



SOCCER AT A STROLL

Given up 'the beautiful game' in your twenties, thirties or forties? Think again. **David Hughes** reports on walking football

FUNNILY ENOUGH, it was a TV ad to promote sitting in front of a computer that motivated thousands of 50-plus British men (and women) to get off the sofa and on to playing fields and sports centres.

Back in 2014, fifty-something sports development officer Steve Rich approached Barclays Bank for advice about how to promote his walking football team on Facebook. Barclays' Digital Eagles service helps older people, in particular, to get the most out of the internet, including online banking. The bank seized the promotional opportunity, arranging a jaw-dropping experience for Steve to play an all-star walking football match with retired legends of the game including Sir Geoff Hurst and Alan Shearer, all duly filmed

and broadcast on Sky TV. With more than five million viewers on Sky and YouTube, the ad, together with a follow-up, no doubt assisted the Digital Eagles service – but it was also a huge boost for walking football.

All over the UK, thousands of former footballers in their fifties, sixties – and older

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Sports development officer Steve Rich

– ditched golf clubs and hauled their boots out of the attic. Steve Rich's Walking Football United directory now lists more than 600 clubs, with more affiliated to the Football Association.

Walking football has been found

beneficial for dementia and mental health problems, and is fast becoming a staple offering at sports centres all over the country. Nor is there the traditional risk of injury.

Forget about bone-crunching tackles, and, for that matter, running. Walking football does what it says on the tin. “One foot must remain on the ground at all times, during the course of a stride,” says Steve.

Walking speeds vary, of course, and different teams and leagues for over-fifties and over-sixties cater for that, but the skills element is still very much there.

“It's pass and movement,” explains Steve. “You don't need to tackle people; all the better teams, and the current champions, just pass the ball around. It's almost just a one or two-touch.”

Standardising rules

While rules are still being standardised, both for FA-affiliated teams and those listed in Steve Rich's Walking Football United directory, the safety trend has been from minimal contact to non-contact, a broadly popular outcome.

Setting international standards may take a little longer. “One of our lads has just come back from the Almelo Cup in Holland, and they don't have goalkeepers. You're not allowed to handle the ball,” says Ian Edmondson, 68, secretary of Chesterfield's Senior Spireites, one of the earliest walking football teams in the UK. “They also don't allow the ball to go more than waist high, which is crazy in my book!”

Ian is delighted with the growing popularity of football's slower version, but advises newcomers to acclimatise gently. “I always say, take it easy to begin with, don't try and keep up with people who've been doing it for two or three years – you can easily pull a muscle. When I started, I was reasonably fit, but I was stretching for balls that I couldn't really reach.”

Some newcomers to walking football are regular exercisers, while others are fresh off the sofa, but all can benefit, says Ian.

“You can see those who haven't done anything improve week by week if they keep coming. Their skills improve, their fitness improves. It's definitely beneficial as long as you're prepared to take it easy.”

The benefits, he says, are both physical and mental. “It improves your mental health, and also improves your physical



health and fitness. Our oldest member is 77, and used to have problems with diabetes and blood; since he's been doing walking football, he says he doesn't have problems any more. And he's got a replacement knee, as well!”

Steve Rich has also noticed a wide range of physical health gains among those flocking to walking football.

“People are losing weight, getting active; and then they think, I'm a lot fitter, perhaps I'll go down the gym, or go jogging. It's a real knock-on effect. And they've said how much their life improves just from going to walking football.

“That's the physical side – losing weight, gaining muscle strength, and co-ordination. It's good cardio – people think, oh, walking football, but it's quite intense, and you get a sweat on very early.”

Social gains

However, there's also the social side to the game.

“That's not so much talked about, but it's equally important,” insists Steve.

“Guys who might be leading a sedentary lifestyle, they're getting some



exercise, and the banter's coming back. That's the joy of the game, you're ribbing people, going for a drink afterwards, friendships are being formed.

“The more I think about it, the more I would say that probably the social side of it is the bigger positive.”

Ian Edmondson would agree.

“The big thing in our club is the camaraderie,” he says. “You're meeting new people, making friends, socialising while you're playing and afterwards. Friendships have been struck up which are pretty solid now.”

He is full of praise for the work of Lauren Mellor at Derbyshire FA, who has set up non-competitive walking football festivals where people can come along and sample the sport.

“The festival programme is focused on bringing groups together, it's a chance for people to meet each other and have that social side,” explains Lauren, who has also organised regular walking football sessions at local sports centres – there are now more than 28 weekly turn-up-and-play sessions around the county.

“The sessions are not age or gender-specific,” she says, “but we do have opportunities for over-60s, and over-65s. And we've started a female-only session. We want there to be opportunities for everyone.”

Other local FAs are also promoting walking football sessions, and the sport is growing by leaps and bounds.

“When I joined, there were just two or three a side for our games,” remembers Ian. “Now we have 50 members, and the club is moving to a venue which has four pitches.”

“The guys in our club are so pleased to be able to do this. When you were younger, you never really thought of playing football at our age!”

Find out more

- Walking Football United – local clubs, festivals, national tournament, website: (www.walkingfootballunited.co.uk)
- Derbyshire FA – clubs, local sessions, festivals, website: (www.derbyshirefa.com/players/walking-football)
- Check your local FA site for events in your area.