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Title: “I can miss any other group, but not walking cricket”: The impact of walking cricket on perceived psychological health and social wellbeing

Abstract

Walking versions of sports are designed to improve accessibility for older adults and help to combat the age-related decline in physical activity and sports participation. Walking cricket is a new sport that has been suggested to anecdotally benefit psychological health and social wellbeing, but to date, there has been no research to support this. Therefore, the aim of this study was to explore the perceived health benefits and reasons for participation in walking cricket. Focus groups were conducted with two walking cricket clubs in West Yorkshire, England, involving twenty participants with a mean age of 72 years. Audio-recordings were transcribed verbatim and analysed using reflexive thematic analysis. Two overarching themes were constructed that captured the reasons for and meanings of participation along with the perceived health benefits of walking cricket. These were *Walking cricket as a strategy to aid ageing well: health and competence, and Belonging, identity, and sustaining participation in walking cricket.* The perceived benefits included increased confidence, enhanced social connections, improved physical health, and opportunities for continued personal development, with these benefits shaped by the inclusive and accommodating ethos of walking cricket. The findings from this research are the first to highlight the embodied meanings of walking cricket participation, offering novel insight into its potential to support psychological health and social wellbeing in later life. This shows promise for the incorporation of walking cricket in social prescribing initiatives that aim to improve social wellbeing and increase physical activity amongst older adults.

Keywords: ageing, participation, sport, physical activity, embodiment

Introduction

The global population is ageing, with the number of people aged 60 years or over expected to reach 2.1 billion by 2050 (World Health Organisation [WHO], 2024). This poses fiscal and societal challenges for governments around the world, particularly as older adults are more susceptible to chronic health conditions compared to their younger counterparts (Beard et al. 2016). Recent statistics show that 19% of the UK population are aged 65 years or over, with this figure estimated to rise to 27% over the next 50 years (Barton, Sturge, and Harker 2024). This will increase the demand for health services, with ageing linked to an increased risk of cardiovascular and metabolic diseases, reduced muscle mass, poor bone health, neurodegenerative disorders, cognitive decline, and reduced social and mental wellbeing (Cruz-Jentoft et al. 2010; Ferrucci and Fabbri 2018; Goodpaster et al. 2006).

In response to the worlds increasing life expectancy, the WHO released a policy framework for healthy ageing (Beard et al. 2016). This policy promotes regular physical activity, which is known to attenuate some of the deleterious effects of ageing (Fox et al. 2007; Cartee et al. 2016; Hamer, Terrera, and Demakakos 2018). However, despite the well-known benefits of physical activity, only 62% of adults in the UK aged 55-74 years achieve the Chief Medical Officer's recommendation of being physically active for at least 150 minutes per week at a moderate intensity, or at least 75 minutes per week at a vigorous intensity (or a combination of both) (Sport England 2024). The proportion of active individuals falls to 43% in adults aged 75 years or over. Therefore, finding ways to improve older adults' participation in physical activity is a key challenge in achieving healthy ageing (McPhee et al. 2016).

The WHO defines healthy ageing as the process of developing and maintaining a functional ability that enables wellbeing in older age (Michel and Sadana 2017). In this definition, functional ability constitutes a person's mental and physical capacity, and includes the ability to be mobile, learn, make decisions, build and maintain relationships, and contribute to society (Beard et al. 2016; Beard et al. 2017). As such, types of physical activity that incorporate a social support network could provide greater benefit to functional ability, particularly mental capacity, compared to individual activities. Sport is a form of physical activity that often includes a social element, particularly those played in a team setting. Indeed, the environment created by team sports could provide additional positive psychosocial health benefits compared to independent exercise activities, including a sense of belonging, higher self-esteem, emotional social support and a social network (Andersen, Ottesen, and Thing 2019).This has been demonstrated in walking football, which has been purported to benefit psychological health and social wellbeing through improved social support and connectedness (Taylor and Pringle 2022; Price et al. 2025). This, in turn, could lead to increased engagement and participation in older adults.

