In a similar vein, Ted said, "I'm athletic and I generally had worked out from the time I was in grade school until now. It's just part of my life. It's nice to have a competition to work toward. It keeps your motivation level up." These statements confirm that participating in the Senior Games provided a valuable social identity to the participants, an identity that was not short-lived or temporary. Their identities as senior athletes were likely to continue after the event, and might entice them to continue to train and, perhaps, look forward to future events.

Discussion

We found in this study that various experiential characteristics associated with participating in the Senior Games were a form of serious leisure. Consistent with Stebbins's (1992) claims, the interview participants demonstrated the central characteristics of serious leisure: perseverance, career development and personal effort, durable benefits, unique ethos, and identity pursuits. We also found that some of the older adults reported that their participation helped them to gain perseverance with regard to pain and injuries. Consistent with Stebbins' (1992) notion, the participants in this study often persevered through these challenges with the expectation of positive outcomes. Although a few of the participants indicated that their activities within the Senior Games were somewhat new to them, these sports facilitated their maintaining an active lifestyle. Competing in the Senior Games also helped the participants develop their careers within the sports. Most of the participants had more than 10 years of experience in their chosen sport, and the maximum experience was 50 years.

Our analysis of the participants' feedback showed that the older adults experienced states of achievement and involvement in their athletic careers. As they reached the later stages of life, they experienced a decline in terms of physical capacity and competitiveness, but were able to cope with it by modifying their levels of involvement. Regardless of their decline in such aspects, it was clear that they invested significant effort toward training and acquiring the skills needed for the competition. Their efforts were often demonstrated by their abilities to set and meet training and competition goals which, in turn, provided them with opportunities for personal growth.

Consistent with results from previous studies suggesting that competition in athletic events provides both personal and social benefits for older adults (Siegenthaler & O'Dell, 2003; Smith & Storandt, 1997), participants in this study also reported various benefits (e.g., enjoyment, social interaction, self-actualization) associated with the Senior Games. Participating in the Games allowed them to experience self-enrichment, social belongingness, and enhancement of self-image. Many of the participants agreed that social belonging and interactions were the central reasons they participated in the Senior Games. For example, their participation was heavily associated with social networks. Participating in the Senior Games was not only an important outlet for releasing stress and maintaining a healthy condition, but also was a way to interact with other individuals within their age brackets.

As Stebbins (1997) indicated, individuals involved in serious leisure develop a unique ethos or subculture as well as a distinctive social world around the activity. For some of the participants in this study, their identities as senior athletes were important because they could make this importance known to others.

The participants sought opportunities to become involved in the Senior Games because their participation enhanced their sense of self. Being a senior athlete was an important part of who they were, and it helped to form their identities. For instance, when we met with Jill, she wore a jacket that contained a number of logos and patches from various running events. She also brought medals and photos from the events in which she had participated. Another participant, Aaron, wore a cycling T-shirt to the interview, which demonstrated participation in a past event. From the information gathered in the interviews, it is clear that the participants' identities as senior athletes were a central component of their daily lives.

Previous research on runners showed that the significance of their serious leisure identities decreased after an event was completed because of family and work commitments (Shipway & Jones, 2007). In our case, it was apparent that senior athletes' identities were sustained after the event. Becoming a core devotee to the Senior Games would include consistent training, keeping track of competitors, and developing skills (Stebbins, 2007). These activities might continuously provide mental and physical stimulation to older adults (Wann, Rogers, Dooley, & Foley, 2011). Therefore, self-identifying as a senior athlete might contribute to maintaining high cognitive and physical functions, which is one of the components of successful aging.

Our results confirmed Stebbins' (1992) serious leisure framework, which suggests that positive relationships exist between depth of involvement and well-being of older adults. Promoting participation in the Senior Games can be a new but effective strategy for bolstering healthy lifestyles. Although the number of participants in the Games has significantly increased, and the National Senior Games have grown to become one of the largest multisport events in the world (National Senior Games Association, 2012), many older adults might not be aware of the opportunities available with regard to participation in such an event. One participant in our study (age 54) indicated that he first started to compete in the event out of curiosity and became more involved afterward. He also noted that it was a coincidence that he learned about the event, because he saw a small advertisement in a local newspaper about the Senior Games a couple of days before the event.

We suggest that a more promotional effort be undertaken among local senior and community centers to reach out to potential participants, because these types of organizations typically offer various athletic activities for older adults. Considering the identity of the Senior Games participants as athletes, advertising in sports-specific magazines might also attract the attention of potential participants. Because the Internet is widely used by older adults, online marketing and social network services might also be effective advertising tools.

In addition, participants in the Senior Games tend to be homogeneous with regard to socioeconomic status (a high percentage of Whites and individuals with high education levels). Considering the numerous personal and social benefits of participating in the Senior Games, we suggest that the organizers should endeavor to approach underrepresented and underserved populations. One way of facilitating this is to diversify the media coverage promotions and attempt to visually involve various ethnic groups. Sending direct information to minority group associations might be another avenue to be pursued. Advertising through community centers and social workers might help reach individuals with a wider range of educational backgrounds.

Serious leisure participation can add significant value to the lives of older adults with respect to positive outcomes such as a sense of achievement, personal growth, personal and social benefits, and social

belonging and interactions. As our findings show, pursuing serious leisure in the form of Senior Games participation contributes to successful aging and, consequently, a quality society.

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