

European Football for



Development Network

EFDN



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EUROPEAN
**WALKING
FOOTBALL**
LEAGUE

**WALKING FOOTBALL
BEST PRACTICES
HANDBOOK**

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CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	3
WHAT IS WALKING FOOTBALL?	5
WHAT IS WALKING FOOTBALL GOOD FOR?	5
RESEARCH – STATISTICS	6
ACTIVE AGING	6
SOCIAL INCLUSION AND REDUCED LONELINESS	6
IMPACT OF PHYSICAL ACTIVITY ON ELDERLY	6
IMPACT OF PHYSICAL ACTIVITY WITH PARKINSON'S	7
MAPPING BEST PRACTICES	8
CRITERIA FOR MAPPING BEST PRACTICES	10
BEST PRACTICES	11
EWFC – ENGLAND WALKING FOOTBALL COMMUNITY	11
THE NORWEGIAN FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION	12
WALKING FOOTBALL LEAGUES ALLIANCE	13
WALKING FOOTBALL SCOTLAND	14
ALMELO CITY CUP	15
WALKING LIONS FC – SPAIN	16
MALLORCA WALKING FOOTBALL TOURNAMENT	17
LUTON TOWN WALKING FOOTBALL CLUB	18
AGE UK	19
CHALLENGES OF ESTABLISHING WALKING FOOTBALL	20
RECOMMENDATIONS WHEN ESTABLISHING A WALKING FOOTBALL PROGRAMME	21
CONCLUSION	22
GLOSSARY	22
REFERENCES	22
CONTACT PAGE	23

INTRODUCTION

Welcome to the European Walking Football League (EFDN) project, a pioneering initiative aimed at enhancing the lives of individuals aged 50 and above through health-promoting physical activities and fostering social inclusion within European communities. The project is grounded in the recognition of the pivotal role physical activity plays in maintaining both physical and mental fitness, addressing issues like obesity, and preventing various health-related conditions. Social interaction is equally vital, and the EFDN project is dedicated to creating an inclusive environment where individuals aged 50 and above are encouraged to participate in sports activities that significantly enhance their overall well-being.

Sustaining physical activity as we age brings a multitude of benefits, including improved fine motor skills, enhanced balance, and a reduced risk of cardiovascular disease, falls, and fractures. Exercise also offers profound cognitive benefits, acting as a natural anti-depressant and supporting overall brain health. The Walking Football League, a program blending physical and mental demands, emerges as an ideal catalyst for cognitive function.

In this project, the EFDN, in collaboration with Vålerenga Fotball, Ferencvárosi Torna Club, Bayer 04 Leverkusen, Rangers Charity Foundation, Fundação Benfica, Real Betis Balompié Foundation, FC Schalke 04, Morton in the Community, Newcastle United Foundation, aims to develop a Walking Football League methodology that empowers individual clubs to establish their own leagues on local and regional levels. The objective is to contribute to the establishment of national leagues and the European Walking Football League, acting as multipliers on various levels and contributing to the professionalization of this new sport. The project seeks to support grassroots and professional clubs, providing them with tools to create partnerships with local, regional, and national football associations. The ultimate goal is to establish walking football leagues that actively promote the game across all levels.

The Walking Football League project, involving nine community-engaged football clubs, aspires to increase physical activity levels and improve social cohesion and inclusion for individuals over 50. It aims to lay the foundation for walking football as a unique and enduring sport. Participants will have the opportunity to take part in two European Walking Football League events per year, fostering international competition, inspiration, and the growth of walking football across Europe. The project is designed to facilitate travel, socialization, and participation in physical activity within a relaxed and social environment, fostering lasting friendships and boosting participants' confidence. The European Walking Football League project is not just about playing a sport; it's about creating a vibrant and inclusive community for individuals in the golden years of life.



Our overarching objectives for this project include:

- Increasing the number of physically active individuals within the target age group.
- Enhancing social connections among local participants.
- Establishing a sustainable partnership among diverse stakeholders in the European Walking Football landscape. We seek consensus on common game rules and a cohesive strategy for developing the sport across Europe.
- Promoting and disseminating this adapted and enhanced football/sport methodology to a wide range of stakeholders across European countries.
- Advocating for the European guidelines on health-enhancing physical activities (HEPA).
- While the project currently involves collaboration among several countries, including the United Kingdom, Germany, Norway, Hungary, Portugal, Spain, and The Netherlands, our ambition knows no bounds. We aspire to broaden our reach and communicate our message at the European level. Together, we are determined to cultivate a thriving Walking Football League that enriches the lives of participants across the continent.



WHAT IS WALKING FOOTBALL?

Walking Football, a captivating modification of the classic game, has gracefully swept across the globe, capturing the hearts of individuals aged 50 and beyond. This innovative adaptation introduces a refreshing twist to the traditional sport, where the central rule is elegantly uncomplicated yet transformative: players, instead of engaging in the usual sprinting, gracefully partake in a leisurely walk on the football field.

In essence, Walking Football skilfully preserves the soul of the beautiful game while artfully mitigating the physical demands associated with high-speed play. The deliberate shift to a slower pace not only enhances accessibility but also opens the doors of participation to a broader demographic. This intentional alteration allows enthusiasts, regardless of age or fitness level, to revel in the joy of football, fostering a sense of camaraderie and competition in a manner that prioritizes safety and inclusivity.