Like general physical activity, sport participation declines considerably with age (Jenkin et al. 2017). Barriers to participation include physical health, lack of playing opportunities, time constraints and prioritisation of younger age groups (Jenkin et al. 2018). To improve accessibility, several walking sports have emerged in recent years, targeting participation in older adults. Walking sports are adapted sports modified to reduce the cardiovascular demands and injury risk (Reddy et al. 2017). Whilst these are open to all adults, they typically attract older adults (>50 years old) who previously

played the ‘original’ version of the sport but can no longer participate due to a change in circumstances (e.g., physical limitations) (Corepal et al. 2020). Limited evidence on the health benefits of walking sport, predominantly from walking football, suggests that regular participation in these sports can have a positive effect on physical and psychological health characteristics, such as improved aerobic capacity, reduced risk of cardiovascular diseases, improved confidence and enhanced mood, along with increased physical activity levels (Arnold, Bruce-Low, and Sammut 2015; Cholerton et al. 2019; Taylor and Pringle 2022).

Despite walking sports being more accessible for older adults compared to their original format, and the known physical and psychological health benefits associated with physical activity, the dominate discourse surrounding ageing may itself present a barrier to participation. In Western cultures, perceptions of ageing are predominately influenced by a medicalised discourse, which focuses on the process of systematic decline (Phoenix and Griffin, 2013). This creates a negative narrative on the ageing process that can cause older adults to accept ageing as an inevitable negative process and reduce their stimulus for lifestyle changes that might improve health in later life (Hudson et al., 2015). Increased participation in physical activity and walking sports, such as walking cricket, could help participants to provide a counternarrative within a socially supportive environment that resists prevailing attitudes towards ageing.

Walking cricket is an emerging form of physical activity targeted at older adults. It has grown rapidly since its inception in 2019, with 13 clubs housing over 400 participants in the Yorkshire region of the UK (Yorkshire Community Cricket Foundation 2025), and further groups throughout England. The sport is usually contested between two teams, with players batting in pairs and no running permitted. Each pair bats for 3-4 overs, regardless of how many times they are out, which ensures that every player is active for a similar period of time. Anecdotally, the motivation behind participants' involvement is not just limited to the perceived physical health benefits, with the main driver appearing to be benefits to social and psychological health (Yorkshire Community Cricket Foundation 2025). However, there is currently no empirical evidence for its benefits. The aim of this research was to explore the perceived health benefits and reasons for participation in walking cricket.

Materials and Methods

Philosophical positioning and methodology

Establishing a clear philosophical approach was key for enhancing the quality of our research (Tracy 2010). The study adopted a constructivist ontology and constructionism epistemology to explore and understand the participants' perceptions and experiences of walking cricket participation. Our constructivist ontology assumes that group members do not simply possess individual views of walking cricket, but actively construct personal realities shaped by their past, personal experiences, social positions, and everyday interactions (Crotty, 1998; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). From this perspective, experience is not treated as an objective phenomenon waiting to be "discovered", but as something continually produced and re-produced within specific social, cultural, and relational contexts (Schwandt, 1994). Complementing this ontological stance, our constructionist epistemology positions knowledge as co-created through interaction - both in participants' everyday lives and within the focus-group (Berger & Luckmann, 2016; Charmaz, 2006). This view assumes that meaning is negotiated, contingent, and situated rather than fixed or inherent (Burr, 2024). Accordingly, our analytic approach moved beyond surface-level theme identification to interpret how collective meanings surrounding walking cricket were generated, reinforced, or contested through group dialogue (Braun & Clarke, 2019; Kitzinger, 1994). This theoretically informed stance enabled us to attend to the relational processes, shared cultural narratives, and broader social structures that shaped how participants constructed the significance of walking cricket.

Participants

Participants were selected using purposive sampling, with all participants playing walking cricket for two local clubs and English speaking. It was considered imperative to have

individuals with shared experiences of walking cricket to provide quality data appropriate to the research question (Tracy 2010). Twenty participants (10 males, 9 females, 1 transgender) from two walking cricket clubs in Yorkshire, England took part in two separate focus groups. The participants had a mean age of 72.2 ± 6.4 years, had been participating in walking cricket for an average of 23.7 ± 17.7 months, and played for 1.9 ± 0.7 hours per week. Twelve participants had played the original form of cricket at varying levels (e.g., at school or competitively), and five participants had played other versions of walking sports (e.g., walking football and walking rugby).

