

A Change of Mindset?

In a nutshell, WF was devised to get the over 50's into some regular exercise through the extremely popular national sport of football. To decrease the risk of injury and to offer a gentle variation of the game, given the target age group, walking instead of running and non-contact were the prerogatives.

Physical benefits associated with the game were obvious, but the lesser talked about mental and social benefits were possibly of even greater intrinsic value to the participants. With so many venues popping up all over the country it was only a matter of time until venues ventured out and played other like-minded groups.

Festivals and tournaments followed suit and became an important aspect to the game. Leagues started forming and national tournaments were available to the more competitive clubs. Unfortunately after almost two years, it was evident that without the divining inspiration and intervention of the national governing body, everyman and his dog had a preference on how best they thought the game would be played.

Rules variations were drastically different all over the nation. This does not happen in the regular game or any other sport available to a mass of interested parties. It becomes a nightmare and a huge discredit to the game. That is still ongoing. But of even more importance in this relatively new sport is people's perception on what the game is all about.

So many new session flyer adverts proclaim "same as regular football but no running." This falls way short of what the game is. There is so much more to it. And it starts by stating the obvious – it's not really anything resembling regular football. More like 5-a-side football.

As well as the obvious no running, there are no offsides, no throw-ins, no entering penalty areas, no goalkeeper excursion from their areas, no heavy tackling, ball below head height, may play off the barriers/walls if the venue is enclosed. Goalkeepers may only throw under arm and cannot score. All free kicks are indirect. No 2-vs-1 at the barriers, no 'cornering' players, no slide tackling or slide blocks. A sin bin not seen in the regular game is in effect in the WF game.

The list goes on, but these are the more salient differences, and when you look at the overall picture – it must then seem far removed from the game we used to know and play. With so many ex-footballers rekindling their passion for the game within WF, it is accompanied by their previous perceptions of football, and the only real adaption acknowledged is to cut out the running.

Difficult as that appears to be for a huge majority, the physicality and competitive determination is still there to be exercised with much energy. Sometimes accidentally, other times unfairly, occasionally spitefully.

What Walking Football must now do is to establish the foundational ethos of what the competitive game is primarily about. Old virtues and values of football minus the running aspect must be put aside and a whole new understanding must be encompassed.

First and foremost each participant must be protected. This comes in the guise of the rules, the code of conduct expectation, the referee and the opponents. Play can of course be competitive and with determination - that shouldn't be taken away - but it must be with respect and with opponent safety in mind. Older bones are more fragile, and bruises, sprains and strains take a deal longer to heal from than of yesteryear and youth.

Many of us have work on Monday morning too. Hobbling on crutches is not a great start to the working week. Clattering into the back of heels either clumsily or aggressively, barging people off or away from the ball, stepping across opponents physically, leaving feet in, bullying players, verbally intimidating opponents, disrespecting players, has to be eradicated from the game.

This is what used to be exercised or to have been dealt with as much younger men. All of these aspects are part of the regular game, as well as the all too evident players claiming for everything, noticeably disrespecting the officials. Not so much a beautiful game as some would have us believe.

Walking Football does not have to go down the same path, or be a follow-on from previous experiences of regular football. Players of senior years should not even want to enforce their presence on others, wind the opposition up verbally or physically, cheat and foul, claim and claw out a result or get an upper hand. That shows the wrong side of competitive spirit, and that too has to be drummed out of the game.

It appears that teams with a sporting disposition and with the correct values, have to revert to negative behaviours by keeping up with the runners, foulers and unsavoury sorts that mar the game just to maintain a competitive counter-balance.

The inevitable outcome is a competitive game that is dominated by perhaps the wrong kinds of teams, and in fact drives the fair and the frail very much out of the process.

More emphatic use of the sin bin, and a zero tolerance to over-physicality, disrespect and referee abuse can add significant progress to the further evolution of the game. Regular football referees are harangued and disrespected, gesturally dismissed and always held in contempt by those they preside over. Rugby referees in comparison are totally respected and are never really opposed by the players on the field.

Walking Football needs to address those principles, embrace the ethos outlined here and lay the foundations down for a safer, fairer and more respected game that participants can be proud of. We do not have to be a continuance of something that in theory is beautiful but when seen in the cold light of day, is somewhat removed from that romantic notion.

The game becomes such a more enjoyable experience for all concerned when the play is not determined by a shove, a bruising tackle or a snide aside when getting a dig in the ribs.

Winning is the result of a good attitude, not an attitude that gets a good result - for one is football, the other a mindset for life.