

‘He’s Running, Ref!’ An Ethnographic Study of Walking Football.

Abstract

This paper explores the experience of playing walking football (w/f) in the south of England. Ethnographic research was carried out at a local authority leisure centre and non-league football club. Data were accumulated through an ethnographic approach which consisted of participant observation, informal conversations with walking footballers and facilitators and documentary collection. The research period ran throughout 2015 -16 for a period of eighteen months. The data, which were analysed reflectively using insights from feminist scholarship, suggest that players experienced a number of benefits from participation. In particular, players reported an increased appetite for life and positivity engendered by playing w/f, together with enhanced levels of social engagement. They reported feelings of social connectedness, enjoyment and inclusion as members of a supportive community. However, there is some evidence of conflict over the philosophy and purpose of w/f/, especially in relation to the spirit of the game and the competitive tournament environment. Further work around these areas is recommended.

Keywords

walking football – health and wellbeing – enjoyment and inclusion

Introduction

Football is widely regarded as the most popular sport in the world and has been heavily researched in recent decades. For example, masculinity and hooliganism¹, the history of football,² global politics³ and women’s football⁴, have all been subjects of academic attention. There is little doubting football’s global popularity and high media profile. For example, an article by Byrne (2014) suggested that many football fans in China identified themselves as fans of Premier League clubs, viewing matches collectively on television and investing “lots of their energies and social time to fandom.”⁵ Yet, despite this position of relative strength, ever greater efforts are made to promote football playing opportunities to a wider audience, including older players. In addition, although the body of work around football is both disciplinary and methodologically diverse, there appears to be a paucity of research into the experiences of recreational (grass-roots) players in later life. As others have noted,⁶ much of the focus of published work has tended to be around elite, professional levels. This paper seeks to contribute to our knowledge of grass-roots participation in a newly emerging form of football called Walking Football (hereafter, w/f).

What is walking football?

Walking football has existed in England for the last 3 or four years; it is difficult to pinpoint a precise starting date. For example, the *Facebook* page for one of the football centres included in this study was launched on 11 September 2014, which was also the date of the first session.⁷ More widely, a *Google* search identifies that a w/f video was uploaded to *Youtube* by Barclays UK in March 2013, as part of their national advertising campaign to promote the digitalisation of personal banking to an older generation⁸. In England, recreational football is organized through county football association offices and w/f comes within their remit. The overall aim is to engage older players (over 50) in a modified, accessible form of the sport. As the name suggests, running is not allowed and is penalised with an indirect free kick. An indirect free kick is also awarded against a player committing a sliding tackle. In many, though not all matches, it is an offence to send the ball deliberately above head height and to head the ball. There are however some local variations to this rule. The pitch is of a reduced size (length minimum 25 m maximum 50m) 20 m) so too are the goals (3 m minimum, 5 m maximum width; 1.20 minimum height 2m maximum).⁹ Outfield player movement is also restricted – only the goalkeeper is allowed in the penalty area. Teams usually have 5 or 6 players each and matches last for a maximum of 15 minutes. In short, w/f has smaller pitches, smaller goals, shorter game time, less players per team and no running, compared to ‘normal’ football.

The overall aims of these rules are to minimise physical contact, increase player involvement with the ball and reduce the risk of injury. Summarising these points, the Hampshire FA describes w/f as “a slower version of the beautiful game”.¹⁰ The evidence from this small scale study suggests that w/f is played and refereed overwhelmingly by men; the author has played against two women in the two years he has been playing w/f/ and has not seen a female match official. However, w/f is very much in line with government concerns to develop physically active citizens and stave off ill health in later life. In Britain, as in many countries, policies concerned with sport, health and social cohesion repeatedly encourage all sections of the population to engage, persist with and return to physical activity. Therefore, the research has a value and currency in exploring playing experiences against this policy background. The following section describes the two settings where research was carried out.

The Research Context: Two Walking Football Settings

The first setting, ‘Mayflower Park,’ is a community leisure centre serving a socially mixed population in an urban area of southern England. Interest in football is high; a number of professional men’s clubs and women’s teams play in the region. Mayflower Park offers opportunities to participate in a wide range of physical activities, of which w/f one. The cost of w/f is £3 per session, either in a sports hall or outside on a multi-sport artificial surface. Sessions are normally facilitated by a younger volunteer (for example, a male Sports Studies undergraduate student). As the research has developed, the facilitator has changed from a volunteer to a paid employee (also male) of a sport company. At the start of the research, w/f had exclusive use of the sports hall; more recently, it has been shared with another group participating in *Buggy Workout*. An upgrading of facilities at Mayflower Park has enabled outdoor matches on multi-use, artificial pitches.

