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The Active-Agers: Fit, Fighting and Flying

There is something about the energy and enthusiasm with which Britain's pensioners are embracing old age that makes many middle aged people look positively lazy. The talk of the town at the moment in London is pensioners' playgrounds, lessons in self-defence with a cane, and the "saganaut" syndrome.

The fact that many pensioners carry a walking stick makes them look harmless and vulnerable. But according to Judo and karate black belt Kevin Garwood, they are in fact carrying a potentially useful weapon. Garwood, a martial arts expert has set up a series of special walking stick self-defence classes teaching how to transform the cane from a symbol of old age or disability into a weapon to boost self-confidence. "What I am not trying to do" says Garwood "is make grey-haired ninjas or have people twitching and always looking over their shoulders. What it does is give them tremendous confidence."

His class typically starts with a warm-up, focusing on gentle movements of the hands, wrists, arms and bodies and then it goes on to techniques in turning and twirling the stick. His pupils also learn simple strangleholds, arm locks and throws, using their walking sticks. "We don't teach lots of complicated techniques. It's basic stuff, stuff you can remember," he says, and proudly tells of a recent case where an elderly woman in Yarmouth fought off two attackers who grabbed her arm and her handbag. Garwood who is 58 has even taken a lesson out of his own book, "Now I always carry a walking stick, even though I don't need one to help me walk."

Another idea to boost pensioners' confidence and fitness is coming from a so-called "pensioners' playgrounds". It looks in fact just like any other playground, and is officially called an "Older People's Play Area". The first in Britain at Dam Head Park, in north Manchester, has been designed exclusively for the over-60s and is made up of six pieces of equipment designed specifically to provide gentle tailor-made exercise for the elderly. The motto of the organisers, the Dam Head Residents Association is "We don't ever give up", and the equipment includes The Massage (upper body exercise), The Skate (trains leg muscles), The Ski (trains hips), The Press (trains stomach and legs), and two stations for

standing push ups and leg pedalling. Some of the equipment is even accessible to wheelchair users.

The facility which cost around £15,000 is meant to provide exercise as well as fun, hence the slogan there stating "Never too old to play". One 74 year old local who tested it out said: "It makes you feel 21 again. It makes you feel good and gives you a real buzz."

Meanwhile the playground has created a buzz of its own, with rumours of more being built across the country, and opening up great sponsorship potential for companies targeting the "silver pound".

With all this new found energy and fitness it is no wonder that modern day oldies are also turning to travel, and fuelling the explosion of the "grey pound" tourism. These new oldies with a predilection for educational travel have been dubbed the "saganauts". According to Voyager magazine, "people over 65 are increasingly choosing to spend their time and money on travel, and are not just visiting the traditional resorts". Surprisingly many are opting for independent travel to out-of-the-way places – competing with the young backpackers. As one journalist said, "it won't soon be unusual to see a pensioner with a large rucksack and a sturdy cane heading off into the sunset for an adventure."