Procedure

Before commencing the research, the study received institutional ethical approval. To facilitate recruitment and data collection, two of the authors visited one walking cricket group to immerse themselves within the group setting (Tracy 2010). The two authors built rapport and acceptance by taking part in a game of walking cricket (Levitt et al. 2021; Lozano-Sufrategui et al. 2019). This allowed for relationships to be established, to generate knowledge of walking cricket, and to understand the group dynamic (Hargreaves and Pringle 2019; Levitt et al. 2021).

Focus groups were specifically chosen for data collection due to the observed dynamics within the group, and to provide participants with a safe environment where beliefs, opinions, and experiences of walking cricket could be voiced in the company of people of similar backgrounds and experiences (Liamputtong 2011). The common guideline of conducting two focus groups (Krueger and Casey 2015; Barbour 2007) for this demographic stratum was considered appropriate to provide a thorough understanding of the benefits of walking cricket and ‘to capture nuances of conceptual codes’ (Hennink, Kaiser, and Weber 2019, page 14).

Prior to data collection, each participant provided their informed consent to take part in one audio-recorded focus group. An interview schedule (see supplementary materials) was generated to align with the two key research aims: 1) Exploring the health benefits of walking cricket and 2) exploring participants' route into walking cricket and reasons for continued participation. All questions were open-ended to generate rich and deep descriptions of experiences and opinions (Tracy 2010). To ensure consistency across the two focus groups, the third author acted as moderator and conducted both group interviews. The focus groups lasted 62 minutes and 68 minutes respectively and took place in social areas at the walking cricket locations to ensure participants were in familiar surroundings and felt comfortable (Taylor and Pringle 2022). To ensure walking cricket did not affect the mood of the participants, the focus groups were conducted on days they did not play.

Data analysis

Interviews were transcribed verbatim, resulting in 20,073 words of data (47 pages of 1.5 line-spaced Calibri sized 12 font text). Braun and Clarke's (2022) reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) informed the data analysis process, due to its flexibility for identifying, analysing, and interpreting patterns (themes) within data. RTA is an iterative approach that allows for back-and-forth progression though data familiarisation, coding, theme development, and writing-up.

The first stage of the data analysis involved authors one and two reading the transcripts and listening to the audio recordings, ensuring they were accurately transcribed. Initial notes were taken during this stage to clarify terms and nomenclature. Transcripts were then re-read to ensure the authors were fully immersed in the data, and to understand the experiences of the walking cricket participants. Next, they inductively coded sections of the interview text independently to capture meaningful insights about participants' views and experiences of

walking cricket. The authors took some time away from the transcripts, to enable time for reflection and insight to develop, then they revisited the transcripts to return to the coding process. The authors met to discuss their initial findings and used 'visual mapping' to cluster codes and devise initial themes (Trainor and Bundon 2021). The first author then individually created tentative theme labels and presented these, alongside participant quotes and their interpretations, to the other authors. This enabled an open discussion and reflections of the analysis. Once the themes were named and defined, the first author wrote up the findings, which included several meetings with all members of the research team to constructively review the findings and ensure that they aligned to the research aims.

This collaborative and recursive approach enhanced reflexivity and interpretive depth, in which the authors reflected on and interrogated their own and each other's perspectives and assumptions throughout the analytical process (Braun and Clarke 2022). However, this was to explore various assumptions, rather than trying to reach a 'consensus'.

Research quality

High-quality qualitative research requires sincerity, which is achieved through self-reflexivity and being transparent about the research process to provide an honest account of the qualitative approach and study design (Altheide and Johnson 1994; Creswell and Miller 2000; Tracy 2010). Therefore, it is important to provide some details on the researchers in this study and their experiences at the beginning of the research process. The first author was a Senior ecturer in Physical Activity, and Health Sciences, and has extensive experience exploring factors that influence health behaviours. This has led to the development and adoption of interventions which aim to promote health behaviours. The second author is a Lecturer in Sport and Exercise Science, who has seven years of research experience in the areas of health and physical activity,

with a focus on walking gait biomechanics. The third author is a Lecturer in Sport and has experience of investigating how sport and physical activity can be used as a vehicle for positive holistic development (e.g., social, cognitive, and emotional development). This author is an experienced interviewer and, having been involved in sport for 30-years, they were able to conduct the focus groups with an understanding of sporting terminology to help mediate the participants through the interviews. Collectively, the three authors had 12-years' experience of conducting qualitative research. Throughout each stage of data analysis, the final author acted as a critical friend (Sparkes and Smith 2013). The critical friend engaged in open discussions about the codes and themes being developed, sharing alternative perspectives, and offering constructive feedback. This process encouraged the first and second author to reflexively engage with and critically evaluate their knowledge construction, thereby enhancing the quality and rigor of the data analysis (Smith and McGannon 2017).

