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Experiences influencing walking football initiation in 55-75 year-old adults

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## Abstract

Adults aged 55+ are least likely to play sport. Despite research suggesting this population experiences physical and psychological benefits when doing so, limited research focuses on older adult sport initiation, especially in 'adapted sports' such as walking football. The aim of this study was to explore initiation experiences of walking football players between 55-75 years old. Semi-structured interviews took place with 17 older adults playing walking football for six months minimum (mean age = 64). Inductive analysis revealed six higher-order themes representing pre-initiation influences. Eight further higher-order themes were found, relating to positive and negative experiences during initiation. Fundamental influences pre-initiation included previous sporting experiences and values and perceptions. Emergent positive experiences during initiation included mental development and social connections. Findings highlight important individual and social influences when initiating walking football, which should be considered when encouraging 55-75 year-old adults to play adapted sport. Policy and practice recommendations are discussed.

*Keywords:* older adults, walking football, behavioural determinants, initiation, qualitative methods, interviews

## Experiences influencing walking football initiation in 55-75 year-old adults

The impact of inactivity and sedentary (i.e. long periods of sitting or lying down) lifestyles on physical health in a general population has been well-documented. Sedentary populations are suggested to be at higher risk of non-communicable diseases (Lee et al., 2012), and sedentary lifestyles within older adulthood can contribute towards a higher risk of all-cause mortality (Rezende, Rey-López, Matsudo, & do Carmo Luiz, 2014), and decreased levels of mental health (Gomes et al., 2017).

In the United Kingdom (UK), more people are reaching older adulthood, with those reaching 65 years and older projected to form a quarter of the population by 2046 (Randall, 2017). Despite life expectancy of the UK population increasing, 42% of adults over 55 are less likely to take part in physical activity (PA), compared to 29% of those aged between 16-55 years old (Sport England, 2016). Sport participation or 'SP' is defined by Fraser-Thomas and colleagues (2017) as “activities which involve training or competition with some level of physical intensity or organisation” (p.175). SP in particular has been found to have the biggest decline over the lifespan, compared with those undertaking PA and those motivated to increase activity levels (McPhee et al., 2016). Age-related conditions such as dementia and stroke increase when reaching older adulthood (Age UK, 2018), placing more pressure on health systems and services (Bauman, Merom, Bull, Buchner, & Fiatarone Singh, 2016). Additionally, research has found difference in inactivity between those living in high and low-income households in the UK, with those holding lower socioeconomic status (SES) more inactive than higher socioeconomic status counterparts, also highlighting the positive relationship of SES on types of PA, especially leisure time PA (Stalsberg & Pedersen, 2018). Additionally, this inactivity gap also increases from early adult life up until approximately age 85, showing the largest differences in a population which is 10 years post-statutory

1 retirement age (Farrell, Hollingsworth, Propper, & Shields, 2014). Healthy ageing has been  
2 defined as “the process of developing and maintaining the functional ability that enables  
3 well-being in older age” (World Health Organization, 2015). By investigating the influencing  
4 physical, mental and socioeconomic factors on behaviours of active older adults, further  
5 understanding can be achieved regarding how active lifestyles in older age can promote not  
6 only healthy aging from a physical perspective (McPhee et al., 2016), but also gain valuable  
7 insight into the psychological aspects of active lifestyles at this stage of life, in order to  
8 influence suitable practice and policy (Gutiérrez, Calatayud, & Tomás, 2018).

9         Despite declining levels of older adults meeting recommended levels of PA, research  
10 highlights multiple physiological and psychological benefits to taking part in PA in older  
11 adulthood, such as lower risk of cardiovascular disease and increased memory performance  
12 (Earnest et al., 2013; Chapman et al., 2013). Research suggests added behavioural and  
13 psychological outcomes for older adults participating in sport, and many countries are  
14 utilising sport as a way of engaging older adults in PA in later life (Sport England, 2016).  
15 Older adults playing organised sport reported having reduced sedentary behaviour (SB)  
16 compared to those taking part in PA conducted in leisure-time, such as walking (Fraser-  
17 Thomas et al., 2017). Additional research suggests SP can have positive psychological  
18 impact, with cognitively-demanding sports, such as football, increasing cognitive flexibility  
19 in older adults (Pesce & Audiffren, 2011), alongside sports such as tennis decreasing delays  
20 in visuomotor skills (Lobjois, Benguigui, & Bertsch, 2006). Qualitative research also  
21 suggests competition associated with SP can help older adults accept aging processes and  
22 functional limits, and provide opportunity for development in later life (Dionigi, Fraser-  
23 Thomas, Stone, & Gayman, 2017; Dionigi, Horton, & Baker, 2011). Nevertheless, some  
24 themes, such as negotiating the aging process (namely the avoidance of old age) and  
25 competition in mainstream sport, have also been presented as challenges for some older

1 adults (Dionigi et al., 2011). This highlights some negative aspects to mainstream sport and a  
2 need for further research exploring different narratives of those experiencing older age.  
3 Much of the literature has been conducted with vast age ranges, spanning from 55 years old  
4 (young-old) to advanced old age (80+). Due to the variability in both physicality and  
5 cognition between young-old adults and those reaching advanced age (Baltes & Smith,  
6 2003), research focusing on specific age ranges within the larger bracket of older adulthood  
7 may provide enhanced understanding concerning SP experiences of older adults, allowing for  
8 the tailoring of sport to suit specific ages (McPhee et al., 2016). As significant differences are  
9 seen in physical activity levels from the age of 55 years old (Sport England, 2016), research  
10 within the specific 'young-old' age range is warranted, exploring experiences of those in this  
11 age bracket.