The game itself unfolds on a standard football pitch, with teams vying for goals, yet the absence of running transforms the dynamics significantly. This modified version not only underscores strategic play but also places a premium on skill, finesse, and teamwork, demonstrating that football's essence remains vibrant and captivating even at a more measured pace.

Moreover, Walking Football serves as an ideal platform for older individuals to stay physically active, revitalize their passion for the game, and relish a communal sporting experience. By eliminating the need for high-speed running, it significantly reduces the risk of injuries, making it an attractive choice for those who may have concerns about the physical intensity of traditional football.

Intrinsically linked with promoting health and well-being, Walking Football transcends the boundaries of a mere sport. It becomes a vehicle for fostering a sense of community, encouraging an active

lifestyle, and creating lasting memories on the field. As individuals gracefully traverse the pitch, the beauty of Walking Football unfolds as a testament to the enduring appeal of the sport and its ability to adapt, evolve, and inspire across generations.

WHAT IS WALKING FOOTBALL GOOD FOR?

Walking Football offers a host of benefits that make it a fantastic choice for individuals aged 50 and above:

Physical Fitness: Despite the lack of running, the game keeps participants physically active, helping to improve cardiovascular fitness, muscle strength, balance, and coordination.

Injury Prevention: The low-impact nature of the sport reduces the risk of injuries, making it an ideal choice for older adults looking to stay fit without the associated risks.

Mental Well-being: Exercise has been shown to have a positive impact on mental health. Playing walking football can boost mood, reduce stress, and even enhance cognitive function.

Social Interaction: The game fosters camaraderie, teamwork, and social bonds, combating feelings of isolation and loneliness.

Sense of Purpose: Participating in walking football provides a sense of purpose and belonging, helping individuals maintain an active and fulfilling lifestyle.

In conclusion, Walking Football is much more than a leisurely kickabout—it's a pathway to active aging, promoting physical, mental, and social well-being. By adhering to a few simple rules, players can enjoy the beautiful game well into their golden years, reaping the numerous rewards it offers.



RESEARCH – STATISTICS

ACTIVE AGING

Celebrating active aging is a relatively recent concept that has gained popularity within the realm of sports dedicated to engaging older individuals. Essentially, it encapsulates the idea of remaining physically active as one advances in age, encompassing the pursuit of an active and vibrant lifestyle during the senior years. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), the rate of global population growth is rapidly accelerating. Currently, the number of individuals aged 60 and above has surpassed the number of children under five years old, and projections indicate that by 2050, the population of individuals aged 60 and over will outnumber adolescents and young people aged 15 to 24. UEFA recognizes the paramount significance of 'healthy aging,' a concept defined by WHO in its World Report on Ageing and Health as "the process of developing and maintaining functional abilities that enable well-being in older age." UEFA is already deeply committed to ensuring the accessibility of football for all age groups, ensuring that everyone can reap the numerous benefits of the sport (UEFA, 2022).

Promoting SDG 3 and the objective of ensuring healthy lives and well-being for individuals of all ages underscores the increasing importance of active aging, especially in light of the growing aging population worldwide. It is imperative to recognize that as the older demographic expands, the provision of engaging activities becomes essential. Walking Football serves as an excellent illustration of an activity that caters to this demographic, offering a compelling example of how such initiatives can contribute to promoting physical and social well-being among older individuals. By embracing active aging initiatives like Walking Football, we not only foster well-being but also ensure that individuals of all ages find these activities not only appealing but also accessible, thus enriching their overall quality of life.

SOCIAL INCLUSION AND REDUCED LONELINESS

As we age, the risk of experiencing diminished health and reduced motivation to engage socially tends to rise. The significance of maintaining robust social connections cannot be overstated, as these connections play a pivotal role in nurturing our mental and physical health, contributing significantly to overall well-being. Extensive research underscores the adverse effects of social isolation and loneliness, revealing that they can potentially curtail individuals' lifespans. In fact, the mortality rate attributed to social isolation and loneliness has been likened to well-documented mortality risks, such as smoking, obesity, and physical inactivity (World Health Organisation, n.d.).

Within the framework of the aging demographic, addressing social isolation emerges as a pressing concern. An inherent challenge for older adults lies in the potential constriction of their social circles due to factors such as retirement, physical constraints, and the loss of close contacts. Consequently, initiatives aimed at promoting social engagement, such as the introduction of recreational activities like Walking Football, assume paramount significance in bridging these gaps. These initiatives not only provide a common

interest but also establish a supportive community where older adults can foster connections, fostering a sense of purpose and vitality in life.

Furthermore, addressing social isolation is a collective responsibility that extends beyond individual efforts. Society at large must take an active role in cultivating environments conducive to social interactions. Recognizing the pivotal role of programs like Walking Football, which serve as platforms for forging connections and transcending social barriers, underscores the broader societal need for such initiatives in bolstering the well-being of the aging population. By embracing active aging strategies and nurturing inclusive communities, we contribute to a collective endeavour dedicated to promoting a healthier and more enriching life experience for older individuals.

IMPACT OF PHYSICAL ACTIVITY ON ELDERLY

The anticipated life span of the population is increasing, prompting ongoing research to provide fresh insights. With ageing populations, a critical query arises: do the additional years translate into a healthy and high-quality life? Physical activity, encompassing both bodily movement and structured exercise, emerges as a pivotal factor in maintaining health and preventing diseases among the elderly.