[Figure 1 near here]

The w/f facilitator normally starts by dealing with administration – for example, keeping a register of attendance, outlining arrangements for the following week or re-emphasising match rules. Session used to include a cooling down and stretching period, led by the facilitator, and embraced with varying degrees of enthusiasm by players. A change of personnel, mentioned above, has ended the stretching and cooling down regime. All players are white males. Most of the group meet up afterwards in the coffee lounge to socialise and relax, giving rise to the development of ‘community sentiments’.¹¹ Social connections between group members are furthered through occasional summaries of sessions, written by one of the players and circulated by group email, for example:

[Table 1 near here]

The second setting, Golden Sands, is the name given to the stadium of a non-league football club. All matches take place outdoors on enclosed, purpose built artificial pitches. Tea, coffee and soft cold drinks are provided, a cooked lunch is also available. (Interestingly, in the days before resubmission of this article, the operational management at Golden Sands appeared to become less accommodating of w/f – for example, no lunch provision and minimal changing facilities – a situation which coincided with ground redevelopment and ‘modernisation.’) Water bottles are brought out to the pitch-side for drinks breaks between matches. Coloured bibs are distributed to identify teams before the group leaves the changing area; there are normally sufficient numbers to form 5 or 6 teams of 5 players. Although there are no match reports, a team page has been created on *Facebook* and some players have contributed short profiles. The popular, middle aged, male facilitator is an employee of the football club, with a remit to develop walking football. He frequently uses ‘banter’ as key strategy to build relationships with the group. (This person has now left the club). Players are almost exclusively white males although a very few women and girls have occasionally attended. As the research has developed, the facilitator has moved to a different role within the club and sessions are now managed by two long-established players. The Golden Sands group also play matches against other teams in the region and the ethos around the club is fairly competitive. A small group have visited a Premier League football club to take part in a community football event, involving a round-trip of several hundred miles. At the time of writing, a short overseas tour is planned. People are investing in the sport. Compared to matches at Mayflower Park, the overall standard of play is higher; the ball is moved more quickly, and there is less time for decision-making. Rules about not running are also more rigorously applied, although this often provides a point of controversy (“He’s Running, Ref!”).

Literature Review

As it is a newly established form of football, relatively few studies have a specific focus on w/f. Those which do exist have tended to consider the instrumental use of walking football to achieve desirable health outcomes for older populations. For example, one group of researchers¹² reviewed the effectiveness of a community health-improvement pilot programme

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at Burton Albion Football Club. Their evaluative study considered a range of physical activity opportunities – including walking football - provided at the club. The outcomes suggested that physical and psychological aspects of health and wellbeing improved by participation in such activities. In relation to the instrumental use of football to influence children's 'healthful behaviours', a different group¹³ explored processes and participation in a community based football scheme. One of the main findings from this research was the important contribution of the session facilitator to sustaining positive engagement. An effective facilitator appeared to be one capable of introducing variety, humour and fun activities in sessions, creating an encouraging climate for participation.

One study which does consider the experiences of recreational footballers focused on the creation and development of a community club in the suburbs of Stockholm.¹⁴ Ethnographic work by Dolk and Kuhn indicates that alternative forms of football, with an emphasis on inclusion and enjoyment, can prove attractive to those disenfranchised by the 'stereotypical, testosterone-driven' culture of mainstream sport. The authors argue that Club SK17 offers participation opportunities for wider sections of the community, suggesting that a less physical style of football is viewed favourably by many players. According to this study, responsibility is placed on all participants to include everyone in the game, in a climate which provides for encouragement rather than critique.

Most recently, Arnold *et al*¹⁵, confirm the overall physical benefits associated with w/f participation. The main emphasis of their research is to identify anthropometrical and fitness changes following a 12 week programme of w/f. However, their article does mention in its concluding section that other contributory factors, such as lifestyle and dietary choices, will impact the results of participation. What their study does not explore is the part that w/f might play in supporting emotional wellbeing, framed within a more holistic interpretation of health.¹⁶ Some Local Authorities, seeking to promote community health and active participation amongst an older section of the population, have chosen to endorse w/f from this perspective.¹⁷ The theme of lifelong participation is also supported by Reddy¹⁸, who argues that the continuing growth of w/f should enable individuals to continue playing until their late sixties and seventies, or beyond. (One player at Golden Sands is an octogenarian). The benefits suggested by Reddy include the 'psychological satisfaction' derived from the playing experience. It is unclear exactly what kind of 'psychological satisfaction' might arise (for example, gains in confidence or feelings of competence in skill learning and performance). However, the suggestion that w/f might offer health gains beyond the physical domain – for example with mental health issues - is consistent with the findings of this study, and will be discussed in later sections.