12         In order to tailor sport for older adults, understanding how best to first engage this  
13 population in sport is important to increase their likelihood to initiate change. Physical  
14 activity initiation is considered as "the period in which people start being more physically  
15 active" (van Stralen, de Vries, Mudde, Bolman, & Lechner, 2009), and has been defined as  
16 the period from the initial adoption up to six to eight months after the adoption of the  
17 behaviour (Lally, Van Jaarsveld, Potts, & Wardle, 2010). Initiation of lifestyle behaviours are  
18 important to explore, as many influences and determinants at this stage of taking up a new  
19 behaviour have also been found within maintenance of the specified behaviour, such as  
20 planning and social support (van Stralen et al., 2010). Additionally, Van Stralen and  
21 colleagues' research (2010) highlights the discrepancy between some determinants of  
22 initiation and maintenance, such as perceived access to facilities and goal setting. As long  
23 term health benefits of PA and sport are seen when committing to activities for an extended  
24 period of time (Laitakari, Vuori, & Oja, 1996), it is important to understand underlying

1 influences and determinants of PA behaviours prior to maintenance, and whether these are  
2 likely to differ from the experience of maintenance within sport participation.

3         Research has previously explored determinants to participation in mainstream SP in  
4 older adults. Jenkin and colleagues' (Jenkin, Eime, Westerbeek, O'Sullivan, & Van Uffelen,  
5 2017) systematic review reported themes such as SP over the lifespan and the state of  
6 physical health influencing SP in older aged adults over the age of 50 years old. In later  
7 qualitative research, Jenkin, Eime, Westerbeek and van Uffelen (2018) reported further  
8 benefits to SP in older age with Australian residents, such as increases in social health and  
9 opportunities to play with younger generations. This also included barriers, for example  
10 limited playing opportunities available for older adults, and a lack of awareness concerning  
11 available sporting programmes. This research suggests older adults can face intrapersonal and  
12 interpersonal deterrents when considering SP, and dropout may be due to a multitude of  
13 barriers, some of which may not be attributed to purely a lack of interest or motivation, such  
14 as a shortage of playing opportunities (Jenkin et al., 2018). However, as many participants  
15 within Jenkin and colleagues' research (2018) highlighted the lack of general sporting  
16 opportunities when reaching older age, future research is needed to better understand sports  
17 that are inclusive to older adults, and investigate determinants and barriers within this field of  
18 sport.

19         There are emerging 'adapted' sports, defined as activities that are directed at those  
20 "who require adaptation for participation in the context of physical activity" (Carrier,  
21 Mainguet, & Delevoye-Turrell, 2016, p.351). Other mainstream sports such as golf, where  
22 play is adapted based on a player's ability, has been found to attract long-term participation  
23 amongst older adults (Stenner, Mosewich, & Buckley, 2016). Sporting bodies state that  
24 adapted sports, such as walking football, can help with staying active, making friends and  
25 regaining mobility (The FA, 2018a).

1 Previous research has begun to uncover the benefits of walking football (walking  
2 soccer), an adapted form of mainstream football which is played at walking pace and  
3 provides rules which encourage minimal contact (The FA, 2018b). Walking football is  
4 experiencing large growth in participation within the UK, with approximately 1200 registered  
5 clubs in the UK (Walking Football Association, 2018). Research concerning the physical  
6 benefits of walking football has been conducted in general populations (Arnold, Bruce-Low,  
7 Sammut, & Arnold, 2015; Reddy et al., 2017) and also with those living with mental health  
8 conditions (Lamont, Harris, McDonald, Kerin, & Dickens, 2017). Results found physical  
9 changes such as significantly lower body fat mass ( $p < 0.05$ ) (Arnold et al., 2015) after 12-  
10 week interventions with adult participants aged over 50 years of age, suggesting physical  
11 improvements from participation in walking football. Additional qualitative research within  
12 these studies highlighted emergent psychological benefits to a general population playing  
13 walking football specifically, such as building social connections and improving confidence  
14 (Reddy et al., 2017). However, as populations included in previous literature span a large age  
15 range, future research may benefit from exploring the impact of walking football within  
16 specific age ranges, such as a young-old (55-75 year old) population. Additionally, within the  
17 research focusing on walking football, the majority of participants identified as male (Reddy  
18 et al., 2017; Lamont et al., 2017). Future research recommendations, such as discerning  
19 previous sporting experience within reported results and investigating the impact of walking  
20 football on women, have been suggested (Reddy et al., 2017).

21 Many governing and sporting bodies in the UK (Sport England, 2016) are currently  
22 seeking to understand how to retain participation in PA and SP into older age, due to the  
23 holistic benefits these activities provide to those in a young-old (55-75 year old) population.  
24 Whilst maintenance of PA and SP behaviour is arguably important to investigate, initiation is  
25 important to understand prior to this, due to the similarities in influences found between PA



1 initiation and maintenance, before promoting long-lasting PA in this age group. There is a  
2 need for research exploring initiation in newer, inclusive sports for older adults, such as  
3 walking football. Understanding how older age groups experience the uptake of walking  
4 football could inform promotion of walking football within this population, and may help  
5 prevent decline of SP in older age. The aim of this study was to identify determinants and  
6 experiences of walking football initiation in young-old adults (55-75 years old) maintaining  
7 walking football play over six months.

## 8 **Methods**

### 9 **Research Paradigm**

10 For the purposes of this study a pragmatist approach was adopted, which emphasises  
11 the research methods being driven by the research question (Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2005,  
12 p.377) and an onus on the research being useful and practical. As this research was  
13 exploratory, and limited research has been conducted to understand experiences of walking  
14 football initiation in young-old adults, qualitative enquiry was used to address the research  
15 aims. The study design was guided by a key principle underpinning phenomenological  
16 research, which centred on the researchers aiming to understand phenomena from  
17 perspectives of those involved in such experiences (Groenewald, 2004).

