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The Dark Side of (Later-Life) Leisure: The Case of Walking Football

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Abstract

Leisure is heralded as a channel for connection, belonging, and inclusion in later-life, particularly owing to a presumed threat of isolation and loneliness. Yet, such a framing of later-life leisure risks obscuring moments of conflict and marginalization. Drawing on interviews with 65 people who play walking football, this article explores how players praise its “inclusive” ethic by asserting and celebrating open recruitment policies, the participation of men and women from mixed social backgrounds, and the accommodations afforded to certain players. However, participants simultaneously highlight instances in which inclusion is compromised, such as players disturbing the “ethos” of the sport and mistreating others on account of gender and/or performance levels. Such transgressions, in turn, are navigated in different ways by players and organizers to preserve the sport’s inclusive reputation. To conclude, this article sketches out how the experiences of walking footballers can disrupt sentimental and idealized conceptions of older people’s leisure.

Introduction

Older people’s participation in group leisure activities is frequently recognized as a solution to assumed experiences of isolation and loneliness as men and women age. Later-life leisure is touted as providing an avenue not only for being physically and mentally active, but also for establishing social networks and cultivating a sense of community and belonging (Brown et al., 2008; Choi et al., 2022; Milligan et al., 2015; Stenner et al., 2016). Walking football (or walking soccer), a modified version of running or association football, is an increasingly popular activity that, it is claimed, performs these functions. Walking football is endorsed as a safe, sociable, and inclusive activity that (re)introduces physical activity to men and women in later-life. It is often played by older adults in small-sided games at a recreational and competitive level. A range of rules are established by different ruling bodies, but two stipulations are that players must “walk” instead of “run”, and significant physical contact is

prohibited. Together with being devised to improve health outcomes for participants, walking football is seen as offering “social benefits” (e.g. friendship). It can be considered as one leisure activity, among many, designed and promoted for older people – and particularly older men.

This article reports on the experiences of men and women who take part in walking football in the UK. It begins by summarizing recent scholarship on older people’s leisure as a growing, yet still slender, area of empirical enquiry. This research often describes older people’s leisure in unilaterally positive terms and, in so doing, aligns with “third age” understandings of ageing (Clarke et al., 2020; Foley et al., 2023; Joseph and Southcott, 2019; Minello and Nixon, 2017; Sánchez-Santos et al., 2022). Yet, such analyses of later-life leisure might potentially obscure moments of conflict and marginalization. This reflects a broader trend in leisure studies research: too few scholars sufficiently explore the “costs” of leisure for its participants. Informed by, whilst moving beyond, such scholarship, this article traces the dark edges of leisure, to consider how exclusion plays out in implicit and explicit ways – with walking football as a case example.

Literature review

Older people’s leisure

The experiences of older people taking part in leisure activities is a budding, yet relatively under-explored, area of research. Such work often highlights the opportunities for friendship, camaraderie, and belonging afforded by leisure pursuits. For instance, Men’s Sheds – a community space where older men are encouraged to connect, talk, and create – is endorsed as a vehicle for reducing isolation and loneliness in a “fun” way, and for promoting social inclusion and wellbeing (Foley et al., 2023; Milligan et al., 2015). Leisure becomes a remedy to feelings of isolation, particularly for those who may have lost partners and friends (e.g. divorce, retirement, bereavement) (Nettleton, 2013; Thurnell-Read, 2021; Wheaton, 2017). A sense of belonging and social ties are established, it is stated, by taking part in leisure, including but not limited to physical activity, with others (Choi et al., 2022; Deneau et al., 2022; Drummond, 2008; Minello and Nixon, 2017; Thomas, 2024). The primary focus in these empirical endeavors – by stressing the connection and inclusivity afforded by leisure participation – is on “shared passions rather than ongoing struggles” (Nettleton, 2013, p. 209).

The “costs” of leisure

The assessment of later-life leisure, however, as a channel for connection, belonging, and inclusion risks obscuring experiences of discord, tension, and exclusion. Several scholars have documented the “costs” of leisure for its participants, though this remains a limited area of academic attention. Costs are distinguished here from “barriers”; the former refer to the possible harms and exclusions of leisure participation, whereas the latter refer to the possible obstacles to people becoming

involved in leisure activities in the first place. The contributions discussed here, then, are based on *current* (not *potential*) leisure participants. In an analysis of “serious leisure”, Stebbins (2011, p. 242) recognizes how rewards for participation act as counterweights to the inevitable costs of activities; serious leisure contains “its own combination of tensions, dislikes, and disappointments”. Likewise, Stebbins says, serious leisure participants may not only be burdened with pressures and obligations, but may also be charged by others as being selfish, obsessive, and too serious in their pursuits (see also: Thurnell-Read, 2021). Others might simply not “fit in”. In a study of an all-male choir, Falconer (2022) explores the exclusion of men who are “out of tune” and unable to harmonize – musically and socially – with other men. Likewise, Lake (2013) discusses how new members of a tennis club are excluded for, among other reasons, not abiding by locally established and enforced rules.

