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England

# Explaining the walking football phenomenon

- Walking football has surged in popularity since first appearing in 2011
- John McKellar founded and coaches one of its most successful clubs
- He explains why thousands of new players are signing up

For football fans, the beautiful game is a gift for life.

But the opportunity to play football, and the physical capability to do so, has traditionally enjoyed a limited shelf life. While all of us will remember the joy of kicking a ball around as a child, and many will have continued playing into adulthood, few are to be found still lacing up their boots by the time we reach 50.

Walking football is changing that. Now, instead of older players becoming too slow to compete, football is slowing down to enable them to continue enjoying the sport they love. And its popularity is soaring.

John McKellar, founder and coach of walking football team [BayCity Strollers](#) in Kent, England, explained the phenomenon. “When we first started in 2014,” he said, “walking football had only been going a couple of years and there were around 80 clubs nationwide. Now there are over 1000.

“There are now quite a lot of international tournaments too, especially in Europe. The rise of walking football has been absolutely phenomenal. And it’s only going to continue growing.”

### Walking Football: Key Facts

- Teams of 5, 6 or 7-a-side
- No running with or without the ball
- No slide tackles and minimal physical contact
- Ball must be played below head height

Football had been an integral part of McKellar's life long before he became involved in the walking variant. A former apprentice player with Gillingham, he became a qualified coach and works for Charlton Athletic as well as running soccer camps and clubs in schools across the south of England.

Yet, while immersed and hugely active in the game, it was while watching television that McKellar first stumbled across walking football.



"It all stemmed from seeing an [advert Barclays Bank were running on TV](#) a few years back," he explained. "I remember thinking, 'That's a great idea, and something I'd really like to get involved in.'"

"I can still remember the first BayCity Strollers session I put on, back in October 2014. It was a really awful windy, rainy night. Monsoon-like. And ten minutes before it was due to start, I was the only person there. But then, just as I was about to pack up the balls and cones, two guys turned up. Then a few more came along.

"I said to them, 'Right. We have two choices in this weather: go to the bar and try again next week, or have a kick-about'. And they all said: 'Let's play'. That's how it started. The next week there were a couple more who came along, and that continued. Now we have over 40 members."

BayCity Strollers, whose oldest player, Trevor, is 73, are one of walking football's great success stories. They have several players involved in trials for England's national team, and were recently saluted on the pitch at half-time during West Ham United's match

with Liverpool after winning a tournament at the Hammers' London Stadium.

**BayCity Strollers WFC** 

@BaycityWfc · [Follow](#)

The Lads receiving their Winners Trophy from West Ham Legend John Moncur many thank to our hosts West Ham 👍



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But such on-field achievements come low on the list of reasons for joining the club. "Some of our members come just for fitness, while some want get back into football and for others it's to help with health issues," McKellar explained.

"For example, we had our first lady member join us last year. Her doctor had told her that her diabetes was getting out of control and that she needed to get some exercise. Recently, she went back to the doctor and was told that now she's not even on the scale when it comes to diabetes – she's totally controlled it thanks to walking football.

“The social side, getting people out of their houses and mixing together, is often just as important. And the camaraderie we have is absolutely brilliant.

“It’s fantastic for getting people out of the house, especially people living on their own. We’ve also had players with mental health issues who have benefited massively from their involvement in walking football.

“That’s such a big thing about football in general – it’s not just what it brings you while you’re playing. We have quiz nights, ten-pin bowling nights, raise money for charity, and I think it has brought something really positive to the lives of everyone involved.”

That much is clear. And with thousands already testifying to the benefits, and the gospel spreading fast, walking football’s meteoric rise seems certain to continue.

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