Results and Discussion

Two key themes were identified through the analysis which capture individual's embodied experiences and perceptions of walking cricket. These were: (1) Walking cricket as a strategy to aid ageing well: health and competence; (2) Belonging, identity, and sustaining participation in walking cricket. All participants were given pseudonyms to ensure anonymity.

Theme 1 – Walking cricket as a strategy to aid ageing well: health and competence

This theme captures how decisions to engage in walking cricket were a purposeful strategy to adopt a sense of control over maintaining their health and wellbeing and managing physical decline which is often associated with ageing (Hudson, Day & Oliver, 2015). The subthemes were: (1) Active self-management: moving to manage health and combat physical decline; (2) Competence through play: Discovering and developing skills and confidence; (3) Enhanced psychological health and re-framing illness and ageing.

Active self-management: moving to manage and control health

The participant accounts reveal how actively choosing to take part in walking cricket was constructed as a purposeful strategy to maintain a sense of control over their health and manage physical decline. Many of the participants emphasised the need to keep active and justified their decisions to participate in walking cricket as a necessary moral obligation, rather than one of a casual leisure choice for fun and engagement. For example, Anne stated, 'Well, I only joined, as I said earlier, to improve my health really because I wanted to get my steps in' (Club 1). Similarly, Kevin explained 'I joined really because I just saw it, I needed some exercise' (Club 2). The terms 'improve' and needed' emphasise the sense of personal responsibility and obligation they felt of participating and suggest engagement in walking cricket as a meaningful

tool to actively maintain their health and potentially resist physical decline, often associated with ageing (Gonzalez-Calvo et al., 2025). This reflects positive ageing discourses which challenge dominant conceptualisations of ageing as inevitably characterised by decline, dysfunction, inactivity, and social disengagement (Pack et al., 2018 & Pheonix and Sparkes, 2009).

The emphasis of active self-management was particularly notable for those living with long-term health conditions. Regular engagement in walking cricket was described as integral to managing health conditions such as cholesterol and blood pressure. For example, Julie stated: 'I noticed, after I'd started playing, that my cholesterol has gone down' (Club 2), similarly Gareth also describes how regular exercise helped to manage his symptoms: 'To help high blood pressure, as well as tablets, is exercise and that has now stabled my blood pressure now and it's a really good reading and I hope it stops that way and what have you' (Gareth, Club 1). Notably, although Gareth acknowledged the role his medication plays in managing his blood pressure, the phrase 'is exercise and that has now stabled my blood pressure', highlights the importance he places on walking cricket as a key factor in controlling his symptoms. This reflects how the participants had internalised broader cultural narratives about the personal responsibility for the management of their health, with regular participation in walking cricket viewed as an active strategy to maintain health (Crawford, 2006).

In addition to the management and control of health conditions, other participants articulated how walking cricket created a place away from their health conditions both physically and mentally, as the focus and engagement needed to play the game appears to temporarily shift attention away from their symptoms and provided temporary but meaningful relief:

> One thing I can say is during the time that I'm at the wicket holding the bat I don't have a tremor, which I have at the moment… So, what I'm saying, so I think to have the concentration which is required to play the game during that time, I'm not conscious of my symptoms… essentially that one time to actually physically engage and to hold that bat and not be conscious of the symptoms is very, very, very beneficial (Brian, Club 2).

The distraction walking cricket offered was echoed by Gareth: 'As I say we forget about whatever is wrong with us, when we're playing, we forget about it. Your mind goes blank, let's concentrate on the cricket, we want to win, it doesn't matter, but you know' (Club 1). This highlights how engaging in walking cricket was interpreted as a meaningful tool that enables them to manage their health and transcend the limitations imposed by their health condition (Roikjaer et al., 2025). Similarly, a recent systematic review by White et al. (2024) labelled this as the 'distractive power' of physical activity, enabling individuals to detach from any life stressors through temporary positive state-based moods, social support, and the physical activity environment.