Costs also extend to financial, temporal, and structural constraints. In their study on elite bridge, Punch et al. (2022) discuss not only the (interpersonal) costs of losing matches and poor performances, but structural costs including familial obligations and expectations (particularly for women), geographical constraints, and economic means. Similarly, Thurnell-Read (2016, p. 69) suggests that Real Ale appreciation “involves considerable investment of time, effort, and money”, especially as appreciation involves purchasing alcohol and investing in a “leisure career” that necessitates cultivating knowledge, expertise, and experiences. As people need access to goods, time, and status to participate in serious leisure, the experience of it, in turn, is “inherently political” (Gallant et al., 2013, p. 100).

The gendered costs of leisure

One nascent, yet important, line of inquiry with respect to the costs of leisure is its gendered dynamics. In their work on Men’s Sheds as a gendered landscape, Milligan et al. (2015, p. 143) show how “multiple masculinities” play out as some older men “performed traits of a hegemonic masculinity” that excluded some men who were not as skillful and “who did not (or could not) aspire to these so-called normative ideals”. Spaces like Men’s Sheds appeal as fostering inclusion and confronting isolation, yet they may equally have a negative impact on some men (Ratcliffe et al., 2021).

Furthermore, sport and physical activity, as a powerful way to develop social capital (Sánchez-Santos et al., 2022) and masculine capital (Drummond, 2008; Wheaton, 2017), is one site in which the exclusion of women can be observed. In Boyle and McKay’s (1995, p. 556) study of a lawn bowl’s club, a “woman’s place” on- and off-the-field was delineated in terms of otherness. Men were able to bowl freely, whereas women undertook unpaid and voluntary duties, occupied traditional gender roles (e.g. women worked in the club kitchen and men managed the finances), and encountered men trivializing and harassing their style of play. Such harassment “belies the idyllic and romanticized notion of later-life being a time of gender neutrality or levelling” (1995, p. 569). In their analysis of wild-swimming, Bates and Moles (2022, p. 2) recognize that despite claims to inclusivity in this activity, exclusions and absences

“flow alongside and against the tide of belonging”. Communities of wild-swimming appear, at first glance, as homogeneous – White, middle-class women – which raises questions about diversity, accessibility, and the racialization of blue spaces; wild swimming is both “a celebrated and contested space” (2022, p. 2). Similarly, in a study of queer sports spaces in Canada, Carter and Baliko (2017, p. 696) explore how complexities regarding “diverse embodiments – from femme invisibility, racism and trans acceptance, to a preference for androgyny, and fat phobia – ignite uncertainties of community idealism”. Despite sports often being seen as a vehicle to find and/or develop a sense of community by individuals of non-normative gender or sexual identities, Carter and Baliko assert that “they simultaneously erect overarching boundaries at the expense of some bodies and identities” (2017, p. 696).

The case of walking football

Outside of this small body of scholarship, analyses of the prospective costs and exclusionary potential of leisure are underbaked (Thurnell-Read, 2016). This is particularly so for older people; research on later-life leisure commonly strikes a chirpy and idealized tone – heralding it as a vehicle for sociality, belonging, and inclusion – in ways that neglect its possible tensions and exclusions. Drawing on 65 interviews with men and women who play walking football in the UK, this article captures how the players praise its “inclusive” ethic by asserting and celebrating open recruitment policies, the participation of men and women from mixed social backgrounds, and the allowances afforded to particular players (e.g. players with dementia and/or players with limited mobility). However, players simultaneously highlight instances in which inclusion is compromised, such as players disturbing the expectations of others (i.e. its inclusive ethos) and mistreating players on the grounds of gender and/or performance levels. Such transgressions, in turn, are managed by players and organizers in an attempt to preserve the sport’s inclusive reputation. By thinking through the dissonances and balances of forces between the idealised scenarios and the realities of walking footballer’s practices, we can see how such experiences can disrupt sentimental and idealized comprehensions of older people’s leisure.

Methods

Semi-structured interviews were carried out between July 2022 and October 2022 with 65 people who played walking football in the UK. Potential participants were recruited from June 2022 onwards, by posting messages on social media to local walking football clubs and sending an email to the Walking Football Association (WFA). A subsequent email calling for participants was sent out by WFA, which led to over two-hundred responses in two days, in which the respective individuals indicated their willingness to take part in the study. In deciding who would be invited for interview, all women who volunteered were recruited (as most respondents were men) as were the first 40 men to respond since this would take the participant pool to over 50 (the desired number of participants). Of all participants, 53 were men and 12 were women.