The benefits of physical activity are extensively documented, including its role in preventing noncommunicable diseases, promoting mental well-being, delaying the onset of dementia, and enhancing overall quality of life. Despite these advantages, a considerable number of older adults fall short of recommended activity levels, emphasizing the need for tailored exercise programmes to address the unique needs of this demographic.

Sedentary lifestyles lead to changes in body composition, marked by an increase in body fat and a reduction in lean body mass. Skeletal muscle atrophy, commonly associated with ageing, contributes to a decline in physical capabilities. Notably, strength training emerges as an effective intervention to counteract these detrimental changes. Active participation in physical activities proves instrumental in maintaining the quality of life, overall health, and physical functionality, thereby reducing the incidence of falls among older individuals.

Exercise training demonstrates a spectrum of health benefits, including a decrease in cardiovascular mortality. It instigates positive alterations in cardiac autonomic balance, enhancing cardiovascular function. The emphasis on high-intensity training holds true even for frail elderly individuals. Beyond physical benefits, exercise exhibits cognitive advantages, bolstering executive control and fostering consistency in physical activity. Sustaining cardiorespiratory fitness necessitates a continuous commitment to physical activity. Adequate support and supervision are paramount for successful maintenance, addressing challenges like conflicting schedules and health concerns. The prediction



of the need for walking aids or assistance is explored concerning moderate to vigorous physical activity.

This collection comprehensively explores various facets of ageing, physical activity, and exercise, highlighting their roles in preventive health measures, disease management, and overall well-being. Encouraging physical activity among older populations, especially those grappling with comorbidities, remains a pressing concern in public health (Langhammer, Bergland, & Rydwick, 2018)

IMPACT OF PHYSICAL ACTIVITY WITH PARKINSON'S

In the dynamic interplay between physical exercise and the intricate landscape of Parkinson's disease, a compelling narrative unfolds. This exploration delves into the profound impact of regular physical activity on the health and well-being of individuals contending with Parkinson's, a neurodegenerative condition marked by multifaceted challenges. As we initiate this exploration, we navigate the intricate landscape where the fusion of exercise and Parkinson's offers valuable insights, encompassing cognitive, motor, and non-motor dimensions.

The manifold health benefits stemming from regular physical activity assume heightened significance for individuals grappling with Parkinson's disease. This nexus between benefits and challenges, encompassing cognitive issues, mood disturbances, and sleep irregularities, underscores the pertinence of physical activity. Despite the well-established association between heightened physical activity and diminished cardiovascular mortality in the

broader population, the absence of Parkinson's-specific exercise directives necessitates adherence to established benchmarks like the AHA/ACSM guidelines.

Substantive findings from studies indicate the viability of sustained engagement in interventions for individuals with Parkinson's, spanning approximately six months and culminating in enhanced cardiovascular fitness measured by VO2max. However, translating these findings into practical application encounters obstacles, underscoring the critical role of remote monitoring and coaching. Deciphering the ramifications of improved cardiovascular fitness on mortality and morbidity in Parkinson's remains intricate. Nevertheless, the interwoven epidemiological threads linking cardiovascular diseases and Parkinson's, coupled with shared concerns about physical inactivity, positions cardiovascular training as a meaningful adjunct in Parkinson's management, offering promise in mitigating comorbidities.

While (anaerobic) training holds promise in empowering individuals with Parkinson's, navigating the subtleties of its effects, especially in stalling deterioration, demands judicious expectation management. In the realm of strength training, although evidence is less robust, it hints at comparable benefits in motor outcomes, alongside improvements in muscle strength and balance.

Within the intricate tapestry of Parkinson's challenges, non-motor symptoms cast a substantial shadow, impacting the quality of life. The potential of exercise to enhance specific facets of cognitive functioning offers a glimmer of hope in the face of cognitive decline associated with aging and neurodegenerative diseases. However, the current corpus of evidence regarding exercise and cognitive outcomes in Parkinson's presents a mosaic of inconclusive findings. Beyond the immediate, tantalizing indications emerge in diverse realms. Regular exercise emerges as a guardian of brain

health, with midlife physical fitness linked to a reduced risk of neurodegenerative conditions. Pre-diagnosis physical activity further emerges as a determinant, correlating with less severe motor symptoms at diagnosis. In the intricate dance between exercise and Parkinson's, the ongoing challenge lies in discerning whether exercise can arrest or even reverse the intricate threads of the neurodegenerative process (van der Kolk, Joosten, van Nimwegen, & Bloem, 2021).



MAPPING BEST PRACTICES

In our endeavour to map the best practices in the realm of walking football, we have undertaken a comprehensive approach that encompasses multiple research methods. A crucial aspect of our methods has been the diligent conduct of desk research. This involved an exhaustive examination of existing literature, reports, and case studies related to walking football initiatives both at the national and international levels. By delving into a vast repository of information, we aimed to gain insights into the most successful and innovative practices that have been adopted by organizations in the promotion and implementation of walking football.

Moreover, our research strategy extended beyond desk research to include proactive outreach to organizations engaged in walking

football initiatives. We reached out to these organizations through a combination of email correspondence and phone calls. This direct engagement allowed us to gain first-hand perspectives and valuable information on how national and international organizations have structured and integrated walking football within their frameworks. By fostering these connections and leveraging the experiences of these organizations, our goal has been to cultivate a comprehensive understanding of the best practices that can be harnessed for the benefit of walking football enthusiasts and participants alike. Through this multifaceted approach, we aim to assemble a repository of knowledge that will serve as a valuable resource for enhancing the growth and impact of walking football programs worldwide.



