

Chapter 1: The Lie You Were Taught About Power

What the Senior Participation Numbers Actually Show About Who Keeps Winning Past 65

You lost to a man who looked twelve years older than you last Tuesday. He barely moved. He didn't need to. His serve landed deep and heavy, over and over, while yours floated short enough for him to step in and take it early. You walked off the court telling yourself the same story you've told for three years now: he's just built different, or he got lucky, or your body simply isn't what it used to be.

None of that is true, and the numbers back this up.

Players aged **65 and up** were the fastest-growing adult segment in U.S. tennis in 2025, adding roughly **299,000 new participants** — a 14% jump in a single year¹.

Read that again. Not the fastest-declining group. The fastest-growing. Tennis overall hit a record 27.3 million players in the U.S. in 2025, up 54% since 2019¹. That growth isn't happening despite older players quitting — it's happening because older players are showing up in bigger numbers than almost anyone else on the court. Some of them are beginners. Many of them are men exactly like you, who never stopped playing and are now hitting serves that hold up against players decades younger.

So if age itself isn't the disqualifying factor, something else explains why one sixty-eight-year-old is dictating points and another is chasing short balls into the fence. That something is technique, not biology. And the technique gap traces back further than you think — probably to a lesson you took forty or fifty years ago.

The Arm-Push Habit a Young Coach Installed in You Decades Ago

Somewhere back in the 1970s or 80s, a coach half your current age stood behind you on a hard court and said some version of "hit up and through the ball, get your arm extended, push it deep." It sounded right. It felt powerful in your twenties, when your shoulder had elasticity to burn and your arm could brute-force a serve into the box a thousand times a week without complaint.

That instruction was never really about your legs or your hips. It was about your arm doing the work, because at twenty-five, your arm could handle it.

Here's the part nobody told you: **that model was built for a body you no longer have, teaching a motion your body was never actually meant to sustain.**

Physical therapists who work with aging athletes say this directly. "Most of the power in your serve is actually generated from the legs and hips, so proper technique should engage your entire body rather than relying solely on shoulder strength," according to EW Motion Therapy (2025-01-01). That's not a modern training fad. It's how the serve was always supposed to work — you just never got taught it that way, because the coach who taught you was working from a script that treated your arm as the engine instead of the transmission.

I felt this myself two summers ago. My shoulder had started aching by the third game of every set, and I assumed it was simply what seventy looks like. I'd spent decades pushing the ball with my arm, the exact way I was taught in 1978, and I'd never once questioned whether the instruction itself was the problem. It wasn't until I traced the motion back to its source — legs, hips, then arm, in that order — that the ache started making sense as a mechanical error, not an inevitable decline.

This matters because the arm-push habit doesn't just cost you pace. It quietly transfers stress to a joint that was never built to absorb it alone.

As players age, they tend to lose rotation and extension in the spine — and often compensate by loading extra stress onto the shoulder during the serve, raising injury risk with every service game³.

"As you age, you'll likely lose rotation and extension in your spine, and you might load more pressure onto your shoulder to make up for that loss as you serve — inviting injury," notes The Jackson Clinics, a physical therapy practice that treats aging tennis players regularly (2025-01-01). Your spine stopped giving you the rotation it once did. Nobody handed you a new serve model to compensate. So your shoulder quietly stepped in to cover the gap, game after game, year after year, until it started announcing itself before warm-up even ends.

The Exact Moment in Your Toss Where Your Shoulder Quietly Gives Up

Here is where the damage actually happens, and it's earlier in the motion than you'd guess.

It's not at contact. It's not in the follow-through. It's in the fraction of a second right after your toss leaves your hand, when your body has to decide how to get your racket up to that ball. If your legs and hips aren't already loading — if your knees haven't bent and your hips haven't started to turn — your shoulder has exactly one option left: yank the arm upward on its own, cold, unassisted, to make up for the power the lower body should have already supplied.

That's the moment. Not a dramatic collapse. A quiet substitution, repeated on every single serve, for years.

- ✓ Stand in your serve stance right now, no ball, no racket.
- ✓ Toss an imaginary ball and freeze the instant it leaves your hand.
- ✓ Check: are your knees already bending? Are your hips already turning?
- ✓ If both are still frozen at that instant, your shoulder is about to do a leg's job.

This single substitution explains more about your game than age ever will. It explains why your serve feels labored by the third game. It explains why a shoulder with real mileage on it aches before you've even broken a sweat. And it explains why the smaller, older man across the net — the one who beat you Tuesday — isn't straining for pace, because his legs are already supplying it before his arm ever gets involved.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- ▶ Senior participation in tennis is surging, not shrinking — 65-and-up players are the fastest-growing adult segment in the sport, which means decline isn't inevitable¹.
- ▶ The "arm-push" serve you were taught decades ago was built for a younger shoulder and was never mechanically correct to begin with.
- ▶ Real serve power comes from legs and hips first, arm last — not the reverse.
- ▶ Age-related loss of spinal rotation forces many players to unconsciously overload the shoulder to compensate.
- ▶ The exact failure point is the instant after your toss releases: if your legs and hips haven't already started loading, your shoulder is forced to do work it was never designed to carry alone.

You now know where the failure happens. What you don't yet know is where this exact fix already existed, decades before your own coach ever stepped onto a court — a method buried so thoroughly that most instructors today have never heard of it.