Competence through play: Discovering and developing skills and confidence

This subtheme highlights the experiences of developing walking cricket beyond the management of health or wellbeing outcomes, and captures how engagement enabled participants to feel competent, skilled, and able bodied, despite ageing and having health conditions. Many of the participants reported developing new motor skills, notably more females acknowledged this compared to their male counterparts, and shared specific examples of the motor skills they have developed: 'Neither am I very good at hand eye coordination. But that's developed and I'm getting better at that, which I appreciate' (Barbara, Club 2) and 'We learned how to bowl, we learned how to hold the bat, how to stand. We didn't know any of

this' (Francis, Club 1). This could be attributed to the fact that many of the females reported that they had never played cricket before, mostly due to the gendered physical education infrastructure: 'I've never played cricket… we weren't, as girls, we weren't allowed, at the schools I went to, to play football, cricket' (Debra, Club 2). Furthermore, the opportunities to learn new skills and develop existing ones, such as hand-eye coordination, through participation in walking cricket appeared to foster embodied confidence (Sims-Gould et al. 2010).

This is further illustrated by Gerald's account: 'But, it helps you develop a skillset, which is really good I think for the brain and it's really good for actually working some of the muscles which you don't necessarily use when you're walking' (Gerald, Club 2). The repetition of 'really good', conveys a sense of pride and achievement associated with developing and adapting skills, reinforcing participants' perceptions of the benefits of engaging in walking cricket. It could be interpretated that learning and developing new skills provides evidence of their bodies' continued ability to adapt and remain capable in later life, thereby challenging dominant deficit-ageing discourses which frame ageing as synonymous with decline or static bodily capacity (Clarke, Currie, and Bennett et al., 2018). This is further supported by the findings of Kim et al., (2020), who reported that continued engagement in competitive sports was meaningful for older adults, and expressed that continued participation could slow down and delay the ageing process. This aligns with the activity theory of ageing which suggests that older adults who remain active and involved in social activities will experience better well-being and life satisfaction (Lemon et al., 1972).

Alongside learning and developing new skills, some of the participants also described the importance of challenging themselves and actively striving for improvement, which further

enhanced their sense of confidence. Angie, among others, emphasised: 'You do gain confidence, you do gain confidence, sometimes… But it's the mental effort of thinking outside the box that you've been stagnating in basically, but its good, its good and we do try and improve' (Club 1). The description of 'stagnating' may reflect a period of lack of mental and physical effort exerted before her participation in walking cricket, which is perhaps due to retirement and limited participation in physical and social activities. Alternatively, it could also indicate Angie's awareness of prevailing cultural beliefs that associate ageing with reduced challenge or growth, and suggestion of her resistance to this perception.

Enhanced psychological health and re-framing illness and ageing

The psychological meaning that participants attached to their engagement in walking cricket illustrated how participation enhanced their psychological wellbeing, everyday coping, and sense of self. Francis, provided a powerful example of her experience and compared the benefits of walking cricket with psychological therapies for her mental ill health:

> I was registered disabled for mental illness, depression, since I was twenty, before I was twenty, I've tried to kill myself. I find it really difficult saying this, but since I started Walking Cricket I've told the psychiatrist I don't need him anymore. I don't take drugs. *(Clapping)*. I was on twelve, fourteen drugs per day and I tried to hang myself and I said whatever you're giving me is not working, nothing works for me, there's no point in me being here anymore and I started Walking Cricket and I can remember thinking this is the first day I've felt happy in forty years, I felt happy and I said to my doctor I'm not disabled anymore, I want to come off the disability thing (Francis, Club 1).

The repetitive disclosure of Francis actively attempting to end her own life, emphasises the

overwhelming sense of frustration and hopelessness she experienced during engagement with psychological therapies. However, since participating in walking cricket, Francis no longer perceives the need for therapeutic interventions and no longer identifies as disabled. This illustrates how walking cricket offered more than symptom relief, but instead enabled her to re-shape her identity, which enhanced her psychological wellbeing through experiencing a sense of competence, belonging, and meaningful engagement, that appeared to be absent within the clinical context.