### 18 **Participants**

19 The study targeted a sample of players from different walking football clubs across  
20 the UK. Participants were screened prior to interviewing according to the inclusion criteria  
21 and a further demographic questionnaire being administered. Inclusion criteria stipulated  
22 participants fall within the young-old bracket of 55-75 years of age (Neugarten, 1974).  
23 Participants were required to have taken part in walking football for six months or longer, in  
24 order to understand experiences of those that had satisfied the minimum term of initiation, in  
25 line with previous research (Lally et al., 2010; van Stralen et al., 2009). The recruitment

1 strategy targeted participants from a range of organised walking sports clubs across the UK.

2 Participant recruitment took place via local football clubs and social media.

### 3 **Interview Guide Design**

4 Interview guide questions were developed taking into consideration the aims of the  
5 study, alongside previous research within the field (Dionigi et al., 2011; Heo, Culp, Yamada,  
6 & Won, 2013). The interview guide for this study was based on a review of previous  
7 literature and used semi-structured, open questions. Interview guide questions addressed  
8 areas such as what influenced players to take up the sport, whether any life events influenced  
9 initiation and who, if anyone, influenced initiation. Example questions from the interview  
10 included; *'Prior to playing walking football, can you tell me about your involvement in any*  
11 *sports at a younger age?'*, *'Can you expand on what was going on in your life around the*  
12 *time you took up walking football?'*, and *'What or who influenced your choice of sport?'*.

13 Further questioning included specific questioning on added benefits the participant  
14 experienced during walking football, for example *'What do you feel you get from playing*  
15 *walking football than, for example, simply going for a walk or run?'*. Additional probing and  
16 follow-up questions (Roulston, 2012) were added to the interview guide, in order to attribute  
17 meaning to answers and assist with recall, in line with previous PA research and guidelines  
18 (McKenna, Foster, & Page, 2004; Wenger, 2011). These included *'How did they [influencer*  
19 *of sport participation] encourage you?'* and *'What did they do or say?'*. Prior to data  
20 collection, a pilot interview was conducted with an older-aged adult with a history of playing  
21 sport. The pilot interview highlighted administrative changes to the logistical aspects to the  
22 study, for example rewording of certain language when asking interview questions.

### 23 **Procedure**

24 Ethics approval was obtained from the University's Research Ethics Committee (May  
25 2018). The interviews took place one-to-one with participant and researcher in the format of

1 face-to-face and telephone interviews and were recorded using a digital sound recorder.  
2 Telephone interviews were pragmatically chosen by the research team, in order to reach  
3 participants from further locations and collect data from a gender-balanced sample. Prior to  
4 interviewing, players received an information sheet and a participant consent form, where  
5 informed consent was confirmed via writing or recorded verbal consent, in the case of  
6 telephone interviews. Players were asked the location of their club, and also completed a  
7 brief questionnaire pre-interview, allowing for the researcher to obtain further demographic  
8 information from the participants (age, gender, sporting experience and time playing walking  
9 football). Club locations have not been disclosed in order to protect participant privacy.  
10 Participants were also offered the opportunity to fill out a lifegrid in order to help improve  
11 recall (Parry, Thomson, & Fowkes, 1999), however no lifegrid responses from participants  
12 were submitted. The mean interview time lasted 37 minutes. Where possible, notes and  
13 'memoing' was used by the researcher alongside the interviews taking place, so to collect any  
14 notes and reflections on the interview which may be useful, but not evident in the interview  
15 transcripts (Miles & Huberman, 1994). After the interview questions were asked, participants  
16 were debriefed and offered the chance to email or contact the researcher regarding the study  
17 or provide any information they had not discussed within the interview.

## 18 **Data Analysis**

19 Interviews were transcribed verbatim and personal details were removed from  
20 transcripts to protect participant anonymity. Member checks were offered to players to  
21 confirm participant experiences (Birt, Scott, Cavers, Campbell, & Walter, 2016). Five players  
22 confirmed review of their transcripts. Once all data was transcribed, transcripts were read  
23 multiple times until the content was familiar to the researcher and allowed for immersion in  
24 the research (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

1 An inductive thematic approach was implemented when coding raw data, as  
2 experiences of initiation in walking sports has not been previously researched extensively,  
3 and the authors aimed to allow the research findings and theory to develop from the  
4 significant themes in the raw data collected (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Thomas, 2006). Peer  
5 consultation of the data took place with two separate peers within the field of behaviour  
6 change and sport and exercise psychology. Peers independently read through transcripts and  
7 codes determined by the initial researcher were checked accordingly. Where any coding  
8 differences occurred, this was resolved through discussion and alteration of the codes. After  
9 analysis of 15 interviews, new codes started to emerge less frequently and data saturation  
10 within the participant group was close to being reached (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006).  
11 Two further interview transcripts were then analysed and saturation was confirmed (Patton,  
12 2002). Further analysis of the data identified varied experiences of participation before and  
13 during walking football initiation, also highlighting positive and negative experiences.  
14 Additional discussion of the themes and subthemes took place with colleagues within the  
15 research team in order to reach consensus of the raw data themes, sub themes and higher  
16 order themes, to maintain analytic rigour (Tracy, 2010).

## 17 **Results**

### 18 **Sample Characteristics**

19 Players were aged between 55 and 71 years ( $M^{age} = 64$  years). Overall, 17 players in total  
20 were interviewed for the study. Nine participants interviewed were male and eight  
21 participants were female. The majority of participants interviewed had been taking part in  
22 walking football for less than two years at time of interviewing ( $n=11$ ), with five participants  
23 taking part between two and five years, and one participant taking part in walking football for  
24 over five years. All but two participants ( $n=15$ ) had over ten years of experience participating  
25 in sport across the lifespan, with two of the female participants having two to five years of

1 sporting experience. Participants interviewed were from a range of clubs from different  
2 deprivation areas according to the English indices of deprivation (Department for  
3 Communities and Local Government, 2015) and Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation  
4 (Scottish Government, 2016), gaining perspectives of participants across different  
5 socioeconomic backgrounds. Five participants interviewed played at a club located in an area  
6 containing the 20% least deprived population in the UK, five participants from a club located  
7 within the bracket of 40% most deprived UK population, and seven participants from a club  
8 located within the bracket of the 20% most deprived UK population.