CRITERIA FOR MAPPING BEST PRACTICES

Embarking on an extensive exploration, the staff of the European Walking Football League delved into the landscape of walking football initiatives spanning diverse European regions. The primary focus was on entities passionately involved in establishing and managing walking football organisations, leagues, tournaments, and clubs. The overarching goal was to extract valuable insights into the diverse methodologies employed by these initiatives to effectively nurture a social culture, promote a healthy lifestyle, and encourage increased physical activity within the vibrant walking football community. This meticulous mapping endeavour serves as a robust foundation, poised to empower other initiative-takers in the collaborative development of nuanced best practices, specifically tailored to the distinctive context and dynamics of walking football.

A total of 12 initiatives fitting these criteria were identified.

The subsequent step involved the identification of best practices from these walking football league initiatives. Additional criteria were applied during the analysis phase to identify those initiatives considered as best practices, including:

- 1 Availability of Information.
- 2 Relevance of the Initiative to the Walking Football Community.
- 3 Effectiveness of the Approach Used in the Context of Walking Football Leagues.

THEREFORE, THE KEY CRITERIA USED TO IDENTIFY INITIATIVES WERE:

- 1 The Initiative Is a Walking Football Organisation Focused on Setting Up Leagues or Teams.
- 2 The Initiative Is a Walking Football Tournament or League.
- 3 The Initiative Is a Walking Football Club/Team.

Through collaborative efforts, a total of 9 initiatives that exemplify best practices in the establishment and management of walking football leagues, organisations and clubs was included in this handbook. A summary of each of these best practices has been documented and included in this handbook.



BEST PRACTICES



EWFC – ENGLAND WALKING FOOTBALL COMMUNITY

INITIATIVES:

Walking Football Association, Setting up national teams, national and international competitions

TARGET GROUP:

Women 40-60+, Man 50-70+

YEAR OF INITIATION OF PROJECT:

2020

NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS PER YEAR:

2000

NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS IN TOTAL:

6000

The England Walking Football Community (EWFC) is dedicated to offering individuals within the walking football community the chance to represent their country both domestically and internationally. With squads for different age groups, including men's 50+, 60+, 65+, and 70+, as well as women's 40+, 50+, and 55/60+, the EWFC aims to host a major annual event, participate in large international events, and organize at least five smaller or friendly events per year for each age group. Working closely with national teams from Ireland, Northern Ireland, France, Italy, Switzerland, Morocco, Poland, and others, the EWFC aligns its play style with the host country's Laws of the Game when they go abroad to play tournaments. This because of the broad variations based on facilities and equipment available in different countries. This approach ensures an inclusive and cooperative spirit, allowing enjoyment of the diversity in playing formats across different nations. The club ensures professionalism and safety through key organizational components, including a constitution,

Chairman, Secretary, Treasurer, Council (committee), bank account, public liability insurance, player insurance, and affiliation with the Birmingham County FA. Appointed managers with FA coaching badges uphold high standards, and a code of conduct guides all members.

The EWFC encourages members to complete relevant online courses provided by the English FA. Securing funding for a defibrillator from the FA and conducting trials to form squads are integral parts of the club's setup. Monthly training sessions take place at Redditch Utd FC's ground, centrally located in England, attracting players from various regions. Monthly gatherings bring together over 100 players, fostering camaraderie and inclusivity. The EWFC supports local initiatives, including Redditch United's recreational walking football and Parkinson's walking football sessions.

EWFC members are involved with their local clubs at different levels, players, coaches, managers, facilitators, organisers. The EWFC encourage them all to give back to their local community, some involved in running local leagues, others run disability sessions or even non walking football youth teams and projects. The EWFC collaborates with partners like the WFLA, participating in national events and co-hosting tournaments. A dedicated welfare team monitors the physical and mental health of players, providing valuable support for various health conditions. Fundraising events contribute to charitable causes, with over £3000 donated to cancer charities this year.

The EWFC is committed to promoting health, inclusivity, and community engagement through walking football, exemplifying the core principles of the sport.



THE NORWEGIAN FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION

INITIATIVES:

National FA, coordinating walking football in Norway

TARGET GROUP:

Women 40-70+, Man 50-70+

YEAR OF INITIATION OF PROJECT:

2022

NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS PER YEAR:

480

NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS IN TOTAL:

480

The Norwegian Football Federation (NFF) is actively championing the growth and development of walking football, recognizing it as a key area for individuals aged 50 and above. To support this initiative, NFF has made significant investments, channelling both finances and resources into expanding the workforce involved in developing local walking football across Norway. This effort includes the appointment of a central NFF walking football lead and the establishment of a network of walking football ambassadors. As part of this strategic approach, NFF has also introduced the role of 'Activity Developers' in various circuit areas. These individuals are pivotal in creating and promoting new, flexible formats, such as walking football, within their regions. This concerted effort has resulted in the establishment of 48 walking football

sessions across the country. The impact of this targeted work goes beyond the sessions themselves. NFF has developed an official strategy, produced promotional videos, compiled walking football toolkits, and provided valuable resources on its website. These resources have collectively contributed to an increased reach and engagement of new walking football sessions.