In terms of international research, the authors of a Danish study concluded that team sports 'seem to be intrinsically motivating to the participants through positive social interaction and play'¹⁹. Other writers have also claimed²⁰ that physical activity promotes a higher quality of life, as it brings about enhanced access to new social, aesthetic and environmental experiences. In a community setting which w/f provides, further research is necessary to examine the social processes and interactions present in the football milieu. On the one hand, w/f might bring positive emotional benefits through meeting new friends or sharing a great team passing move leading to a goal. On the other, social exchanges such as not being selected for a team, or receiving criticism during or after matches might have negative consequences for the self.

Although there is plentiful evidence to support engagement with physical activity, sections of the literature have identified some drawbacks to participation. For example, it is reported that, in many cases, older people involved in physical activity have little tolerance for strenuous

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exercises due to low fitness levels²¹. Furthermore, some activities can cause ‘soreness, discomfort or pain’ afterwards. Indeed, some authors²² maintain that experiencing pain was one of the main barriers to exercise in older people. The main implication of this research is that it is not possible to state uncritically that all forms of physical activity will automatically prove beneficial; there is a cost which participants have to accept.

Similarly, claims for relationship development through sport have sometimes been exaggerated. They have tended to overlook the fact that, in some situations, certain kinds of relationships are given primacy over others. For example, the concept of masculine identity work, enacted through social rituals and physical/verbal interactions between players, has been said to be one way of prioritising an athletic, heterosexual, male identity.²³ Such behaviours might be interpreted either positively, as team bonding activities, or negatively as exclusionary practices. Authors subscribing to the latter position argued that dominant, heterosexual sporting definitions of masculinity served to reward high status athletes displaying the required personal characteristics (e.g. toughness and aggression) whilst trivialising and disenfranchising others²⁴. Paul Hoch (1972) was one of the first to argue critically that sport can provide arenas for this kind of behaviour, which he referred to as ‘jock culture’. In this paper, I argue that here is no monolithic football culture, it is varied and shifting. Efforts have been made by the Football Association (FA) to bring about a change of culture. For example, through taking disciplinary action against professional players using homophobic language, the FA has demonstrated a willingness to modernise and challenge outdated and prejudicial social views. Yet, we are reminded²⁵ that football is often regarded as an activity replete with ‘blood and thunder’, and with ‘high levels of physical competition.’ If these characteristics are carried forwards into w/f, then the activity may well become less attractive for some individuals and hence, less inclusive. We are alerted to this possibility by Reddy, who suggests that football as an activity is prone to these issues, as there is an established culture of confrontation within the game²⁶.

Methodology

The overarching aim of the research was to explore what walking football was ‘all about,’ from the perspective of a player. An ethnographic approach was adopted over an eighteen month time span, enabling sustained immersion in the activity. Ethnography involves attempting to describe everyday life ‘from the points of view of those who live it.’²⁷ It is an approach which has been recognised as valuable within the social sciences and in the study of physical activity and physical education. For example, ethnographic methods, aligned to a feminist perspective,²⁸ provided a framework for exploring critically the construction of gender relations in elite level windsurfing. The researcher was able, as a skilled and experienced windsurfer, to negotiate access to a windsurfing group and document the social reality of their experiences. She possessed the status and credibility to access these social situations at first hand. In physical education, a study²⁹ focussing on the professional world of two secondary school teachers was facilitated by the researcher taking a supportive role in school for several months. In developing this research, I spent time around the two w/f settings acclimatising to the playing environments, competing in tournaments and becoming acquainted with a wide range of players; some of whom I have come to regard as friends. Over time, open and relaxed relationships were established through the process of ‘being around people’,³⁰ with the methodology anchored in these naturally occurring social relationships. In line with a flexible, ethnographic approach, incidents and conversations were noted as and when they arose to create data from the fluid social milieu. Documentary evidence, including registers of attendance supplied by one club secretary, supported this material.

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I took part in more than 30 sessions (45 hours) of w/f and four, all-day regional tournaments during a period of ‘extended participation in the field’³¹. I also attended club social events, responded to email conversations and *Facebook* postings. Field notes were kept in a diary detailing incidents taking place before, during and after sessions. Conversations took place in various locations, including at the side of the pitches during drinks breaks between matches, in car parks, minibuses, coffee bars and clubhouses. Often, a few remarks would be shared whilst walking to and from the pitches. There were no structured interviews and no formal sampling methods used. These conversations and observations took place from March 2015 to August 2016. Attendance was interrupted by various life events including Jury Service, work commitments and childcare responsibilities. Nevertheless, I attended sessions consistently, and was an established member of both groups.