With respect to sampling, age limits were not placed on eligibility criteria, so as to open recruitment to all people who played walking football (including women). Whilst 10 men and 4 women are under the age of 60 (and so are not defined in this article as 'older people'), their experiences of playing alongside other (older) players are crucial for revealing the darker edges of leisure. As such, this article draws on the dataset of all 65 participants. Players were mixed relating to their social backgrounds, educational history, and employment status. They were also mixed with respect to playing running football at some level in their youth (e.g. school; Sunday league; amateur; semi-professional; professional). Most men played running football before playing walking football, but many women in this study had never – or more sporadically – played running football on account of gendered norms and expectations in their youth. Indeed, during interviews, all women referenced, and lamented, how they were “socialized in times when normative feminine embodiment privileged passivity” (Palmer et al., 2021, p. 951).

Interviews were conversational, audio-recorded, and ranged from thirty minutes to over one hour in length. All interviews were conducted online with video capability enabled. Interviewing online can introduce various problems, such as establishing familiarity, missing visual and non-verbal cues, and connectivity and accessibility issues. In this study, online interviews were a productive approach. Video calling allowed for observing visual/verbal cues; connectivity problems were minimal; digital platforms enabled access to spaces where many people live their lives and are used to occupying (including video-calling), and; geographical restrictions were collapsed. Nonetheless, the method of recruitment, and online interviewing itself, will have excluded prospective participants who are not engaged in online spaces.

During interviews, questions invited participants to discuss their involvement in walking football. They were asked about why they initially became involved in it, its major benefits for them, how it feels to play, and what are its possible drawbacks/challenges, among other matters. Participants were told that interviews would be recorded for transcription purposes, and they could refuse to answer questions, stop the tape-recorder, and/or withdraw from the interview at any time. They were told that their information would be kept confidential/safe, and attempts would be made to preserve their anonymity (pseudonyms are used in this article).

The approach to doing data analysis involved a dialogue between collected data and wider theoretical and empirical contributions, rather than formulating codes in early stages of analysis. This corresponds with Timmermans and Tavory's (2012) “abductive” approach to analysis. For Timmermans and Tavory (2012, p. 169), abductive analysis involves rethinking the guiding principles and sensibilities of grounded theory by “generating anomalous and surprising empirical findings against a background of multiple existing sociological theories and through systematic methodological analysis”. The approach involved attempting to identify patterns in the dataset and to form common themes that framed the analysis during and after the

study. Themes that were cultivated during analysis included (but are not limited to) gendered norms and expectations (particularly relating to masculinity), ageing (e.g. stereotypes), relationships (e.g. friendships, connections, a sense of community and belonging), and experiences of inclusion and exclusion. Such ideas were fleshed out, and finalised, by substantiating conclusions with reference to other scholarship focusing on older people's leisure as well as other theoretical and empirical contributions on these broad themes. In this article, data is drawn on which best corresponds to inclusion and exclusion in leisure practices. The project received ethical approval from the Cardiff University School of Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee.

Results

The analysis is presented in three parts. First, the article focuses on the assertions of inclusivity as expressed by participants. This narrative constitutes an attempt to defend and preserve the inclusive nature of walking football. Second, the threats to this "ethos" are outlined. Attending to the situations and causes of exclusion in walking football, it shows how players disturb the sport's ethos and mistreat others on the grounds of gender and/or performance levels. Third, the article considers attempts by players and organizers at walking football clubs to confront and rectify these threats, ranging from discrete feedback to the outright exile of players.

"It's open to all": The narrative of "inclusivity"

All of the men and women in this study praised walking football as an activity that, among other things, kept them physically and mentally active, offered a medium for social connection and friendship, and allowed them to cultivate a sense of belonging and interdependence. These trends are explored at length elsewhere (Thomas, 2024; Thomas and Thurnell-Read, 2024). Moreover, players praised walking football as an "inclusive" activity. When participants were asked what they meant by this – thus recognizing inclusion not as a taken-for-granted category, but as a locally accomplished discourse – they replicated common descriptors from elsewhere; walking football was "fun", "safe", "accessible", "friendly", "open", "adaptable". More specifically, players often heralded what they saw as a permissive approach to recruiting players and, subsequently, the demographic diversity of its players:

I've never seen anybody turned away, I've never seen anybody not being included...Everybody just sees everybody as a football player...Everybody is just welcomed and they all fit in...Age, gender, sexuality, whatever, I don't think it makes a difference. (Deborah, 57-years-old)

It's very diverse, very inclusive. If you're a lady who comes and wants to play football, you put your hand up, you join us. There are no barriers at all. I don't care if you're black, white, green, pink, or whatever, you can come and play football...I don't think we've ever had one person turn up that's not fitted in and been made to feel welcome. (Jasper, 70)

Walking football was heralded as an activity "open to all"; "we will welcome anybody regardless of race, creed, color, or abilities" (Donald, 68). It should, Zachary (62)

claimed, “cater for everybody”. For many men who played running football in their youth, feeling “welcomed” (Samuel, 66) related to nostalgic recollections of their biographical histories:

It takes you straight back to the changing room, the banter, joking, mickey-taking and stuff. Straight away, the lads know they can talk to you. Welcoming straight away. It felt just like going home...There's no racism, there's no sexism, no LGBTQ, there's no slights on anybody. If you want to come play football, come play football. I'd say it's very inclusive. (Wayne, 51)

Equally, claims to being “welcoming” and “inclusive” were discussed in relation to the participation of players who did *not* have a similar background in football (particularly women). Indeed, when asked whether walking football was inclusive, answers like Henry's (75) and Linda's (64) were typical:

Totally inclusive...We've got one or two players with Parkinson's [disease]. There are separate women teams, but sometimes the women play in training sessions with men as well. So, it's totally inclusive as far as I can see. (Henry, 75)

The men have made [me and friend] feel welcome. I initially thought, well, these men are not going to want us playing football with them...But it's not been like that at all. It's been so inclusive for everybody. (Linda, 64)

Henry and Linda recognize how inclusivity is accomplished by men and women playing – and being “welcomed” – in the same team. Equally, the existence of single-gender teams, rather than being seen as a mode of segregation, was interpreted by many participants as simply another option for women to take part in walking football (i.e. if they were more comfortable participating in a women-only team). Assertions about inclusivity were often supplemented, too, with suggestions that people who took part in walking football had mixed social backgrounds (e.g. education and employment):

I've mixed with all sorts of backgrounds, a lot of people I never mixed with during my work. I've tended to mix with people at a certain educational level. Now, I'm mixing with people who are former steel workers, headmasters, shop workers and office workers, and anything in between. On the pitch, we're all the same. (Jason, 74)

Despite clear differences between participants – “I've met people that I would not mix with them in any way in any social situation, because we're from totally different worlds” (Eugene, 51) – walking football constituted a novel mode of coming together that transcends social differences. Difference, here, was acknowledged but flattened. Even so, claims about being inclusive were supplemented, at times, with suggestions that a participant's club had made concerted efforts to recruit players from different gender and racial backgrounds, although not always successfully:

Unfortunately, we're an all-male club. And we are desperate to try and get some women in...But I'd say it's probably one of the better sports purely because, at tournaments, you'll see a lot of

women playing with the men as well as having their own tournaments...I think it's definitely more inclusive. (Patrick, 51)

Many people were involved in propagating an inclusive and progressive reputation of walking football. Players and club staff/volunteers, participants claimed, remained committed to welcoming new players and striving toward cultivating a diverse and convivial environment. Walking football was described as an environment where older people can nurture attachments and a sense of belonging. This perception was supplemented with an acknowledgement from several participants that other settings designed to help them “keep fit”, such as gyms, are isolating and unwelcoming.

Claims of inclusivity were also made relating to the game itself. This included abiding by its *formal* rules as a slower-paced alternative to running football, specifically “not running” and avoiding heavy physical contact. *Informal* rules, however, seemed equally important for sustaining its inclusive reputation. This included players attempting to make “allowances” for particular players, such as those with dementia:

We've got one lad who has dementia. He can't remember which way he's kicking half the time, who's on his team, and that. We have to make allowances for that. When the ball goes to him, we all stand off. Things like that. There's another guy who's partly blind. So, you make allowances for this kind of thing. (Samuel, 66)

Such conduct can be viewed as an attempt to include players by “levelling the playing field” (Finn, 65). Outside of singular examples (e.g. a player with dementia), participants often described the need to make accommodations and affordances for older players based on their age:

We're all very, very respectful of each other. We know a bad fall could be nasty. We don't tackle, we're competitive without being nasty, we're not yelling at people. So, it's very inclusive and everybody says the same, “it's like being back at school. We were made so welcome”. I think it's way more inclusive than [running football], to be honest. The reasons for it could be because as we're older, we're probably a little bit more respectful and understanding of people's issues in terms of age, fitness, illness. It's the closest it's ever been to an all-inclusive game that I've ever come across. (Jack, 67)

Guys that are a lot older, 74 or 75, it's unwritten that you don't tackle these guys, because they're a bit more frail. You just make different allowances for different levels of ability. So, that builds a sense of community, I guess. (Alfie, 66)

Involving players “of all different abilities” and “who haven't played football in donkeys years” by, for example, passing the ball to them is seen as a mode of “acceptance” by Oliver (63): “it's very inclusive in terms of it's not ‘well, you're not very good so you're not going to play with us’, like you might say when you were kids”. Likewise, Otto (71) claimed:

There are a number of older, late 70s, players who you can see are physically stiffer, less mobile. But if you had an option to pass right to one guy who's really good or pass left to an old

guy who might lose the ball because he can't kick it very well, we are inclusive insofar as we will pass it both ways...And, if you've passed it to the old guy, everybody stands off. We're trying very hard to be inclusive, to make sure we don't say, "oh, you shouldn't come along because you're rubbish". We are encouraging people to come along, whatever standard they are, to play.