This endeavour is just the beginning of a larger movement gaining momentum in this important development area. NFF envisions sustained growth in the coming years, with a commitment to further expanding the reach and impact of walking football. Additionally, recognizing the competitive aspect of the sport, NFF has taken steps to enhance professionalism. This includes the development of official walking football insurances and the establishment of rules and regulations for teams, providing a structured and professional framework for those engaging in competitive play.

The Norwegian Football Federation (NFF) is committed to the vision of 'Football for All,' actively supporting the delivery of walking football for older players. Collaborating with partners in the walking football space in Norway, NFF aims to expand the reach of this important football development area. Currently, 11 out of 18 NFF circuit areas deliver walking football, and with ongoing support, the goal is to make it a core offering for football participation across Norway.



WALKING FOOTBALL LEAGUES ALLIANCE

INITIATIVES:

Support network for Walking Football Leagues

TARGET GROUP:

Women 40-60+, Man 50-70+

YEAR OF INITIATION OF PROJECT:

2019

NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS PER YEAR:

1000

NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS IN TOTAL:

3000

The Walking Football Leagues Alliance (WFLA) was established in 2019 with the primary objective of providing a cohesive and supportive framework for walking football leagues across England. Presently, it boasts a network of 27 member leagues, embodying a commitment to free and non-political collaboration in fostering grassroots competitive walking football within safe environments. The WFLA gathers representatives from each league to discuss around best practices, The FA's Laws of the Game (LOTG), and the establishment of a unified approach across walking football in England. The committee, founded by Bill Murney, welcomed Tony Norton and Mick Hill in 2022, leveraging their wealth of experience in the walking football landscape. A representative from each league contributes to the committee's diverse expertise.

A key initiative by the WFLA is the organization of tournaments, including national and local events sanctioned by local County FAs. These competitions provide a platform for leagues to showcase their

champions, fostering healthy competition and camaraderie within various age categories. The introduction of the National Walking Football Cup in 2023 further enriched the competitive landscape, starting with local contests and culminating in grand finals held at Redditch Utd in September.

Currently, the WFLA boasts affiliation from over 600 clubs across its 27 leagues. Affiliation to the WFLA is cost-free for FA leagues, granting every club within their league access to the alliance's three major competitions. Discussions are underway to welcome more leagues into the WFLA family, with anticipated additions by December 2023.

Geographically, the WFLA's reach spans from Cornwall, Devon, and Dorset in the south to Durham in the north and the regions in between. The organization ensures uniformity in competition standards by adhering to FA LOTG and employing experienced referees sanctioned by local County FAs. Collaboration is a cornerstone of the WFLA's approach. In 2022, the alliance formed a partnership with the England Walking Football Community, sharing a commitment to providing a safe and professional environment for walking footballers. This partnership expanded in 2023 with the inclusion of the National Walking Football Alliance, emphasizing a comprehensive pathway for players from recreational walking football to international representation.

In essence, the WFLA stands as a dynamic and inclusive force within the walking football community, dedicated to uniting various leagues, clubs, and players under a common vision of promoting the sport's growth and development. The organization's motto, "Stronger together," reflects its commitment to nurturing walking football at all levels of ability and engagement.



WALKING FOOTBALL SCOTLAND

INITIATIVES:
National Walking Football Organisation

TARGET GROUP:
Women 40+, Man 50+

YEAR OF INITIATION OF PROJECT:
2017

In 2012, the vibrant realm of walking football found its roots in Scotland, germinating in Midlothian and gradually spreading its influence. What began as an incipient spark has burgeoned into one of the nation's fastest-growing sports in under four years. Presently, over 130 groups encompassing approximately 3,500 participants span the country, showcasing the sport's inclusive nature with players ranging from their early 40s to the sprightly age of 90.

The allure of walking football lies not only in its accessibility but also in its capacity to embrace diversity. With memberships ranging from 10 to over 100 individuals, these groups extend a warm welcome to participants with disabilities, dementia, and those recovering from significant illnesses. Beyond mere physical exercise, walking football emerges as a catalyst for heightened fitness levels and enhanced social integration.

The Scottish Walking Football Network, in 2015, recognized the need for an organisation to nurture and champion walking football. This gave rise to Walking Football Scotland (WFS) in April 2017, which swiftly attained charitable status and affiliated with Age Scotland by September of the same year. Supported by key organizations like: Scottish FA, Chest Heart & Stroke Scotland, Football Memories Scotland and SAMH, WFS actively collaborates to elevate the sport's

profile and bolster groups and participants across the country. In 2022 Walking Football Scotland became affiliated members to Scottish Para-Football, the governing body for para-football in Scotland. Launched in 2018, Scottish Para-Football is the first Affiliated National Association for para-football in the World, bringing together multiple disciplines of football under one national umbrella.

Governed by the Scottish FA, the purpose of Scottish Para-Football is to provide a voice for all those playing parallel versions of the game; to champion the achievements of Scottish para-footballers and to promote inclusivity and equality in order to grow the game. WFS's mission is succinct yet profound: to enhance, sustain, and advocate for the physical, mental, and social well-being of older adults through walking football. The overarching aims encompass fostering collaboration with all stakeholders, managing, supporting, and developing walking football in Scotland, amplifying participation, creating a robust competition structure, and advancing refereeing and leadership pathways.

To materialize these aims, WFS strategically focuses on participation growth, providing support to local groups and individuals, promoting social inclusion, and publicizing the sport's myriad benefits. Events and education also feature prominently in WFS's agenda, with a commitment to organizing competitions, festivals, and establishing nationally recognized qualification pathways in leadership, refereeing, and coaching, in partnership with the Scottish Football Association.