### 9 **Identified Themes**

10 A total of 128 raw-data themes emerged from the analysis of the data. Further  
11 analyses of the raw-data themes revealed six higher-order and eight lower-order themes that  
12 collectively represented the influences involved in walking football initiation before  
13 participation. Eight higher order and ten lower order themes representing the influences  
14 involved in walking football initiation during participation were also revealed, under global  
15 dimensions of positive and negative experiences. A breakdown of the higher-order, lower-  
16 order and raw data themes are seen in Figures 1 and 2. Each of the higher order categories  
17 will be explained in detail below and where subtle differences arose between genders; these  
18 have been noted within the relevant theme. Within the figures provided, the gender split of  
19 each raw data theme has been recorded (e.g. 4/4, male to female respectively). Verbatim  
20 quotes are provided to demonstrate themes and are labelled with a participant pseudonym,  
21 gender (e.g., M = male / F = female) and participant age (e.g. 71).

### 22 **Influences Involved in Walking Football Initiation Before Participation**

23 Higher order themes relating to walking football initiation before participation were  
24 values and perceptions, PA and sporting experience, life events, awareness of walking  
25 football, self-efficacy and factors delaying participation.

1           **Values and perceptions.** This higher-order category consisted of two lower-order  
 2 themes: health values (e.g. knowledge of health benefits) and sport-specific values (e.g.  
 3 holding a strong sporting identity, valuing lifelong sport participation). In many interviews,  
 4 health and sport-specific values were given equal value, with some players feeling they  
 5 benefitted from both simple physical activity and specific sporting activities,

6           I think the running, playing sport and running benefitted me massively. And in fact  
 7 walking is important I do a lot, as much walking as I can do now, because physical  
 8 exercise is key I think to maintaining a decent uh, decent health (Michael, M, 71)

9           Around half the players interviewed identified as a 'sporty' person and lifelong participation  
 10 in a sport was valued and discussed as an important positive influence on participation,

11           I think you know, if you're a sporty person you just love sport, and you just want to  
 12 carry on as long as you, as you possibly can. Um, I go along mainly to keep fit, to  
 13 keep the weight down (Mary, F, 64)

14           Additionally, a number of participants, a majority of these attending a club from the 20%  
 15 least deprived areas, shared experiences of being mindful of their sport and physical activity  
 16 relapse:

17           Yeah, and maybe if we are getting deep, maybe there's a big regret in the gap where  
 18 I didn't play, and I mentioned earlier where I said if anyone talks about football and  
 19 they're thinking packing it in I'll say carry on while ever your legs are carrying, you  
 20 carry on, cause I didn't. (Simon, M, 63)

21           **PA and sporting experience.** This higher order theme explores the prior experiences  
 22 players had of both PA and sport. The vast majority of players (94%) had positive childhood,  
 23 or mid-life sporting experiences (e.g. a work football culture) with many players recounting  
 24 fond memories of playing football or team sport:

25           Yeah, I was, cross country and things like that at school, uh I did have an operation...

1 after that I carried on playing football, carried on cross country, sports days were  
2 great at school, I left and I played football for a number of um, pub teams shall we  
3 call them, work teams, uh, managed to get, had a season in the county senior league  
4 so I thought I weren't bad [laughs] um, and I enjoyed it. (Simon, M, 63)

5 Previous involvement tended to be in team sports, which influenced initiation in walking  
6 football, as some players felt the games were similar to one another. One player recounted:

7 I loved hockey and I loved tennis. Um, and I think for me, because obviously hockey  
8 you play with a stick, but to me the um, the reason I like football is that it's almost the  
9 same as hockey (Irene, F, 66)

10 **Life events.** Over two thirds of players discussed life events as having an influence on  
11 initiating walking football. A physical injury or health condition was the most reported life  
12 event to influence initiation, with players experiencing a forced transition from one higher  
13 intensity/higher impact sport to walking football. As one player notes, the reason for  
14 participation in walking football was injury. "I was always hoping to go back to 5 a side but  
15 I'd got injured as I said about 5 and a half years ago and I now believe it's a back injury,  
16 affecting my hips" (Jack, M, 61). However for players that had retired, the life event of  
17 retirement had encouraged positive PA change, and the need to replace work with other  
18 hobbies:

19 Just totally linked to stopping work then looking for other things to do... I booked  
20 myself a few golf lessons as well...and I think you know, you indulge your hobbies.  
21 So it's thinking what to do when after stopping working full on, five days a week or  
22 probably more, taking work home at weekends, to thinking to yourself right, what am  
23 I going to be doing now that I'm not working anymore (George, M, 64)

24 **Walking football awareness.** Awareness of walking football as a sport was discussed  
25 by many players, and lower-order themes included media exposure and social prompts. For

1 many players, media outlets were participants' routes to an awareness of the game.  
2 Awareness through media outlets was in some cases linked to awareness through social  
3 connections:

4 And in there, was a little half page article by [club organiser], about [Walking  
5 Football club]... With a link to the website, um, and [friend] and whatever triggered  
6 the thought in your brain, was sort of like, oh, you know what, so I took the piece  
7 down to [friend] and said what do you think to this, shall we give it a go? "Yeah, let's  
8 go up" (Jonathan, M, 62)

9 In a few cases, predominantly within those attending clubs with a higher deprivation score,  
10 awareness through PA facilities and local football clubs was an influence for players, with  
11 some players encouraged to play walking football with the programmes offered by the local  
12 football club they support. One player also recounted seeing the version of the game being  
13 played at a local club:

14 Did see a little example of it uh, on half time at some [football club] match you know,  
15 or [football club] playing walking football or something, uh, so that's you know that's  
16 what I did know of playing walking football (Jeffrey, M, 71)