The "unspoken rule" that certain players are not tackled is not only "respectful" and avoids "humiliating your opponent", but is an indicator of being "inclusive" (Jason, 74). This is more challenging, however, as several participants noted, when participating in a more competitive environment, such as walking football tournaments, whilst others felt that making "adaptations so that everyone is included" does mean "the game gets dumbed down a bit" (Rupert, 66). Nonetheless, players maintained allusions to inclusivity by referencing a social contract where players are expected to prescribe to the same rules and constraints, in ways that align with the overall impression that walking football is an inclusive sport. In what follows, the article describes moments where the inclusive ethos of walking football becomes threatened.

"Go find somewhere else to play": Threats to inclusion

Claims to inclusion in walking football are compromised in several ways, particularly relating to men's (gendered) assumptions of women players. Women often praised male teammates for welcoming them and for being "so encouraging" (Kathleen, 50):

I didn't have the skills because I didn't play football at school like the men did when they were boys. I really started from scratch. But they've been very generous, they've given me guidance. I've been very happy to take it. (Angela, 68)

There was a sense among some women that walking football flattened gender, that is, women's gender identity became "disregarded" and "ignored" (Angela, 68) on the pitch. These experiences suggest that walking football, in turn, constitutes a space of inclusivity. However, women also, and often in the same interview, would claim that *some* men did not include them in the game, such as not passing them the ball. Margaret (60) described her first experiences of playing walking football:

The men, at first, didn't pass you the ball. Well, what's that about? I was getting a bit frustrated, to the point where I even thought "nah, I'll leave". But I stuck at it. A couple of the blokes were great. "Just stick at it. It's just a macho thing. You are good. You've got a lot of skills. It'll come"...I only really felt I wasn't included when we got on the pitch. I started to feel for a number of weeks that the easy pass was to me, but they made the harder pass to another chap...So I nearly walked away, but I'm glad I didn't.

Similarly, Jennifer (64) said:

A couple of the men wouldn't pass to the women...I shouted over, "bloody hell, we haven't come all this way just for you lot to play against us. Give her the ball"...Some of the men are really ignorant...I just put my fingers up to them or just joke about it. But it is few-and-far-between to be honest...When I went to [club] for the first time, they just said to me "Stay upfront" and I just thought, this is pathetic, just stand there? Like we do now with the 80-year-old

because he can't run around? Since then, I've gotten better and better. They wouldn't pass me the ball but when I go now, it's like "Jennifer's on", "Jennifer this", "well done Jennifer".

Whilst Jennifer stated that such treatment was "few-and-far-between", it clearly frustrated her and other women. Her improved ability has meant, though, that the same male players now include her and offer her praise during the game. Nonetheless, whilst women's poor treatment by men – such as not passing them the ball – was identified by several participants, one woman, Betty (67), described a moment in which she was specifically targeted by an opposition player on account of her gender identity:

We played a team and this bloke wiped me out in the first 5 minutes. Bear in mind, we're over 60 and we're playing walking football... Two, three, four minutes later, he did it again and I ended up in hospital having a total knee replacement. One of my lads said to this player "what are you doing?" And he said, "there isn't a place for women in football". How sick and sad is that? I missed out on a lot of football and, not only that, I was frightened as the game had been taken away from me by someone who didn't hold the values that I held. It was horrendous. I lost all my confidence and fell into a bit of depression.

Being physically targeted, and assaulted, as a woman was only discussed by Betty. This is an extreme case, yet it highlights the damage caused to Betty on the basis of being a woman in a space primarily occupied by men. Even so, more subtle modes of exclusion, like not being passed the ball, were more common and, for the women, appeared to be motivated by sexist presumptions of having poorer skills compared to men. Equally, several men said that older male players, particularly those perceived as slow and as having poor ability, were subjected to similar (mis)treatment:

A bunch of players decided that they were fed up of new players coming who'd never played football. And some of my colleagues who thought they were superior wouldn't pass to them. They would actually say, "what are you doing here?", you know, "go find somewhere else to play"...We've got some who are not welcome by some of the community. (Gregory, 72)

As well as not being passed the ball, players who were seen as "not as good as some" might sometimes be shouted at for losing the ball when passed to by others (Margaret, 60). Players having "less sort of ability" could clearly be "frustrating" to players like Oliver (63):

I have to admit, you get a bit frustrated with players who have less sort of ability when you're trying to have a decent game. I would always pass to those players and involve them, but I know a lot of the other players got a bit frustrated. These guys never really played football when they were younger, so it was just having to put up with the fact that they're not going to be able to control the ball.