As walking football continues to stride across the Scottish landscape, Walking Football Scotland stands as its stalwart advocate, steering the course for holistic well-being, inclusive participation, and the enduring joy of the beautiful game.



ALMELO CITY CUP

INITIATIVES:
Walking Football Association, Setting up national teams, national and international competitions

TARGET GROUP:
Women 40+, Man 55+

YEAR OF INITIATION OF PROJECT:
2016

The Almelo City Cup a captivating fusion of sportsmanship and leisure set against the charming backdrop of Almelo. Orchestrated by the dynamic walking football club, Gold Stars Heracles, in collaboration with Heracles and Preston Palace, this event not only guarantees an electrifying walking football tournament but also offers a delightful partner program for accompanying guests. The entire experience is heightened by the amiable atmosphere both on the fields and within the inviting confines of Hotel Preston Palace, where the organizers aim to provide a hospitable haven for participants.

As the excitement unfolds on the pitch, the organizers are dedicated to nurturing a genuine sense of family throughout the event. Since its inception in 2016, the Almelo City Cup has garnered immense popularity, drawing returning teams and welcoming new applicants each year. The event hosts a maximum of 48 teams, divided into three classifications, with each club limited to two teams.

Set against the modern, intimate, and friendly stadium of Eredivisie club Heracles, matches provide not only a thrilling sports experience but also an opportunity to explore the welcoming streets of Almelo. The matches adhere to the Walking Football regulations of the KNVB, ensuring a fair and competitive playing field overseen by KNVB referees. Tailored for men aged 55 and above and women aged 40 and above, the tournament offers flexibility in the number of players per team, with a minimum of 9 players required. Fair play points, independently evaluated by the game supervisor and the field coordinator, infuse an extra layer of sportsmanship into the competition. The team amassing the most Fair play points claims the prestigious Ben Hulshoff Cup, while the Acerbis Cup awaits the team with the highest goal tally.

The tournament features two classifications for men the spirited "Hendrie Kruzen" for the more fervent players and the balanced "Herman Finkers" for those seeking a mix of fun and competition. The ladies participate in the engaging "Ilse de Lange" classification. The tournament unfolds seamlessly, starting with the preliminary round, followed by the semi-finals, and culminating in the final round.

Named after illustrious Almelo residents, the three classifications Hendrie Kruzen, Herman Finkers, and Ilse de Lange embody distinct facets of walking football. Adding an extra layer of excitement, teams have the opportunity to compete for the coveted titles of the most fair team and the most scoring team, contributing to the overall dynamism and inclusivity of this tournament.



WALKING LIONS FC

INITIATIVES:

Walking Football Club

TARGET GROUP:

50+

YEAR OF INITIATION OF PROJECT:

2020

NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS PER YEAR:

24

NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS IN TOTAL:

40

Walking Lions FC, a Spanish walking football club, embarked on its journey in 2020 with a modest yet dedicated group of 24 participants. Over the years, this number has grown to a commendable total of 40 individuals actively engaged in weekly training sessions, tournaments, and social initiatives. The project's primary focus extends beyond the mere physical aspects, emphasizing the improvement of overall health and social activation among participants.

The heart of Walking Lions FC lies in its commitment to maintaining the well-being and physical condition of its members. Weekly training sessions serve not only to keep individuals physically activated but also foster a sense of camaraderie and social engagement. The project goes beyond the pitch, participating in tournaments and social actions that contribute to the broader community.

To sustain and expand this altruistic initiative, careful attention is given to various aspects, from participant recruitment and staff selection to session design and securing sponsors. Clear communication of the rules, physical and social objectives of walking football aids in attracting participants, emphasizing the holistic benefits it brings. Staff recruitment involves individuals who share the altruistic spirit of the project, understanding the importance of the goals set for walking football. In designing sessions and activities, the age and specific needs of the participants are taken into account, prioritizing physical well-being over technical aspects. As an officially registered entity, Walking Lions FC appeals to potential sponsors by articulating the multifaceted advantages that walking football offers to its target age group, creating a harmonious blend of physical, mental, and social well-being.



MALLORCA WALKING FOOTBALL TOURNAMENT

INITIATIVES:

International Walking Football Tournament

TARGET GROUP:

Women 40+, Man 50+

YEAR OF INITIATION OF PROJECT:

2019

NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS IN TOTAL:

480 teams / 5.500 participants

Nestled in the picturesque surroundings of Santa Ponsa, Mallorca, the Mallorca Walking Football Tournament beckons football enthusiasts from around the globe. Organized with finesse by Mallorca Football Events, a seasoned Dutch company boasting over 38 years of expertise in orchestrating international football tournaments, the event promises an unforgettable experience. This annual extravaganza, set against the backdrop of a sport complex in Santa Ponsa, unfolds on five outdoor fields. The tournament, now gearing up for its 6th edition in May 2024. Mallorca Football Events caters to diverse teams, including Government, amateur, and walking football teams. Mallorca Football Events, known for their proficiency in hosting large-scale events, ensures a seamless and professional execution of the tournament.

Following the Walking Football rules of the KNVB (Dutch Football Association) and officiated by KNVB referees, the matches unfold in a 6-a-side format, excluding goalkeepers.