However, the decision to participate and engage with a group³² and subsequently write about events creates questions of role identity and ethical dilemmas concerning confidentiality and disclosure. For example, one member of the group handed me a word-processed note suggesting that his mental health had been helped by playing w/f. Another disclosed he had been the victim of an assault which had left him with life altering injuries. There is no easy answer to these ethical dilemmas. A further example occurred early on, when I decided not to challenge a racist comment made to me during a pre-match conversation. Furthermore, such judgements varied according to how much time I had spent with the group and how confident I was feeling at the time. For example, when one player suggested that the lone female member of the group’s bib (a coloured vest worn to identify players with teams) ‘matched the colour of her eyes’, I said: ‘I don’t think you can say that now Barney, the world has moved on.’ Over time, a range of materials accumulated. In reflecting on how these materials were selected and later represented, I acknowledge the filtering of those materials and memories, influenced biography, circumstance and identity. In responding to these concerns, some personal details are included in an attempt to avoid problems associated with the absent authorial voice³³; a weaknesses, it has been suggested, of many qualitative accounts.

As a young person, I played street football with neighbourhood children behind our family’s terraced house and in the local parks. Skills and were developed at primary and secondary school during timetabled physical education (PE) lessons, lunchtime and after-school ‘kickabouts’ and representative matches against other schools. Subsequently, at a PE (Physical Education) College in England, matches against local league teams and Higher Education establishments developed a competitive sport orientation. As a young adult, I played for various works’ teams and in my middle years continue to play informal, evening football at the local secondary school. For these biographical reasons, the football environment is one I am familiar with, which perhaps explains why ‘access problems’³⁴ were not encountered. Arguably, engagement was made ‘more possible’ because of my football biography, with the final crafted text based upon ‘careful but selective observation’³⁵.

[Figure 2 near here]

Ethics

Although University guidelines on ethical research were implemented, the process was not always straightforward. For example, the explanation of the Informed Consent Forms required further clarification. One participant wondered if I wanted him to include his middle name on the form. Another asked, after reading the informed consent form: “What does RKE mean”? (This University acronym means *Research and Knowledge Exchange*).

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[Table 2 near here]

In relation to ethics and the decisions made by the researcher, a number of authors have advised that ‘judgement should be carefully exercised’³⁶. In line with University policy, all identities are kept confidential; this includes the identities of individuals and organizations; pseudonyms are used throughout for this purpose. Transcripts of field notes are kept securely in a password protected file and all data will be destroyed on completion of the project. Care was taken to obtain the appropriate research consents of staff at the Mayflower Park Leisure Centre and Golden Valley Football Club. The final version of the paper was emailed to the two facilitators and one of the participants (Mickey Lord) prior to submission, providing them with further opportunities for comment and reflection. Two emailed acknowledgements were received, with no suggestions for amendments, although Mickey did subsequently suggest he would have liked to have chosen his own pseudonym!

Health and Wellbeing: Mickey Lord’s Story

“Football isn’t a matter of life and death. It’s much, much more important than that.” This quotation is attributed to the late Bill Shankly³⁷. Whilst the above statement might indicate the former Liverpool manager’s personal obsession with football, it can also be said to resonate with a piece of documentary evidence, supplied at the end of one session. The word processed note handed to me by Mickey Lord supports the view that there is more to football than kicking a ball around a pitch. In this note, Mickey describes how walking football encouraged him to re-assess his priorities and take a much more positive view of life. Indeed, he regards playing w/f ‘as the last rung on a ladder from a deep well of misery, depression and despair.’ I would suggest that this piece of documentary evidence supports the view that participation in w/f can give a renewed sense of direction and purpose to some individuals, and support mental health and wellbeing in later life:

Personal Communication received 14.07.15

‘You asked last week at Mayflower Park, what Walking Football, meant to me, and as per usual we went off in a totally different direction and you never got an answer. I have had time to think about this so here goes. When I first saw the ad for Walking Football I was totally convinced this was not for me. I had never been good at football, and did not imagine that the passage of time since I had last kicked a ball would have made me the over 50s Messi. I put the paper down and thought no more of it, however an increase in my blood sugar levels, drew me back to look once again. If it was walking I thought no one could run past me, how wrong I was on that score, a little walking could be just the thing.

I attended my first session at [Mayflower Park Leisure Centre] in mid-December, and soon discovered that I was both as unfit as I thought, and as useless at football as I had been 45 years ago, but the blood sugar level needed to be reduced. After that first session, we went upstairs for a coffee, and I think it was then I became a convert to Walking Football. I was aching all

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over, but the friendly banter, made me laugh, and knowing that we were all in the same boat seemed to help. I suffered all over the Christmas period with pain, much to my relative's amusement, but come the New Year I was back for more. I now do Walking Football at 4 different venues on 3 days, I am still as useless as I ever was, but I do not care one iota. I enjoy the physical exercise, but almost on a par is the conversation between us before, during and after a session.

This is a bit deeper do with it what you will, I think Walking Football as the last rung on a ladder from a deep well of misery, depression and despair. Almost two years ago I was in a very dark place that had put me on a roof top restaurant in Singapore looking down with only one thought in mind; I had gone on the Lions Tour with no intention of returning. I did not jump as my being here proves, but I spent a long time fighting my demons, and to me Walking Football is another step if not the final one, back from the abyss.

