



Barriers and Factors Behind Participation and Retention of Participants

The benefits of walking soccer are well documented and span physical, psychological, and social factors. Physically, walking soccer contributes to reductions in body fat and time to volitional exhaustion, lower risk of cardiovascular disease, decreased delay in visuomotor skills, higher energy levels, and increased skeletal muscle adaptation^{3,4}. The sport also provides psychological benefits, helping players develop increased memory performance, increased cognitive flexibility in older adults, and an improvement in mood and affect. Additionally, walking soccer gives players a sense of empowerment and contributes to an increase in self-confidence^{3,4}.



Finally, the social benefits of the sport are evident - playing leads to positive experiences surrounding team cohesion, social connections, and encouragement from friends and family³.

The difficulty therein lies with barriers to entry that do not allow players to experience the sport themselves. Physical inability in the form of preventive injuries or health conditions, as well as the fear of injury contribute to a lack of participation¹. Mental barriers like anxiety and a lack of confidence can exacerbate these existing issues. Receiving scorn from peers outside the sport, worrying about having a negative team or social experience regarding a lack of acceptance, particularly for women, also acts as a barrier for new players⁴. A lack of structure consisting of few tailored coaching sessions, poorly organized tournaments, or inconvenient session timings can deter players as well. Finally, environmental factors such as a lack of awareness or lack of access to facilities, particularly for those with lower

socioeconomic status, can make participation difficult⁴.

Participation can be encouraged by focusing on individuals' values and perceptions of the sport - building knowledge of the health benefits as well as connecting with previous sporting identities and team experiences. Helping individuals gain self-efficacy and explaining the ease with which one can participate can help new players join in easily. Generating awareness of the sport through media exposure and social prompts from friends and family can allow individuals to find their place in the community⁴. Additionally, those with more health conditions feel less isolated when surrounded by those with similar experiences, highlighting the importance of adequate peer support during initiation. This can encompass initiatives like a buddy system and the creation of an inclusive, supportive community².

Maintenance is the final step in ensuring that participation remains long-term. Individuals who have a generally positive physical and psychological health outlook are more likely to keep participating in the future. Their ability to persist and manage setbacks and adversity, as well as a love or passion for the sport, will allow them to keep returning despite the barriers they may face³. Social influences such as encouragement from friends and family, participation with peers, positive team dynamics and experiences with coaches as well as feelings of loyalty, comradery, and responsibility can encourage an individual to keep playing. The general culture of walking soccer must also be one of acceptance for all ability levels, disabilities, gender, and age, as well as correct enforcement of standardized rules. Sessions must be accessible and affordable, with varied focuses to keep participants engaged and able to return in the future³.

¹Brennan, Dylan, et al. "I Just Roll over, Pick Myself up, and Carry on!" Exploring the Fall-Risk Experience of Canadian Masters Athletes." *Human Kinetics, Human Kinetics*, 1 Oct. 2018, <https://doi.org/10.1123/japa.2017-0103>.

²Cholerton, Rachel, et al. "Differences in Older Adults Walking Football Initiation and Maintenance Influences across Respondent Characteristics: A Cross-Sectional Survey." *Human Kinetics, Human Kinetics*, 26 Feb. 2022, <https://doi.org/10.1123/japa.2021-0305>.

³Cholerton, Rachel, et al. "Experiences and Strategies Influencing Older Adults to Continue Playing Walking Football." *Human Kinetics, Human Kinetics*, 7 Jan. 2021, <https://doi.org/10.1123/japa.2020-0058>.

⁴Cholerton, Rachel, et al. "Experiences Influencing Walking Football Initiation in 55- to 75-Year-Old Adults: A Qualitative Study." *Teesside University's Research Portal, Human Kinetics Publishers Inc.*, 10 Dec. 2019, <https://research.tees.ac.uk/en/publications/experiences-influencing-walking-football-initiation-in-55-to-75-y>.