Others in the current study discussed how their general and social anxiety has improved through participating in walking cricket. For example, Ben stated 'Particularly the Walking Cricket, that has enabling me to lose the anxiety problems that I was having, of simply going along and being in a room with people' (Club 2). Similarly, Debra explained:

> But I've suffered with social anxiety on and off for a number of years, for various reasons… I thought I've got to bite the bullet, I've got to go out and meet some more people and do this, and I did and it's really, really helped me now in I'm feeling more confident to actually go to more group things. Whereas before I just wouldn't turn up, I just wouldn't go. So, the mental health benefits have been great, and I think that's a credit to everybody in the team (Club 2).

Debra's account highlights a shift from avoidance and social withdrawal to increased confidence and willingness to engage in social settings. Like Debra, many participants across both groups emphasised the importance of socialising and being around others, contributing to perceived improvements in their symptoms of anxiety and mental illness. The social engagement of walking cricket appeared to enable participants to experience a sense of

belonging, and fostered confidence through repeated social interactions, which contributed to improved psychological wellbeing for some. These findings align with Ruiz-Comellas et al. (2022) who reported improvements in depression, anxiety, and health status perception, among older adults participating in a group-based walking intervention, compared to those in a usual psychological treatment group. Although the differences were not statistically significant, clinical depression and anxiety were reduced by 59% and 45%, respectively, in the walking group. It also corroborates existing evidence regarding the positive effects that sport and physical activity can have on reducing anxiety symptoms among the older adult population (Kazeminia et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2020). This suggests that walking cricket may have the potential to serve as an effective intervention for improving psychological health.

Beyond the development of skills, confidence, and psychological wellbeing, walking cricket also provided participants with opportunities to remain active and to actively challenge ageist assumptions about decline in later life (Clarke, Currie, and Bennett et al., 2018). For some, participation was explicitly framed as a way of demonstrating ongoing physical capability and resisting stereotypes of ageing as a limitation:

> When I saw Walking Cricket I rang up, I saw it advertised and I thought I wanted to prove I've still got physical ability, I wasn't old and past it … I love it and the feeling it gives me (Francis, Club 1).

And

> When you walk down the field to bat I'm scared and I love that thrill from it. I've not had that for years and that had all gone because I was old and society treats you as old when you're fifty-year-old and I'm nearly eighty and to feel the thrill of adrenalin and if I (unclear), the excitement of it and I only get that experience in Walking Cricket

(Francis, Club 1).

The accounts from Francis reveal ongoing negotiations between internalised perceptions of ageing and resisting traditional perceptions of ageing. In the first extract she rejects being 'old and past it', emphasising her intentional participation in walking cricket as a means of resisting traditional stereotypes of ageing and demonstrating continued physical capability with the phrase 'I wanted to prove I've still got physical ability'. At the same time, her reflection in the second extract, 'that had all gone because I was old', and 'society treats you as old' illustrates her awareness of, and partial alignment, with dominant cultural narratives of ageing. Through participation in walking cricket, enabled Francis to experience thrill, excitement, and enhanced physical capability, which in turn fostered feelings of empowerment and supported her resistance to traditional narratives of ageing, allowing her to re-shape her ageing identity. This is supported by Dionigi (2006), who argued that sport and physical activity have the potential to empower older adults to resist, negotiate, and construct discourses of ageing.

Likewise, Debra also acknowledges the societal narratives that privilege youth and marginalise older adults, particularly in relation to sporting and physical activity contexts:

> Even now, as an older person and we all know that in the society we live in its very geared towards young people, so just to be able to get that chance and say well no I didn't get a chance then, but I do now and I think that's a very healing thing (Debra, Club 2).

Her reference to 'very geared towards young people' implies an explicit recognition of a socially congruent expectation of ageing that limits opportunities for participation in later life.

However, the phrase ‘but I do now’, emphasises how walking cricket has provided an opportunity in later life for embodied resistance to the dominant narrative of decline and disengagement, and enabled her to reclaim the opportunities which were denied earlier in life (Pheonix and Tulle, 2017). Additionally, her description of ‘that’s a very healing thing’, signifies a sense of repair and re-shaping her identity by countering previous exclusions in a sporting context and long-held gender assumptions about who is sport for. Thus, further illustrates how participation in walking cricket provided a transformative process, which fostered existential growth and empowered older adults to resist dominant sporting and ageing narratives while re-shaping their ageing identities (Humberstone and Culter-Riddick, 2014; & Pheonix and Tulle, 2017).