The notion of "having a decent game" seems to correspond to (men's) desire for competitiveness, with Bob (73) suggesting that "competition equals less inclusion". Competition was highly prized by men in this study; participation allowed them to foster a competitive, instrumental masculinity (Messner, 1990). Being competitive allows

men to retain power and privilege that is associated with expressions of hegemonic masculinity in their youth, and to embolden their masculine status by positioning themselves as distinct from women *and* other (marginalized) men who were not as skilled as *them* (Connell, 1995; Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005).

Nonetheless, men's claims to desiring competition were tempered by a stated need to balance this with the pleasure of playing football and establishing a sense of belonging and connection (Thomas and Thurnell-Read, 2024). Moreover, they suggested that over-aggressive expressions of competition were unwelcome (and, as discussed later, heavily policed). Male players who were perceived as prioritizing winning over abiding by the inclusive ethos of walking football were cast as behaving in improper, even juvenile, ways. They were, as Sean (72) explained, "too serious", over-physical, and over-competitive in a sport seen as a more leisurely, gentle alternative to running football:

I think there's a limit to how seriously people should take walking football...[Former team] takes it very seriously, training is very serious, there's no banter. It's actually too serious. That wasn't the reason that [walking football] started. It was to give older guys the opportunity to get out on the field and kick a ball about, and there's a good reason why there's no physical contact...because if you get injured, if you get hard knock, at 70, you can be in trouble...I think people should try and remember why we're out there doing it and how lucky we are.

It was widely acknowledged that some players "take it very, very seriously" (Gale, 60). This became problematic, though, when this transformed into over-physical, aggressive play. For some participants, men – and particularly younger men and "alpha males" (Ernest, 62) – were the biggest culprits of this:

There's a little bit of competitiveness, but we don't allow any tackling, no tackling from behind, no shoulder charging...It's men who want to feel that competition, they can't help themselves. And actually, that's the tragedy to me...this isn't walking football. (Gregory, 72)

I think there's a lot of testosterone floating around the place...I think, the spirit of the game, we're mature people playing this game. We're all in it together to enjoy. But sometimes it can get a bit out of hand...Gender plays a big part in it because I don't see that in the women's game. It's good-spirited, no argy-bargy. (Margaret, 60)

Concerns about (men's) over-physicality (which, as Margaret claims, does not seem to occur in women-only teams) and "elitist men running and shoving and pulling shirts" (Betty, 67) had a pragmatic quality: older people, given their age and health status, were framed by participants as vulnerable to injury and harm. As such, anyone being over-physical, on their terms, was endangering players. However, there was also a moral component to this; taking oneself too seriously demonstrated an "over-involvement" (Goffman, 1963, p. 51). The presence of men expressing what players perceive as the worst excesses of masculine forms threatened claims to inclusivity, and energised the possibility for exclusion, in two key ways. First, men's inadequate alignment with a defined (inclusive) ethos of walking football risked injuring fellow

players and, subsequently, discouraging them from future participation. Second, men's (mis)behavior exposes them to the possibility being marginalized and excluded *themselves*. How such transgressions are handled by other players and managers/organizers is where the article turns next.

“Well, if you’re staying, we’re not”: Navigating conflict and marginalization

Reactions to individuals who threatened the inclusive ethos of walking football were varied. Players who encountered hostile others – i.e. players who did not involve them in the game and/or were overly-physical and overly-competitive – sometimes decided to leave clubs (or, at least, avoid competitions where this behavior flourished). For instance, some women described joining, or knew others who had joined, women-only teams. This decision might have been for other reasons, such as being more comfortable playing football exclusively with other women (even without the experience of playing with men). However, it is also possible that this decision was informed by previous (mis)treatment from male players. More commonly, such hostile moments – of being marginalized in the game – were policed by other players and club organizers and managers. In some cases, this was pre-empted and acted upon, as Kenneth (73) explained:

We've had another couple of female players coming along recently. The first thing when we kicked off, I passed the ball to [one of the female players]...The mindset is there that we're all in the same team. You quite often see games where you've got a less mobile player and they just ignore him and don't pass the ball to him. Well, that's not good enough. He's got every right to play the same as everybody else has. We've tried to kick that sort of mentality out of the club where people just passed the ball to their mates or someone of a similar skill factor. (Kenneth, 73)

Kenneth describes passing to a new female player, because he knew other club players had previously ignored others viewed as not having a “similar skill factor”. In other instances, players were warned by other club members that their conduct was unacceptable:

There is an inclusive element and there have been some incidents where people who are too competitive or endangering or injuring people. We've had several people have a word with him quietly and say, “look, you're not playing at Wembley [large professional football stadium in England] here, it's not a cup final”. Some people have difficulty moderating that because...that's how they played before. (Alfie, 66)

The notion of “having a word” with players was also discussed by Bruce (68):

One of the guys yesterday, he's taking it far too serious. He shouted at one of his own players, including me, which he shouldn't. If you keep doing that mate, it'll ruin my experience. I won't stop coming, but I'll make sure you can't come again because that's the objective of the club...[Chairman] will have the task of pulling this person aside or phoning them up and having a word in his ear, “You can't do that”.