Mickey Lord.”

(Handwritten underneath in capitals: “PS BLOOD SUGAR LEVEL BACK TO NORMAL”)

Some of Mickey's comments are in line with the suggestion³⁸ that relationships play a crucial role in an individual's wellbeing. Indeed, some theorists³⁹ maintain that continuous exercise promotes a sense of self-efficacy, maintaining feelings of wellbeing in the form of self-worth and personal development. It should be noted that Mickey has taken on some responsibilities for the organisation of some of the sessions, distributing bibs and selecting balanced teams. He and his partner have attended several tournaments in a supportive capacity, and he clearly values the social experiences provided by w/f both on and off the field. He has recently enrolled on a course of part time course of study at a local College. Arguably then, social activities which promote the creation and subsequent maintenance of meaningful relationships can help people, particularly those older in society, stay healthy on a multi-functional basis. Thus, it appears reasonable to suggest that w/f might help reduce an individual's feelings of depression and encourage a more optimistic outlook on life. Most studies report an inverse relationship between physical activity and depressive symptoms⁴⁰, which resonates with Mickey's experiences and the published work reviewed.

The connections between physical activity and mental health have been explored by a number of scholars dating back at least to the end of the nineteenth century. For example, one historical review of the literature⁴¹, refers to work by the psychologist William James (1842 – 1910) who suggested that vigorous muscular exertion would make us ‘good humoured and easy of approach.’ This review suggests that James was one of the earliest psychologists to address ‘the role of exercise in improving how people feel’⁴². In terms of this research project, other comments and conversations indicated an awareness of the role of w/f in promoting physical health, especially in relation to weight loss and weight management. Other players mentioned specific medical conditions (e.g. Parkinson's and Sciatica) which influenced their decision to participate from a therapeutic standpoint. However, this paper emphasises the non-physical health benefits of participation and suggests that further work is necessary to develop our understanding of this area.

[Table 3 near here]

Enjoyment and Inclusion – Stories from the Field

As previously described, in the United Kingdom, the aggressive nature of mainstream (running) football has long been recognised and perhaps, in some quarters, still celebrated⁴³. However, for some players, this aggressive/competitive ethos is not necessarily attractive. The above email message about ‘some of the guys taking it all a bit too seriously’ appears to substantiate this point, as does this scene described in field notes:

[Table 4 near here]

Pain is considered one of the main barriers to exercise in older people⁴⁴. However, the emailed comments from Charlie indicate that older players will accommodate pain and discomfort, if they judge the pay-off to be worthwhile in terms of fun and enjoyment. Humour has a part to play here, as evidenced by the following incidents:

[Table 5 near here]

The data suggest that climate of participation at Mayflower Park is highly inclusive. One definition of inclusion⁴⁵ ‘a place where everyone belongs, is accepted, supports and is supported by his or her peers.’ For example, according to Mickey Lord, one of the players ‘is not exactly on the same page; John does whatever John wants to do...and that’s fine’ (field notes, 31 March 2015). It had been noticeable, for example, that no-one normally rushed to take the ball off John, despite his relative slowness in some game situations. However, this was not always the case:

[Table 6 near here]

Despite the incident above, differences in footballing ability, concentration levels and energy are usually accommodated at Mayflower Park. Further evidence of this is provided by the following view from Ray that: “the best thing about the Tuesday group is that people are *allowed* to play.” (Field Notes, 31 March 2015). Further evidence of inclusivity is presented in the following extracts from a field diary:

[Table 7 near here]

At Golden Sands, inclusivity took a slightly different form. For example, at the start of one session, the facilitator announced that we would be joined by members of a local Young Carers group who had expressed an interest in playing (Field Notes, October 2015). A Young Carer is ‘a person under the age of 18 who is forced to grow up early and miss out on the same opportunities as other children because they care for family members who are disabled or chronically ill, or for adults who are misusing alcohol or drugs’⁴⁶. This session saw young

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people aged between 10 and 14 playing alongside the regular adult players at Golden Sands. The regular walking footballers encouraged the young people to take part, making allowances for the fact that it was a new footballing experience. It must sound contrived⁴⁷, but when one Young Carer scored a goal, another shouted “Yes! We’ve all scored one now!” Some might argue that these experiences represent a form of bridging capital and that wider community benefits arise from meaningful, shared experiences across the generational divide⁴⁸. Such experiences allow people of different ages to ‘see each other in a different light’ and enable preconceptions based on age to be challenged. Indeed, such connections and interactions are thought to be at the heart of a healthy community⁴⁹.

Inclusion at Golden Sands also meant showing concern for others not regularly playing, and perhaps this represented a wider sense of community inclusion.

[Table 8 near here]

Is There a Walking Football Community?