17 As well as retirement and health conditions, around half of the players reported that having a  
18 family member explicitly encourage participation was also an influence on initiation of  
19 walking football:

20 People have said to me yeah, I've tried walking football, oh I've heard of that, you  
21 know, but I wouldn't have gone and looked into it, if my sister didn't say ooh, you  
22 know, come give it a try one day, come along (Rita, F, 58)

23 **Self-efficacy.** The concept of self-efficacy (defined by Bandura [1977, p.193] as a  
24 person's conviction that they can "successfully execute the behaviour required to produce the



1 outcomes") was highlighted in discussions with some players, predominantly in female  
 2 players, as an influence on initiation of walking football, as highlighted by one player:

3 [I] said I can't be doing with the gym, I said it'd be like sticking pins, so then it made  
 4 me look, and I thought well what can I do, I don't think I'm fit enough to run round  
 5 doing badminton or squash, and I love football... I'd heard about walking football  
 6 you know, it kept coming up on news programmes and stuff, so I sort of just googled,  
 7 went onto google and put in walking football (Kathleen, F, 61)

8 **Factors delaying participation.** Amongst higher order themes exploring the  
 9 influences on initiation of walking football, the players also highlighted some factors related  
 10 to delayed participation. Lower-order themes within this category included prior  
 11 commitments, sport culture, perceived physical ability and social influences. A prominent  
 12 lower-order theme was sport culture, with players feeling that a lack of awareness coupled  
 13 with a lack of opportunity to participate in walking football inhibited participation. For  
 14 female players in particular, a lack of opportunity and accessibility delayed participation:

15 I live in a retirement apartment...one of the things that they mentioned was walking  
 16 football and my ears pricked up at this point and I thought ooh that sounds  
 17 interesting. Um, of course, what they also said was oh no, let me talk about this for  
 18 the men, right okay fine but of course the interest had been uh twinged (Anne, F, 65)

19 Within the lower order theme of perceived physical ability, many male players felt that aging  
 20 created physical restrictions to sport, and thus a delay on participation at an older age. As one  
 21 player noted; "I was always nervous about going back doing football full time at age 55 or  
 22 something, probably earlier, fifties but not quite 55, in case it aggravated the back injury  
 23 again" (Jonathan, M, 62).

24 **Positive Experiences During Walking Football Initiation**

1 Higher order themes under positive experiences included physical health, mental  
2 adaptation, social interactions and walking-football specific environment.

3 **Physical health.** Many interviewees, especially female players, attributed an increase  
4 in fitness, PA levels and energy to their participation in walking football. As one player  
5 expressed, “you don’t come off feeling sluggish, like you do when you sometimes go on and  
6 everything and then, it’s just a massive turnaround” (Liz, F, 60). One participant also  
7 discussed the physical satisfaction; “it makes me feel like I’ve done something, brushed the  
8 cobwebs off, um, put a bit of a sweat on, and uh, feel a bit fitter I think” (Jack, M, 61).

9 **Mental adaptation.** This higher order theme comprised of four lower-order themes  
10 centred on positive mental experiences; changed perceptions and values, walking football-  
11 specific learning, empowerment and positive affect. Within the lower order theme of changed  
12 perceptions and values, players talked prominently about positive changes in perceptions of  
13 walking football, alongside the awareness of the benefits of walking football. The majority of  
14 players discussed walking football-specific learning, especially skill acquisition, and the  
15 adaptation of previous sporting skills. One player highlighted the experience of adapting the  
16 tactics and skills required within walking football, compared with mainstream football:

17 You can’t, well when you pass the ball you can’t pass it too far in front of somebody  
18 because you can’t run to get it whereas in normal football you can pass way in front,  
19 run across and get it, and you have to have more precision than anything (Liz, F, 60)

20 Additionally, many players reported coping of aging and health conditions, and also higher  
21 self-efficacy, not only in walking football but other areas of their lives. One player in  
22 particular felt that walking football elicited an increase in self-efficacy levels relating to other  
23 activities they took part in:

24 Well I think there’s a massive change in me, I’m a lot happier, look forward to  
25 football, I’m fitter, I do more things like I’m doing cycling, I’m doing up to two, three

1 cycle rides a week which is about 20 miles per ride... when I rode my bike before I  
 2 went out for five miles on my bike the first time, and I nearly had a seizure doing  
 3 that as well [laughs] but now I'm [at] 20 miles I can do that so easily now (Liz, F, 60)

4 Enjoyment of walking football competition, increased positive mood outside of walking  
 5 football sessions, and general physical satisfaction from playing walking football were all  
 6 widely reported raw data themes within affectual change from both male and female players,  
 7 as one female player describes:

8 I personally thrive off that challenge of my, I'm gonna get that ball before you or  
 9 what have you, do you know what I mean it's, you need that I think cos it for me  
 10 personally I always liked it, a challenge (Kathleen, F, 61)

11 **Social interactions.** This higher order theme comprised of two lower-order themes,  
 12 based around positive experiences of team connections and non-club support networks.  
 13 Positive team cohesion was reported by two thirds of the players, as well as new social  
 14 connections being enabled by walking football:

15 Everybody's very friendly, and they ask you your name, and they'll talk to you like  
 16 they've known you forever. So it isn't one of these things where you're a you feel a bit  
 17 of an outsider. You're in there from day one. (Chris, M, 65)

18 Non-club support networks were also important. Support to play walking football by a family  
 19 member or friend was reported by 14 of the 17 players. Many players said that family  
 20 accepting changes in routine and understanding reasons for playing walking football were  
 21 important experiences during initiation:

22 They are supportive because it does disrupt you know routine at home on a Thursday  
 23 because you know it's timing the meal and timing everything else so, you know, it  
 24 does a little bit so you get that support but they understand why we're doing it  
 25 hopefully and what we doing (Jonathan, M, 62)