Some players privately, and sometimes publicly (see Jennifer's extract in the previous section), reminded perpetrators of their responsibilities to fellow players. Raising this led, in most cases, to the desired outcome; players offered apologies and altered their conduct accordingly. In some cases, players stopped coming themselves because a resolution did not seem to be possible:

We don't have any aggressive types, swearing types, kicking the hell out of you [laughs]. We are very friendly, gentlemanly game with each other, and we play to the rules...We had someone in the early days who argued a bit too much referee and went off in a huff, swearing, whatever else. We gave him a bit of talking to, "This is just friendly, there's no competition here". He took it on board, came one more time, and couldn't help himself, back to swearing. Eventually, he didn't come again. He understood that behavior wasn't really acceptable for us. He even called us posh gits! (Charlie, 56)

On other occasions, when players were perceived as repeat offenders and/or as seriously endangering the safety of fellow players, condemnation and subsequent exclusion – symbolically and literally – could follow. Indeed, outright exile was more common for transgressions that threatened player safety (i.e., the overzealous man) rather than not involving players based on their gender and/or performance:

There was one guy, and he was very, very loud, always bossing other people around...He actually lost his rag one day and almost in my opinion, in a surreal sort of way, excluded himself from the group by action. He actually did a sliding tackle and went straight through a disabled guy who plays in our group. And basically about 5 of the guys just walked off the pitch and said, "well, if you're staying, we're not". He resigned then and hasn't been back since. (Frank, 62)

[Opponent] just couldn't get past [player] and he ended up flooring him. And I kicked him out, I kicked him off our pitch, told him "Don't ever come here again". He flattened a man who was 84. What was that about?...It was horrible. He couldn't even fib and say it was an accident. It was intentional. What about winning is that much that you're willing to hurt somebody else, especially at 84-years-old? (Betty, 67)

Betty (67) – as chairwoman of a walking football club – exiled four men at different points "because they were disruptive, trying to play their own brand of football which wasn't our brand"; "over-physicality, questioning decisions, pushing, shoving...That's not in the ethos of the game, that win-at-all-costs mentality". Local social rules dictated the expected behavior of players. Breaches communicated that offending players were not committed to the established principles of togetherness and inclusivity. By not allotting fellow players "a kind of sacredness that is displayed and confirmed by symbolic acts", transgressors disturb the expectation that individuals involved in walking football should "hold hands in a chain of ceremony" (Goffman, 1956, p. 473, 493). Their "improper moves", by being a "dangerous giant, a destroyer of worlds" (Goffman, 1961, p. 81), was to not accord fellow players with "deference" (Goffman 1956); that is, they did not readily display them respect. While some players were informed that they would not be welcome back (as above), other players were (more gently) notified "they might be better off at another club" (Evan, 65). When talking about

a collection of younger players who he felt were “not doing anything nasty but were physical”, Jack (67) said:

Most people over a period of time, they get the message, and they'll slot in. We've had a couple over the years where we've had to say in the end “we don't think that you're ready for this so probably best if you stick with [veterans' football] and come back at a later stage”. And they've agreed in fairness.

This section has outlined how older people who do not buy into the ideal of inclusivity appropriately are excluded from a club's harmonious embrace. Not passing to certain players and overzealousness was policed by others, with outcomes ranging from private/public reprimand to immediate expulsion.

Discussion

This article has shown, through a case example of walking football, how older people's participation in leisure activities – often framed in overwhelmingly positive, valorizing terms – can include moments of tension, conflict, and marginalization. Players appealed to the sport's inclusive ethic, with reference to its open recruitment policies and practices, the involvement of people from mixed backgrounds, and a series of in-game adjustments to accommodate certain players. This narrative of inclusivity, configuring walking football as a shared practice (Moles, 2021), is part of the sport's alleged appeal. Inclusion is something that is not so much a clear and obvious outcome, but a collectively and incessantly performed ideology (Zelner, 2015). Players work together to celebrate walking football as a welcoming, collegial, and social activity, with various formal and informal rules that shore up the boundaries of what is expected of its participants.

However, the analysis has shown how we should be careful to not romanticize later-life leisure. Whilst the study, generally, has highlighted its benefits for participants (Thomas, 2024; Thomas and Thurnell-Read, 2024), this article captures the dissonances between the *ideals* and *realities* of walking football. Specifically, by exploring the situations and causes of exclusion, the article shows how players disturb the sport's “ethos” and mistreat others based on assumptions of gender and/or performance levels. Its inclusive ethic is jeopardized, in particular, by overly-competitive men valuing *winning* over *wellbeing*. This shares similarities with other scholarship that captures how sport becomes a site for asserting and bolstering masculine identities via bodily sporting prowess and for excluding and controlling women (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005; Wheaton, 2000). Men's competitiveness could result in excluding those viewed as less skilled and committed, thereby contributing to “a culture of exclusivity” (Wheaton, 2000, p. 439). In walking football, then, exclusive practices crept into a space designed and sold as an inclusive space for older people.