The tournament introduces a unique divisional structure, catering to various age groups:

- A division for players aged 50 years or older
- A division for players aged 60 years or older
- A division for players aged 65 years or older
- A division for players aged 70 years or older
- A dedicated Women's division for players aged 40 years or older

Adding an element of flexibility, the tournament allows teams in the men's divisions to include 2 to 4 players up to 5 years younger than the division age, with the exact number contingent on the division age limit.

Beyond the thrilling matches, Mallorca Football Events crafts a compelling travel package, offering participants the chance to savour the island of Mallorca. This includes curated excursions, providing a delightful blend of football fervour and Mediterranean exploration. The strategically chosen sports complex, closely situated to selected hotels and apartments, ensures a convenient and immersive experience for all participants. Join the ranks of football aficionados converging on Santa Ponsa for the Mallorca Walking Football Tournament, where passion meets play amidst the sun-soaked beauty of Mallorca.



LUTON TOWN WALKING FOOTBALL CLUB

INITIATIVES:
Walking Football Club

TARGET GROUP:
50+

YEAR OF INITIATION OF PROJECT:
2015

In 2015, Luton Town FC extended an invitation via social media for a walking football event, specifically targeting men aged 50 and above. Responding to this call, a diverse group of individuals, mostly strangers, gathered at Venue 360 Luton on: June 19th, 2015, to participate in the first Football League Southeast Regional Walking Football tournament.

This group of strangers were arranged into three teams, A, B, and C, Luton Town teams. All three teams reached the quarterfinals with 2 of them succumbing to narrow semi-final defeats.

Encouraged by Luton Town, Arthur Mason, a devoted fan and local team manager, assumed the role of player-manager. With his enthusiastic guidance, the fledgling group evolved into a competitive team, participating at local and national level in various cups and leagues. This success led to the establishment of an over 60s men's team.

Presently, Luton Town Walking Football Club (LTWFC) fields competitive men over 50s, over 60s and since May 2023, ladies over 40s teams, alongside inclusive non-competitive sessions. In October 2023 LTWFC were awarded a grant from Luton Airport's Community Trust Fund for the purchase of first aid equipment, new kit and to supply FREE community walking football sessions. Open to new players, LTWFC's future aspirations include establishing over 70s men's and ladies' teams, plus the expansion of its community plans to encourage fitness and mental well-being among the over 50s, who may feel that they're too old to play football anymore.

Luton Town's walking football community boasts a diverse and inclusive membership, currently comprising 35 males aged 50 and over, with the club extending a warm welcome to younger participants facing medical conditions that impede participation in 'standard running football.' In addition, the club embraces the active involvement of 22 female members. Beyond its current roster, Luton Town is actively engaged in community projects, aspiring to attract 70 to 100 individuals to its free bi-monthly trial sessions.

LTWFC offers an engaging walking football experience, where camaraderie and competition converge offering a unique and enriching opportunity to make new friends and to re-create those past glories.



AGE UK

INITIATIVES:
Walking Football Club and Tournament organisers

TARGET GROUP:
Women 40 +, Man 50+

YEAR OF INITIATION OF PROJECT:
2021

NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS IN TOTAL:
1833

Age UK's Walking Football Programme, generously supported by Sport England and the Football Association (England) from 2021 to 2023, has left an indelible mark on the well-being of older individuals. A comprehensive initiative, the program facilitated the establishment of 86 walking football groups across England by 38 local Age UK partners. These groups, engaging 1833 older participants in 2500 sessions with nearly 22,000 attendances, have become instrumental in enhancing the lives of those involved. Tailored to the unique needs of local communities, the walking football groups targeted specific demographics, including individuals with long-term health conditions, those from lower socio-economic backgrounds, and women segments traditionally

characterized by lower levels of physical activity. Remarkably, the sustained success of the initiative is evident, with almost 70% of the groups continuing their operations, showcasing both the relevance and impact of the program.

The reported outcomes are nothing short of remarkable, with participants experiencing increased physical activity levels, reduced feelings of loneliness, and enhanced mental well-being. Beyond these individual benefits, the walking football groups have emerged as vibrant hubs for socialization, offering regular engagement and fostering a sense of community. Notably, the initiative has also provided a transformative pathway, allowing participants to transition into roles as volunteers and coaches.

In essence, Age UK's Walking Football Programme stands as a testament to the profound impact of well-designed community initiatives. It not only champions the physical and mental well-being of older adults but also serves as a catalyst for social integration and personal development, embodying the spirit of positive aging.

CHALLENGES OF ESTABLISHING WALKING FOOTBALL

Introducing walking football to new communities is a multifaceted endeavour that involves overcoming the challenge of raising awareness about the game and its associated benefits. The commitment to this goal is evident in the allocation of resources, including dedicated staff and ambassadors, to flexible football initiatives. This strategic investment has played a pivotal role in the impressive growth of walking football programs, fostering inclusivity and participation among diverse age groups.

However, as with any burgeoning initiative, there are common challenges that need strategic attention for sustained success. One such challenge is the need for sustainable funding to support these projects in the long term. Recognizing the importance of financial stability, various walking football programs are actively exploring potential commercial sponsorships to ensure the continuous growth and development of the sport.

The operational aspects of running national tournaments also present distinct challenges. Coordinating volunteers from different regions to ensure the smooth execution of the tournament, arranging local rounds amidst a busy fixture schedule for numerous clubs, and maintaining high standards by insisting on open 3G pitches are among the logistical hurdles. Finding sponsors also remains a perpetual challenge.