1 **Walking football-specific environment.** Factors relating to the walking football  
2 environment were also seen to be positive experiences during initiation, with lower-order  
3 themes of session structure and club community. Location of the walking football club was  
4 mentioned by a number of players, alongside the sessions being tailored to suit injury or  
5 health conditions mentioned by half of players interviewed. One player stated that “they  
6 tailor the session to look after everybody, so they don’t, it’s not geared for the person who’s  
7 the poorest, it’s geared, they seem to be able to treat everybody differently and so  
8 everybody gets something out of it” (Chris, M, 65). Additionally, wider factors related to the  
9 club community were also important to some players, such as having the opportunity to play  
10 in tournaments, having a choice of available equipment and facilities, and also for many  
11 female players, the choice of multiple sessions to play at. Mixed responses came from female  
12 players regarding the type of walking football sessions they preferred, with some ladies  
13 enjoying the physical challenges of mixed sessions, and some preferring ladies’ only  
14 sessions, for reasons such as the competitive atmosphere experienced during training  
15 sessions:

16       So I said to [friend] I’m never going to mixed, I know some of the girls do it  
17       but I didn’t like it at all. Um, I think it’s a much nicer atmosphere with the ladies, and  
18       I’m not being sexist here, I just think it is. They are competitive but not in that, like  
19       really nasty competitive in my opinion they just go a bit OTT [over the top], so I think  
20       again, I like women’s football, the women’s walking football, is getting stronger and  
21       stronger. (Kathleen, F, 61)

## 22 **Negative Experiences During Walking Football Initiation**

23       Higher order themes within negative experiences included physical inability, social-  
24 specific restraints, club-specific restraints and perceived mental barriers.

1           **Physical inability.** Despite most reported experiences from players being positive,  
2 there were some negative experiences described. Some players experienced physical inability  
3 during initiation, such as injury. As one player recalled, injury whilst initiation created shock  
4 and anxiety; “it was purely accidental we just happened to be coming from two different  
5 directions heading for the same place, and collided, but I ended up in a heap on the floor, it  
6 shook me up quite a lot” (Anne, F, 65).

7           **Social-specific restraints.** Negative experiences related to social connections,  
8 comprised of non-cohesive team behaviour and out-of-club relationships were reported by  
9 players. Cases of negative sportsmanship and not feeling welcome were discussed, alongside  
10 a lack of acceptance from other players, which was experienced by female players. One  
11 player felt a case of exclusion when taking part in a mixed session, and recalled that “funnily  
12 enough I went to a mixed session once, just to try it out, never again...the men cheat, they  
13 don’t know what walking means, and they’ve been sinbinned every five minutes, plus they  
14 don’t pass to you” (Kathleen, F, 61). Additionally, negative perceptions of walking football  
15 from peers outside the club were also mentioned by some players, with other peers not  
16 wanting to play the game:

17           I mean the people I play golf with they laughed [scoffs], “you’re playing walking  
18 football?”, you know, they would dream of it, but um, I know two or three of them  
19 would probably enjoy it, I don’t think they’d come to walking football though (Jack,  
20 M, 61)

21           **Club-specific restraints.** Some club-specific restraints were noted by players, with  
22 lack of a tailored session mentioned by two players, and negative tournament experiences  
23 also taking place in initiation. A prominent raw-data theme discussed was inconvenient  
24 timing of sessions for some players, either due to family commitments or events:

25           It’s like I gave up my other things, but if something else is on I give up the football, to

1 do it you know because, for example I'm going to a wake and Fridays a lot of the  
2 time, Friday night's something's on, you know, it does have a knock-on effect  
3 because of the day that it's on (Rita, F, 58)

4 **Perceived mental barriers.** Lastly, perceived mental barriers were highlighted as a  
5 negative experience by some players. Some players reported anxiety or apprehension before  
6 attending sessions during initiation, as one player recounts:

7 So I eventually plucked up the courage to do it cos you know you're walking into  
8 something completely in a situation where you don't know anybody and you know  
9 it's quite can be quite a big deal, um, so you may have found this yourself at your age,  
10 I mean when you get older it becomes more difficult to do because it's all a  
11 confidence thing isn't it you know (Anne, F, 65)

12 Additionally, a prominent mental barrier for some players was considered to be the fear of  
13 getting injured or damaging health conditions. For those with diagnosed health conditions,  
14 injury was something on their mind throughout initiation, with one player stating they have  
15 "to be careful because my back... I lost two inches in height with this... my bones are really  
16 badly damaged in the pelvic area, so I have to be careful, and my energy levels are not what  
17 they were" (Michael, M, 71).

## 18 **Discussion**

19 The purpose of this study was to identify experiences influencing walking football  
20 initiation in young-old adults (55-75 years old). Findings indicated that the process of  
21 walking football initiation is multi-faceted, with some themes arising similar to mainstream  
22 sport participation, and newer, emergent themes representing the experiences of those  
23 initiating walking football specifically.

24 Specifically, a range of factors and experiences perceived to influence initiation  
25 before and during the initiation process were identified. The wide range of factors extend

1 current research (van Stralen et al., 2009), highlighting emerging factors that need to be  
2 considered when older adults initiate a walking sport, such as walking football. For example,  
3 the most discussed enablers to walking football participation for this age population were  
4 captured in the themes of PA or sporting experience, and awareness of the availability of  
5 walking football. These subthemes that emerged are consistent with previous research  
6 highlighting the role of previous sporting experience (Dionigi, 2015) and awareness of sport  
7 availability as drivers for participation and barriers such as physical inability, or poor health,  
8 in participation of mainstream sport (Jenkin et al., 2018). The research also suggests that  
9 awareness of walking football programmes may vary between locations of the clubs, with  
10 those attending clubs in higher deprivation areas being made aware of programmes through  
11 local PA facilities or local football clubs, whereas those from lower deprivation areas were  
12 more likely to be made aware of programmes through media outlets such as newspapers, or  
13 television. This highlights the need to consider the type of programme awareness and  
14 promotion offered in different locations. New insights into values and perceptions of those  
15 taking part in walking football emerged, suggesting a high importance of a positive outlook  
16 on PA and previous SP as an enabler of walking football initiation. Values and perceptions  
17 congruent with forming positive habit changes, such as PA, have been found to increase the  
18 likelihood of PA and long-term behaviour change (Hutchison, Johnston, & Breckon, 2013).  
19 This research therefore offers new understanding into values and perceptions from a sport-  
20 specific perspective, especially in a 55-75 year-old population. Additionally, the mindfulness  
21 of activity levels and any sport relapse was reported by more participants from the least  
22 deprived areas, further uncovering different values and perceptions arising amongst different  
23 SES backgrounds. Tailoring sports around differing values in certain locations may be an  
24 option to increase initiation within an young-old adult population.