Walking football, as a social world, has its own rules, values, and stocks of knowledge which are shared and negotiated between participants (Scott, 2009). Players who misbehaved, thus, were perceived as breaking residual rules of the game and, ultimately, as not abiding by its inclusionary sentiments. Here, ideas of inclusivity are produced by accounts of what a player *does* and what they *do not do* (Moles, 2021). The (often male) transgressors are those who “present a discord to the utopian space of harmony” (Falconer, 2022, p. 5), retaining Connell’s (1995) insight about masculinities as constructed in opposition to other (women’s and marginalized men’s) bodies. They are privately and sometimes publicly reminded of their responsibilities or, even, banished altogether. This shows how maintaining a reputation of inclusivity is still ‘predicated on processes of exclusion’ (Zelner, 2015, p. 578). By intruding on cheery and idealistic comprehensions of older people’s leisure, this article highlights how statements of inclusivity are tenuous and, arguably, related to processes underlying existing and persistent social inequalities (Zelner 2015). Equally, exclusionary tactics arguably had the effect of not only cultivating a united ‘moral majority’ (Scott, 2009, p. 141) and bolstering a commitment to the rules and norms of the sport, but also renewed and strengthened the cohesiveness and collectively-ground identities of walking footballers.

The experiences of some walking footballers are inconsistent with assertions of inclusion. Not reporting on these experiences risks such feelings and encounters being buried. This is not to deny the benefits of walking football for many older people, and how it does constitute an inclusive environment *for them*. Nonetheless, we should exercise caution about presenting leisure involvement for older people as an inherent positive, as an “automatic panacea to disconnection” (Falconer, 2022, p. 1). The study mirrors and problematizes walking football as a utopic activity. Walking football is both a celebrated site of fun and connectivity, and a contested site of struggle and tension. This assertion aligns with Carter and Baliko’s (2017, p. 701) claim that leisure spaces upholding a community of practice, like walking football, can be “inclusive, transformative and empowering, but also limiting, restrictive and silencing”.

Nonetheless, there are limitations to the arguments in this article. Participants were mixed with respect to social backgrounds, yet they almost all identified as White and UK nationals. This is similar to a glut of research on older people’s leisure with White, middle-class, and/or heterosexual participants (Clarke et al., 2020; Deneau et al., 2022; Gregory and Dimmock, 2019; Minello and Nixon, 2017; Wheaton, 2017). Our research practices, including the project presented in this article, are at risk of reproducing heteronormative, racialized¹, and classed conceptions of older people’s leisure. Attempts must be made, in future work, to include a wide array of perspectives in our research. Likewise, only 12 women were interviewed. Even if the sample arguably reflects the demographics of those playing walking football (i.e. mostly men), the study sample limits the article’s assertions. Moreover, this project did not involve interviewing people who had encountered barriers to participating in walking football. The self-selecting nature of participants meant, perhaps, that participation was often

discussed in positive terms, whilst still acknowledging the more negative experiences of some players. In addition, it is possible that claims to inclusivity, at the same time as heralding *difference*, were at times predicated on a *sameness* that could prevent, or at least discourage, certain populations from ever taking part.

There is a need for future research, as well as to widen its sampling frames, to examine how structural, cultural, and historical contexts influence participation in leisure activities (Palmer et al., 2021). Doing so will likely reveal the fractures, failures, and demotions felt and experienced by older people, and others too, when taking part in leisure activities. The dangers are clear in this article. Older people are regularly cast as lonely, feeling “left out”, socially excluded, and overlooked. Equally, we know that the fear of stigma and ridicule can be a barrier to physical activity for older people (Evans and Sleaf, 2012). The experiences of walking footballers possibly point to why some older people *do not* participate in physical activity outside of popular, yet flawed, explanations focused only on “lifestyle”. Furthermore, if we are to take their experiences seriously, we should be wary of heralding participation in (physical) leisure activities for older people as fundamentally celebratory and unproblematic. Future work could outline, thus, the possible ways of resolving experiences of conflict and marginalization in the leisure activities of older people, especially if the ultimate intention is to continue mobilizing inclusive environments and practices.

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The author reports there are no competing interests to declare.

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Endnotes

ⁱ In this study, players described how walking football “feels very White” (Eric, 59), and there is “scope for increasing diversity” (Bob, 73). Whilst some reflected on an absence of racially minoritized players as a problem to be resolved (e.g. through targeted recruitment), others repaired any possible charge of racial discrimination by saying that it reflected the demographics of their local area and demographics of running football when they were young. Future research should attend to the experiences of racially minoritized older people seeking to participate, or currently participating in, physically active leisure.