Moreover, the COVID-19 pandemic added a layer of complexity as this happened in a crucial stage of many of the initiatives, with initial meetings conducted online rather than face-to-face. Over the past three years, the walking football community has faced various challenges, including health issues among players, partners, and family members, ranging from cancer and heart problems to mental health concerns and age-related illnesses.

Amidst these challenges, new hurdles emerge, such as a lack of available pitches or indoor facilities at the required times, potentially hindering the smooth progression of groups. The early stages witness lower attendance, posing a challenge in retaining potential new participants. Varying skill levels and expectations, especially in mixed-gender sessions, further underscore the need for tailored approaches. Participants managing long-term health conditions face barriers to participation, and the absence of social areas in some facilities after sessions proves a limitation. Additionally, issues like transportation to and from pitches further contribute to the multifaceted landscape of challenges.

In navigating these challenges, the walking football community remains resilient and self-reliant, continuously striving for growth and improvement. Despite the tight financial constraints, the community is enthusiastic about expanding its reach and impact, eagerly welcoming more sponsors to join their mission and contribute to the sustained success of walking football initiatives.



RECOMMENDATIONS WHEN ESTABLISHING A WALKING FOOTBALL PROGRAMME

Recommendations for our Walking Football League partners encompass various aspects. Firstly, providing detailed explanations of rules and articulating clear physical and social objectives can significantly enhance participant attraction. Emphasizing the selfless nature of the work during staff recruitment contributes to building a motivated and dedicated team. When setting up sessions, considering the age, work, family, and physical conditions of the typical player is paramount, with a focus on prioritizing maintenance of the individual's physical and mental state over the improvement of skills.

Moreover, when seeking sponsors, the importance of being an officially registered entity and highlighting holistic benefits tailored to the targeted age group cannot be overstated. Effective visibility strategies, including active engagement on social networks like Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, etc., and creating a league or club website, further enhance outreach. Continuous monitoring, evaluation, and adaptive strategies are pivotal for sustained growth and success in the dynamic landscape of walking football initiatives. Effective recruitment often relies on word of mouth, leveraging the influence of key members within the local community to endorse and support your walking football initiatives. Walking football ambassadors, who are well-regarded figures within the walking football community, serve as excellent examples of individuals who can contribute significantly to the success of such programs. Their endorsement not only lends credibility but also helps in attracting new members.

Recognizing that the primary motivations for participating in walking football are to stay active, maintain fitness, and foster social connections, it's crucial to infuse your sessions with a social and enjoyable atmosphere. By incorporating a fun element into the activities, you create an environment that encourages regular attendance. This social aspect plays a pivotal role in ensuring that participants not only achieve their fitness goals but also find a sense of camaraderie and enjoyment, enhancing the overall appeal of your walking football sessions.

To expand outreach, employ diverse promotional strategies, utilizing word of mouth, local media, and social platforms. Tailor advertisements with positive imagery, clearly defining the targeted participant level. Consider the success of women-only sessions to increase female participation. Forge partnerships with local football entities, fostering connections with clubs, foundations, and County FA's, tapping into their expertise and potential trained staff. Adhere to FA rules and guidelines, especially when working with individuals with long-term health conditions, incorporating appropriate warm-ups and drills to reduce injury risks.

Establish links with local football clubs or associated foundations for potential funding and support, and commence monitoring sessions from the program's outset. Align promotional activities with major events and tailor strategies for continued sustainability post-funding. Accommodate varied preferences, offering competitive and recreational play options.



CONCLUSION

The European Walking Football League's extensive best practice research has led to the identification of 11 outstanding walking football initiatives. This milestone culminates in the unveiling of this Best Practice Handbook, a compendium that not only celebrates exemplary practices but also serves as a strategic

roadmap for stakeholders committed to advancing walking football. This collective effort reflects the league's commitment to nurturing a vibrant and health-conscious community, fostering a transcontinental alliance dedicated to the holistic development of walking football across Europe.

GLOSSARY

- **Cognitive Function:** Cognitive function involves mental processes such as perception, attention, memory, and reasoning. Walking football, with its blend of physical and mental demands, serves as an ideal catalyst for cognitive function, promoting mental fitness.
- **Social Inclusion:** Social inclusion involves creating an environment where everyone feels valued and has opportunities to participate.
- **HEPA (Health-Enhancing Physical Activities):** HEPA refers to activities that contribute to the improvement or maintenance of physical fitness and overall health.
- **Active Aging:** Active aging promotes staying physically active as one ages to maintain a vibrant lifestyle. Walking football is a prime example of an activity that supports active aging.
- **Social Isolation:** Social isolation occurs when individuals lack social connections and engagement. Initiatives like walking football play a crucial role in addressing social isolation among older adults by providing a platform for social interaction.
- **Sustainable Funding:** The challenge of securing continuous financial support for walking football projects to ensure their long-term growth and development.
- **Commercial Sponsorships:** Exploring partnerships with businesses or organizations to provide financial support for walking football programs.
- **Resilience:** The ability of the walking football community to withstand and overcome challenges, demonstrating continuous dedication to growth and improvement.
- **Self-Reliance:** The community's ability to independently address challenges and strive for success, even within financial constraints.
- **Camaraderie:** The sense of friendship and community among participants, emphasizing the importance of creating a social and enjoyable atmosphere during walking football sessions.

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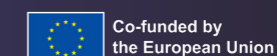
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