1           During walking football initiation, widely discussed positive experiences of players  
2 were captured in the theme of cognitive growth, such as walking-football specific learning  
3 and empowerment of individuals (e.g., sense of purpose and higher self-efficacy).  
4 Additionally, positive team cohesion and support from family and peers were widely  
5 discussed within the theme of social interactions, alongside subthemes relating to the tailoring  
6 of the game to match health or aging within the theme of the walking-football specific  
7 environment. Social connections and norms as a driver to positive lifestyle change has been  
8 highlighted amongst well-known behaviour change theories, such as the COM-B ('capability',  
9 'opportunity', 'motivation' and 'behaviour') model (Michie, van Stralen & West, 2011), which  
10 focuses on an individual's capabilities, opportunities and motivations, to influence behaviour  
11 and lifestyle change. Under the COM-B model, social opportunity sits within this section as  
12 being a driver for behaviour change, highlighting the importance of social norms and cues  
13 (such as support from family and friends, as seen in the present study).

14           Previous research within mainstream sport highlights competition and negotiation of  
15 the aging process to be benefits of sport participation for some older adults (Dionigi et al.,  
16 2011; Jenkin et al., 2018) and findings from the present study strengthens these findings,  
17 extending it to an adapted sport-specific context, which has been previously underresearched.  
18 Additionally, further research found socialising with others and learning new skills to be  
19 linked to the enjoyment of the sport (Gayman, Fraser-Thomas, Dionigi, Horton, & Baker,  
20 2017). Research to date has shown that walking sport helps older adults accept the aging  
21 process (e.g. Reddy et al., 2017) however, new themes relating to tailoring of the game to suit  
22 all abilities and genders emerge within the current study. The tailoring of the game to suit  
23 each individual's physical state was a prominent theme and highlighted the importance of  
24 adapted sports matching older adult ability levels at the stage of initiation. This extended to



1 providing women's sessions for female players, allowing for extra opportunities for adults in  
2 later life in addition to conventional gym or outdoor settings.

3         This study's findings found that adapted sports, such as walking football, can offer a  
4 level of sport that caters to all abilities, allowing those with poorer health or mobility to  
5 participate. This study therefore builds on Jenkin and colleagues' research, which suggested  
6 barriers to sport participation such as poor health or fitness, with former club members  
7 ceasing participation in certain sports due to this reason (Jenkin et al., 2018). In addition, the  
8 raw data theme of skill acquisition was discussed by many participants as being a positive  
9 experience during participation. Previous research conducted into sport practice and learning  
10 with older adults suggests that sport can offer cognitive flexibility and motor skills, such as  
11 positive changes in reaction times (Dascal & Teixeira, 2016; Lobjois et al., 2006). This  
12 research adds to this body of work from a qualitative perspective, highlighting a positive  
13 response to learning new skills within the remit of walking football. Whilst previous research  
14 has highlighted the challenges relating to a 'sport for all' social policy and questioning the  
15 effectiveness of sport to solve larger scale issues such as obesity (Gard & Dionigi, 2016), the  
16 findings presented indicate that adapted sport, such as walking football, may have positive  
17 psychosocial effects with older adults within different genders and socioeconomic positions.  
18 The experiences conveyed suggest that walking football provides benefits at initiation such as  
19 changes in positive mood and social connections, at a tailored level of play that conventional,  
20 mainstream sport may not be able to offer.

21         Whilst negative experiences during walking football participation were not as widely  
22 discussed by the players as positive experiences, some themes did emerge. Specifically, the  
23 themes of perceived mental barriers (e.g., fear of re-injury, and a sense of anxiety before  
24 initial walking football sessions) and social-specific barriers (e.g., negative peer perceptions  
25 of walking football) were highlighted. Physical limitations have been discussed within

1 research into mainstream sport (Jenkin et al., 2018), however discussions over fear of re-  
2 injury during initiation of walking football highlights a new aspect to consider when  
3 considering players' initiation and ongoing participation of adapted sport, specifically  
4 walking football. In addition, the majority of players that expressed anxiety before initial  
5 sessions highlighted that social support was an important factor in influencing them to  
6 participate in walking football (e.g., peer attendance in the first sessions, or already knowing  
7 people at a club). This discourse clearly shows the importance and influence of social support  
8 on initiation walking football within this particular age population.

### 9 **Applied Implications and Future Research**

10 From a policy perspective, as many walking sports such as walking football are being  
11 marketed to older adults (The FA, 2018a), it is necessary that sporting organisations  
12 recognise the experiences involved in the process of initiating an adapted sport for older  
13 adults. Although many players had previously taken part in football, there were many cases  
14 of players that had moved from different sports, or not had extensive involvement in sport  
15 before. In light of this knowledge, sporting bodies' policies should attempt to introduce  
16 frameworks for players to easily move from playing mainstream sport into the adapted  
17 version of the sport and recognise walking football as an extension and natural progression of  
18 the mainstream version of the game, for those no longer able to play the full game.  
19 Additionally, it is important to note that predominantly female players experienced a prior  
20 lack of football accessibility and, in some cases, a lack of acceptance from other players.  
21 Marketing and promotion of walking football and other adapted sports should appeal to both  
22 male and female players and marketing materials should be altered (for example, an onus on  
23 social networking and physical benefits for women) to ensure the sport appeals to a vast  
24 range of potential players. Additionally, depending on the area and location of the club, the  
25 methods of programme promotion (either through media outlets, or from a club level such as

1 showcasing walking football at half time) should be carefully considered in order to improve  
2 maximum awareness of such programmes.