It has been argued that ‘Community’ can be contested and contradictory⁵⁰, meaning many different things to different people. One author has suggested that ‘a fixed and bounded location⁵¹’ within which people might co-exist, interact and go about their purposeful activities is helpful in developing our understanding of the term. At one level, it is tempting to consider the pitches and social arenas of Mayflower Park and Golden Sands as fixed and bounded locations. Yet the existence of social media pages, email communications and text messaging indicate that community membership extends beyond physical proximity. Other writers have pointed to a sense of connectedness between members as a salient community characteristic. For example, the view that a community is best understood as a group of persons who are...’meaningfully connected, for example, through forms of communication, recognition and/or shared identity’⁵² might best encapsulate the w/f community. It is suggested that the act of joining a community of individuals who share an interest in w/f enables older people to gain a possible feeling of belonging, community value and encouragement. Seen in this way, w/f supports social capital⁵³, through building connections and forging long-term friendships. The varied examples of social support and interest in the welfare of others, demonstrated by cards, collections, email messages and Young Carers’ opportunities might be said to constitute examples of social capital in action, enriching the lives of those involved.

That said, the issue of who plays walking football requires further consideration. In essence, the research from this programme indicates that it is primarily white middle aged and older men. Over the eighteen month period of research, only three females were seen playing w/f and even fewer from minority ethnic groups. Hence, although w/f is heavily promoted as an inclusive activity, the data suggests that it is currently a white, male dominated sport. This contrasts sharply with the Football Association’s commitment to equity and opportunity, and desire to “double the player base and fan following of female football”.⁵⁴ Only ‘time will tell’ whether walking football begins to address some of these issues and aspirations. As stated, this study had a specific focus on two w/f centres in the south of England, enabling a detailed picture of each centre to be built up and discussed. Therefore, from this study, it is not possible to draw inferences about how regional variations might influence the w/f playing experience or perceptions of the sport in other part of the country.

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Conclusion

This paper has identified health and wellbeing, enjoyment and inclusion as key themes from an ethnographic study. Whilst some aspects of the literature identify toughness and aggression as prominent features of the footballing landscape, this study has identified the development of community sentiments, friendship and consideration for others as alternative possibilities. The relationships arising from these connections appear to benefit some players' mental health. The outcomes of this study suggest that playing grass-roots (recreational) football has much to offer in terms of community bonding, relationship-building and the health and wellbeing of older people.

The data also suggest that one of the anomalies of w/f is an emergent polarisation of playing styles between individuals and teams. This means that, for some, replicating the cut and thrust of running football, vocalising loudly and winning tournaments appear to be of decisive importance. For others, participation is all. As Arthur (aged 87) told me after one recreational club session: "That was great. It doesn't matter whether I win, lose or draw, I really enjoy it." By contrast, at a recent tournament I played in, the referee walked off the pitch half way through the match, stating he would "never have anything to do with walking football again." This action followed repeated running, physicality and argumentation by some players. This varying philosophy concerning what w/f is, or should be, presents some challenges for match referees and those administrators seeking to develop the competitive ethos of the sport. Further research might explore the ways in which referees handle the challenges and expectations of tournament matches, whether players should be encouraged to 'take more responsibility' when tempers fray and whether a clearly demarcated two tier structure of competitive and social walking football might better serve people's needs. At the moment, some regulatory bodies⁵⁵ appear to be trying to combine two arguably incompatible views – a 'slower paced version of the beautiful game, designed to help keep people active and...the excitement of competitive sport.'

As indicated above, there are some less positive aspects to w/f. These include physical discomfort, differing interpretations of playing rules and playing styles and occasional tension in group dynamics and between individuals. Players appear willing to accept the pain and muscular soreness sometimes brought on by w/f, if it is offset by an enjoyable and inclusive playing experience. The degree of seriousness (competition) offered at w/f sessions needs to be carefully considered and managed, however. Examining the evidence from this study, not all participants appeared to relish the confrontational flashpoint moments which occasionally developed. Others found residues of macho posturing tedious and puerile:

[Table 9 near here]

Evidence also suggests that the freedom and flexibility to play in a manner according to individual choice is important. For example, at one tournament another player said to me: "I'm not enjoying this very much...I'm sixty years old...I don't want to be micromanaged." Facilitators should, therefore, continue to strive for an appropriate climate of participation. This might include recognising the many years of experience and playing knowledge within the group and challenging some of the outdated social views which may still be associated with

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football. Overall, however, the evidence suggests that there are many benefits to participation across both physical and mental aspects of health. Players have reported increased appetite for life and positivity engendered by playing w/f, together with enhanced levels of social engagement. In drawing this paper to a conclusion, I argue that Mickey Lord's story supports the argument that wider social and emotional benefits of participation should not be underestimated. The power of grass-roots football as a catalyst for good social outcomes is sometimes overshadowed by highly publicised incidents and controversies at elite level; footballers are often portrayed in one dimensional terms which may not always 'tell the full story.' If we accept the view ⁵⁶ that for every 1,000 people over the age of 65, 250 will have a mental health issue, perhaps w/f has a positive role to play in supporting this aspect of older people's health. Further work around w/f/ with a specific focus on mental health issues is therefore recommended. In addition, further research into styles of participation, the spirit of the game, and the competitive environment may also prove fruitful.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest is reported by the author. There are no financial interests or benefits arising from the direct applications of this research.

