

They think it's all over ...it isn't!



**BLUE BOOTS! WE DIDN'T PLAY IN
BLUE BOOTS WHEN WE WERE LADS**
Members of Cove Rapidly Ageing
Pensioners remember the smell of
dubbin and liniment before kick-off

It's two-touch and go as ageing wizard of the wings **Will Ellsworth-Jones** puts his boots on to tackle walking football, which is giving the over-50s the chance to continue playing the beautiful game

Photographs **Andrew Hayes-Watkins**





On one relatively swift movement Doug Gilbey gathers the ball with his first touch, looks up and passes with his second; his teammate shoots and... just wide. OK, he's not quite Eden Hazard but he's still pretty good, particularly as he is 83.

Welcome to the world of walking football, the relatively new sport drawing in thousands of older men – very few women yet – who thought their footballing days had long since gone. The obvious and key difference is, as the name implies, the players walk, they don't run. The sport had been growing steadily until Barclays featured it in a TV ad for their 'Digital Eagles' a year ago, prompting an explosion in the number of players wanting to try the game.

Doug plays in Farnborough, Hampshire with the Cove Rapidly Ageing Pensioners (don't try saying the acronym out loud), who include some of the players featured in the Barclays ad. They have 76 players and there are two morning sessions a week, plus one evening session so that the 'younger' players who are still working can join in.

Doug is the oldest player and he's unusual in that he played very little football in the past. Now, he says, he is making up for lost time using 'guile and what-not' to pick up the football skills that the others have had for years.

On a perfect Monday morning, 22 players have arrived on the AstroTurf five-a-side pitches where they are divided into four teams. They range in age from Doug's 83 down to 51, and since they are not playing a rival team they are wearing whatever strip they like; perhaps the most noticeable is Peter McCrory wearing the full Man U strip, given to him by his son on his retirement, with DAD 65 on the back. That was seven years ago and he's still going strong.

Peter, who gave up football at 40, started walking football two years ago and says, 'I haven't missed

EXTRA TIME Walking football gives players at all skill levels the chance to play on – and maybe score the 'wonder goal' that eluded them in their youth



‘We’ll get stuck in, but there’s nothing vindictive – it’s all good sport’



The laws of walking football

There are no fixed rules. The flexibility allows for varying standards of ability (and disability). However, in general:

- ◆ Games are usually five-a-side
- ◆ Players can only walk. Running or jogging while the ball is in play results in a free kick to the opposition
- ◆ The ball should not go above hip height
- ◆ Slide tackling is prohibited
- ◆ A player is allowed only two touches of the ball at a time
- ◆ Unlimited substitutions and anyone can change places with the goalkeeper
- ◆ Indoor games are played with a size 4 Futsal ball; outside games with a regulation ball

Saga is sponsoring the **National Walking Football Festival**, July 11, Eastleigh Football Club, Hants; 023 8061 3361. See walkingfootballunited.co.uk and click on festivals for details



Find out how to join a walking football team – and discover other walking sports – at saga.co.uk/walkingfootball



'All of a sudden they are thinking, "My last trophy was 30 years ago – now look at this"'



GOAL HANGING Age is no barrier to walking football: if you can trap and pass a ball, you're in – which is good news for Roy Hodgson, England manager

◁ a beat.' He has lost about a stone and a half in weight though, and as well as his improved fitness he also enjoys 'the camaraderie of a lot of men together'. However, he emphasises, 'We're competitive, don't get me wrong. We'll get stuck in, but there's nothing vindictive – it's all good sport.'

From the touchline there is a continuous, almost musical, background of men who for this one hour in the morning are 20 not 60. 'Put him under; have a pop; oh, unlucky... Square it; let's go; you're not working, lads; you're not working... No movement, pressure, shoot. Early ball... Go to him...'

With almost all the men I talk to three words come up: 'fitness' is the obvious one, but more interestingly are 'banter' and 'camaraderie'. Jon Isaacs, 64, who captained the team when they became Hampshire champions, says: 'I retired and there was a big gap in my life. You think you've got loads of hobbies, and more to the point you think you've got loads of friends. But you realise the friends you have got are very work-related.'

'I think it's more true of men than women. We're not inclined to phone someone up and go, "Fancy going for a coffee?" So you kind of get a little bit detached from it all. I was becoming a couch potato. So it's great to be in a dressing room with a bunch of

guys. It's the sort of thing you've forgotten since you were at school.'

His wife has observed that 'personality-wise I have changed, I have got more to say, more to talk about'. And quite apart from enjoying the banter, he has also lost more than two stone. 'You cover a lot of ground without the ball,' he explains.

Do they ever get in an old-time scuffle? 'At one tournament we came up against some 55-year-old men who still thought they were in the Sunday League. The referee had to warn a couple of guys off. I went to shake one guy's hand and he took his hand away. But I showed him our cup at the end... and I guess in a way that's part of it.'

The players pay a bargain £3 a session to Mick Quinn, 52, a sports therapist who organises it all. Mick left Glasgow years ago, but happily Glasgow has not left him and his personality helps make the whole thing work. 'We're old school. So if someone calls me a fat Scots b*stard I'm not going to call the police because I'm offended! I am going to be giving them some real grief back. They're all old guys who can have a bit of banter.'

They have won two trophies in the past few months. A party of them went to Portugal and came back with the trophy, and there were four teams in the Hampshire tournament. One player tells me that on the way back some players wanted to stop the

coach at a local pub, but time had moved on. 'We decided against it because someone said they had to get home to water their garden.'

'It's a big deal putting on a full strip and saying, "Yes, here we go",' says Mick. 'All of a sudden they are thinking, "My last trophy was 30 years ago – now look at this".'

My own introduction to the game was not going to win any cups. There are different versions, but in Hampshire it is all about safety and minimising risk, so they play 'two-touch football': control it with one touch, pass it with the next and no time to dribble. I had been on the field only about a minute – trying desperately not to run for the ball – when Mick blew his whistle. 'You've taken about 14 touches there, Will.' Worse was to follow: our team was awarded a penalty. I was asked to take it and my shot was hopelessly wide. Ignominy. And to make matters worse, I was puffed out – you might not be running but you are walking as fast as you can, intercepting, covering, passing. It was comforting to know that Mick is medically trained.

Walking football is still in its infancy. How many touches should be allowed is one area of dispute, and there is an argument about how much competition there should be. The Football Association's national football development manager Colin Moore says, 'It's not about finding the next England Walking Football team. For now, let's just get as many people playing as we can.'

Having started off thinking it could not be for real, I ended up a convert – the tray of doughnuts brought by one player to celebrate his birthday with his team-mates helped. I convinced myself that if I found a team close to home I'd join. But then Mick dropped me off at the station and his parting words to me were, 'Don't worry about the penalty miss, Will.' Of course, I have been worrying about it ever since. ◆

To find out more about Mick Quinn's sessions in Farnborough, email 67mick@tiscali.co.uk