3         On a practice level, making clubs and coaches aware of the process of initiation,  
4 alongside potential positive and negative experiences involved in walking football  
5 participation at older age is crucial. New themes such as values and perceptions of health and  
6 PA were widely reported, therefore it may be prudent for coaches to understand, as stipulated  
7 by Hutchison and colleagues' (2013), individual players' values and what they expect from  
8 sessions on initiation of the sport. In addition, understanding the health capabilities of players  
9 and addressing any fears or anxiety prior to joining is important. Therefore, awareness of  
10 players' mental and physical state prior to joining, and introducing players to the team in a  
11 sensitive way, is recommended for coaches and walking football programmes to take into  
12 consideration when inviting new players to sessions. Sessions should be tailored suitably to  
13 address injury prevention (e.g., adequate time to warm up and cool down), and coaches may  
14 benefit from tailoring sessions to include some skill and competitive aspects, so players may  
15 learn skills related to walking football, alongside building on past skills learned during  
16 mainstream football play. This may promote self-efficacy and enjoyment and retain  
17 participation from the stage of initiation and into maintaining the behaviour (Barz et al.,  
18 2016). Alongside this, the choice of multiple sessions for women was an important factor,  
19 having choice to play in a mixed or women's only sessions, for reasons such as appropriate  
20 levels of competition.

21         This paper extends previous knowledge around initiation of walking sports for older  
22 adults, such as the importance of previous PA and sporting values and knowledge when  
23 initiating an adapted sport. Within behaviour change literature, limited research has explored  
24 initiation within these adapted sports (Jenkin et al., 2018), and this research provides further  
25 understanding concerning influences present during 55-75 year-old adults initiating walking

1 football, such as tailoring of the game to match health issues and positive team cohesion. This  
2 research also provides rich data (e.g. the role of previous team sport participation and  
3 different forms of walking football awareness) concerning sporting and PA experiences  
4 before walking football participation takes place. This adds to the body of evidence  
5 attempting to explain the gap between intending to and following through with positive  
6 lifestyle behaviours (Sniehotta, Scholz, & Schwarzer, 2005), especially within the domain of  
7 sport participation in older adulthood.

8         However, whilst this study looks at the determinants and experiences involved in  
9 initiation of walking football, research is yet to explore determinants or strategies used to  
10 maintain adapted sport participation in 55-75 year-old adults. Health benefits of PA are often  
11 seen when committing to activities for a long time period (Laitakari et al., 1996), and these  
12 benefits extend into older adults maintaining sport participation, for example improved  
13 reaction times (Dascal & Teixeira, 2016). Therefore, further research may involve exploring  
14 maintenance strategies in adapted sport participation, in order to provide a strong base of  
15 qualitative evidence into initiation and maintenance of adapted sport in older adulthood.  
16 Further use of timelines or lifegrids within qualitative research (Parry et al., 1999; Sheridan,  
17 Chamberlain, & Dupuis, 2011) may also be prudent to consider when interviewing others on  
18 their past participation in sport and exercise.

### 19 **Strengths and Limitations**

20         This study builds on understanding around determinants and experience of sport  
21 before walking football participation had begun, gaining a holistic insight into players'  
22 experiences and behavioural processes involved before initiation occurred. Alongside this, a  
23 specific age group of 55-75 years old was chosen, to understand the specific processes and  
24 experiences in walking football participation for young-old adults, allowing for tailoring  
25 activities to specific age groups (McPhee et al., 2016). The research also contained male and

1 female players, to understand in depth experiences from both genders, which limited previous  
2 research has divulged. One limitation to note is that results are representative of the study  
3 players and therefore may not be representative of all young-old adults. Experiences of 55-75  
4 year-old adults involved in other adapted sports, or those not taking part in sport at all, are not  
5 represented in the data. Further research exploring behavioural themes within other adapted  
6 sports, and also to explore and compare experiences of those who are not involved in adapted  
7 sport, may provide further understanding on how to encourage adapted sport initiation in  
8 older adulthood. Assessing the validity of behaviour change theories, such as theories relating  
9 to values and perceptions (Hutchison et al., 2013) within the context of adapted sports may  
10 also be warranted, in order to understand the transferability of such frameworks into a  
11 sporting context.

## 12 **Conclusion**

13 This research aimed to understand determinants and experiences of young-old adults  
14 (55-75 years old) initiating walking football. With the rise in popularity of adapted sports and  
15 little evidence exploring behaviour change factors within walking football, it is important to  
16 understand older adults' experiences when initiating the sport. This research offers new  
17 knowledge highlighting values and perceptions and the awareness of walking sports as  
18 influences when initiating walking football in older adulthood. In addition, having a positive  
19 experience during the initiation phase, such as coping with aging (including coping with  
20 health conditions) and empowering players to cognitively and socially develop in older age,  
21 were also important factors. There were also some negative experiences during initiation to  
22 consider, such as anxiety, fear of re-injury and negative team dynamics,  
23 in order to create an environment conducive to initiation and beyond. Coaches and  
24 walking football programmes should look to diversify marketing to include both men and  
25 women's experiences of play, and understand players' values and perceptions surrounding

- 1 PA and sport, to encourage positive habit change. Coaches may also benefit from tailoring
- 2 sessions for different ability levels and genders and help to foster a positive team
- 3 environment to encourage positive experiences in older adults initiating the sport. Future
- 4 research should look to focus on long-term maintenance of adapted sports, and strategies
- 5 used to maintain participation in older adulthood.

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