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Tables and Figures

Figure 1 Sports Hall Action from Mayflower Park



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Table 1 Match Report Circulated by Group Email

Hi All

A beautiful Spring morning saw the Tuesday gang outside on the 4g pitch. The dimensions of the playing surface result in low scoring games just lately and some members voiced ideas about shortening the area thus reducing blue area around the goals. If we could all give a couple of minutes thought to this 'cos we do seem to breaking into runs a lot. Anyway, the football was intense and the bibs ran out 4 – 1 winners. Lord Riley decided on two evenly matched sides and the first 1/3 ended 0 – 0. In the 2/3 with Bob Thomas and Mike Smith hugging the side-lines the space opened up for the Bibs midfield of Dave Emerson and Geoff? to take control. Then the goals started to flow. The second 1/3 ended at 3 – 1 to the bibs. Big Ron was impenetrable in goal despite the clever probing of Bobby Mason and Sandy Carlisle. New guy Barry did his best to improve the scoring but the game ended in a 4 – 1 drubbing for the non-bibs.

The cameras were in attendance and all the action can be viewed at...

Figure 2 The author was a member of a Higher Education football team (1982)



Table 2 Field Notes, March 2015

Bit of fussing over the ethics forms, takes longer than expected.

(Papers spread over the coffee bar tables.)

Joe wants to “take it away and bring it in next week.”

Archie asks what a “DBS check” is (*Disclosure and Barring Service*).

Table 3 Enjoyment and Inclusion: Email exchanges from Mayflower Park

Hey Charlie,

Haven't seen you and Tosh lately. You both alright????

Barry.

Hi Barry,

Thanks for your email .

As far as I know Tosh is fine - although as I have been away for the last week I haven't

seen him for a while. Last time I spoke to him about football he was sure he wasn't going to go again. I don't think that he will change his mind.

I haven't been for a while now and to be honest I think it is a little unlikely that I will attend again. Some of the guys are taking it all a bit too seriously and all the fun we used to have has dissipated during the course of the first few months of this year. This is not what I expected. I'm disappointed not to be playing but said all along that I would put up with my injuries (and I've had plenty of these over the last 18 months) as long as I continue to enjoy playing.

But the enjoyment has gone and now so have I.

I wish you all well and hope I'll see you around some time.

Charlie.

Reply from Charlie Bryant. Is there anything we can do to address this???? Barry.

Table 4 Field Notes Competitiveness 28 April 2015

Only other incident today was encounter between two of the more energetic players (names unknown).

One guy tried to play the ball from behind his opponent, and managed to trip him over.

It just seemed clumsy, but the player on the floor quickly jumped up.

He stood facing the other guy, glaring.

Reaction did not completely surprise me; things can escalate 'in the heat of the moment.'

Table 5 Field Notes from Mayflower Park 14 and 28 April 2015

Mayflower Park, 14 April:

Funny incident today when I called for the ball from Tony, our goalkeeper.

I shouted: "Little Roller!"

This was intended to encourage Tony to roll the ball underarm a short distance, towards me.

John (quietly): "There's no need to call Tony that".

Mayflower Park, 28 April:

Some amusement when one of the players caught the full force of a shot in lower abdomen/groin. We all sympathised, but couldn't help laughing.

As Mike lay poleaxed, John murmured: “Nobody’s going to put their hand in there”.

Table 6 Field Notes from Mayflower Park 12 May 2015

Brian (playing in goal) gently rolls the ball towards John.
 John is not seeing much of the action, seems to be losing confidence.
 (Earlier, he shouted: “Not me, Not me!” when he senses the ball may be coming his way.)
 One of our team (Colin) easily takes the ball off John, shoots and scores.
 Brian ‘has a word’ with Colin.

Table 7 Field Notes from Mayflower Park 12 May 2015

Atmosphere supportive, comments such as “Good idea” from Ollie (facilitator) when things didn’t quite go to plan and “Well played” (from both teams) when they did.
 Encouraging atmosphere to play in.
 No really dominant personalities.
 One or two collisions, some falling over...people stumbling over ball.
 But game was stopped long enough for them to recover...

Table 8 Field Notes from Golden Sands 02 April 2015

Pre-match announcements today were “not all good news”.
 One member of the group had been moved to a specialist hospital preparing for heart surgery.
 Facilitator had bought a card and asked us to sign it.
 A card had also been bought for a player who had “done his Achilles” recently, and who would probably not be able to play again.
 Brown wicker collection basket next to cards propped up on bar, people were contributing...

Table 9 Field Notes from Golden Sands 02 April 2015

The tall dominant figure called Bert, who is something of a ‘character’, arrived slightly late today, halfway through the notices.

He’d been ‘stuck in traffic.’

He announced his presence by throwing one of his boots towards the facilitator.

A few of the group raised their eyebrows.

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Notes

1. Murphy, Williams, and Dunning, '*Football on Trial*'.
2. Goldblatt, '*The Ball is Round*'.
3. Giulianotti, '*Football*'.
4. Lopez, '*Women on the Ball*'.
5. Byrne, 'Football Fever in China'.
6. O'Gorman, 'Developing the research agenda in junior and youth grassroots football culture'.
7. Golden Sands w/f facilitator, personal communication by email with attached spreadsheet of records of attendance.
8. Barclays UK, '*Digital Eagles*'.
9. Hampshire Football Association, '*Walking Football Toolkit*'
10. Ibid.
11. For a consideration of how informality of relationships between participants in an outdoor education context might facilitate community sentiments, see Gee, 'Creating a Temporary Community'.
12. Arnold *et al*, 'The impact of 12 week walking football on health and fitness in males over 50 years of age'.
13. Parnell *et al*, '*Football in the Community*'.
14. Dolk and Kuhn were part of a group who founded Club SK 17 as a political response to changing government policies and priorities. SK 17 is named after the postcode of the district in Stockholm where matches take place.
15. Arnold *et al*.
16. The World Health Organisation's multidimensional definition of health is widely accepted, incorporating more than the absence of disease from the body.
17. For example, Havant Borough Council suggest one of the purposes of w/f is to promote the continuation of an active and energetic lifestyle in later life, bringing benefits to the individual and wider community.
18. Reddy, '*Walking Football*' phenomenon.
19. Nielsen *et al* emphasised the potential for positive social interactions and for social connectedness developed through participation in team sports.
20. Bennike *et al*, '*Football Fitness*'.
21. Miles, '*Physical Activity and Health*'.

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22. Schutzer and Graves, *Barriers and motivations to exercise*.
23. Messner and Sabo refer to the concept of hegemonic masculinity as a dominant version of masculinity which is prioritised in the sport context. This concept has been widely used in discussions around sport and masculinity.
24. Jennifer Hargreaves' highly influential work questioned entrenched power relations in sport and wider society, drawing attention to the trivialisation of women's sporting achievements and myths such as the incompetent female body and sport as a male preserve.
25. Ince, *Football for the Over 50s*.
26. Reddy, '*Walking Football*' phenomenon.
27. Denzin and Lincoln, *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research*.
28. Belinda Wheaton was an elite level windsurfer who explored gender relations within this sport through ethnographic methods.
29. Keith Lyons took the supportive role of a physical education (PE) assistant teacher to research, with two teachers in different schools, how they experienced the pressures of teaching and documenting moments of success and failure in their professional lives.
30. Lyons, *Telling Stories from the Field?*
31. Hammersley and Atkinson, *Ethnography*.
32. Glaser and Strauss' development of grounded theory involved being part of the group under consideration.
33. Sparkes, *Telling Tales in Sport*.
34. Delamont, *The Old Girl Network*.
35. Lyons, *Telling Stories from the Field*.
36. Smith and Sparkes, *Routledge Handbook of Qualitative Research*.
37. Kelly, *It's Much More Important*.
38. Mental Health Foundation, *Why relationships?*
39. Craft and Perna, *The Benefits of Exercise*.
40. Pinto Pereira *et al*, *Depressive Symptoms and Physical Activity*.
41. Sartorius, *Paths of Medicine*.
42. Lees *et al*, *Barriers to Exercise*.
43. In an earlier account of football in England, Arthur Hopcraft highlighted what he perceived as connections between arduous, manual work and characteristics of football players.
44. Lees *et al*, *Barriers to Exercise*.
45. Godwin, *The Voices of Students with Disabilities*.
46. The Children's Society, *Young Carers*.
47. Lyons, *Telling Stories from the Field*.
48. Putnam wrote about a perceived the decline of community spirit in America and the 'need' to strengthen the bonds between individuals to counteract feelings of isolation
49. Somerville, *Understanding Community*.
50. Stepney and Popple, *Social Work and the Community*.
51. Gee, *Creating a Temporary Community*.

52. Gilchrist, *The Short Guide to Community Development*.
53. Putnam, *Bowling Alone*.
54. The Football Association is the governing body for football in England. It sets out its values and priorities for the development of the sport in its *Strategic Plan 2016-20*.
55. Surrey Football Association, *Age No Barrier*.
56. Burns and Warner, *Better Access to Mental Health*.

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