Theme 2 – Belonging, identity, and sustaining participation in walking cricket

This theme highlights how engagement in walking cricket enabled the participants to challenge traditional, socially constructed narratives of ageing, with their accounts demonstrating how participation provided opportunities for identity exploration, renewed purpose, sense of belonging, and activating social bonds. The subthemes were (1) Social connection, belonging, and overcoming loneliness, (2) Enjoyment, laughter, and renewed sense of purpose, and (3) Inclusive and accommodating environment.

Social connection, belonging, and overcoming loneliness

Walking cricket provided opportunities to combat social isolation, a common issue associated with retirement, through fostering an inclusive and supportive environment. The importance of social connection was a central aspect of the conversations across both focus groups. Most of the participants were retired, and some lived alone following the death of a partner/spouse. These shifting life circumstances negatively impacted their social and psychological wellbeing.

Francis emphasised the significance of social connection and forming new friendships through walking cricket, particularly for those living alone after the loss of a partner:

> You've got to think, a lot of us, at our age are living alone because they've lost their partner. So that's another biggie for us. When you've got friends, you've got a social group who interact with you outside walking cricket, because they become our friends and that's good (Francis, Club 1).

Her use of the phrase 'that's another biggie for us', when referring to living alone, highlights how social integration and engagement is experienced as fundamental to wellbeing. Importantly, Francis emphasised that relationships formed through walking cricket extended beyond walking cricket itself, with participants becoming friends who interacted socially outside the sessions. Others similarly highlighted the importance of forming social connections that extended the formal boundaries of the sessions. Joan reflected on how socialising afterwards promoted an emotional uplift 'I have my coffee and my cake and I'm on top of the world and I tell my kids yes, I've had a good day' (Club 1). Another participant also described post-session rituals of coffee and shared food, further emphasising the social connections fostered as a result of this:

> You know, then we have the game, we lose, then we have the coffee afterwards, biscuits, the scones, which is important and that! But I think the social aspect is just as important as the cricket. In fact, sometimes it's more important (Gareth, Club 1).

These accounts highlight social interaction and connections as a significant dimension of walking cricket, through which participation becomes meaningful and sustainable. The

emphasis on shared activities such as coffee, cake, and conversations, highlights how pleasure and belonging are produced through informal, relational practices rather than the walking cricket itself. Furthermore, Gareth's framing of the social aspect as 'more important' than participating in the activity itself, further illuminates the importance of cultivating social bonds and helps explain continued engagement (Gustavo González-Calvo et al., 2025).

The emphasis on social connection was echoed by other participants, for whom the social dimension of walking cricket as central to their experiences and continued engagement:

> Well to me the social aspect is far more important than anything else… I'll be honest, loneliness has really come into it. I'm from a big family. I lost my wife ten year ago, and I finished work ten years ago. I haven't missed work one little bit. But yeah, its social aspect, I enjoy meeting everybody, camaraderie (Mark, Club 1).

Marks' account explicitly links experiences of loneliness in his later-life, shaped by the loss of his wife and retirement, with participation in walking cricket, positioning the activity as a fundamental means of counteracting social isolation. This suggests that participation functioned not just as a recreational activity but one as a crucial means of re-connecting with others, creating a sense of belonging amongst the walking cricket community. These findings align strongly with those of Beselt et al. (2023), who found that women intentionally schedule group based physical activity classes for the social opportunities and to avoid staying at home alone for extended periods. The social connections and integration achieved through group activities like walking cricket enables older adults to engage in embodied practices that challenge the traditional narratives of social withdrawal and disengagement (Phoenix and Tulle, 2017 & Gustavo González-Calvo et al., 2025).

Enjoyment, laughter, and renewed sense of purpose

In addition to fostering belonging and social connection, participants described deriving pleasure from walking cricket through enjoyment and a renewed sense of purpose. Intrinsic enjoyment of the activity was repeatedly emphasised by participants and acknowledged as a crucial motivating factor for continued participation. Some participants positioned enjoyment as the primary reason for taking part, often prioritising pleasure over performance and competition. As Thomas explained, 'We're there to enjoy it and I think that's the most important aspect of all, really' (Club 2). This was further echoed by Gerald, 'it's the enjoyment of what you're doing when you're doing it, which is more important than actually whether you've won or not' (Club 2). The repetition of enjoyment being the most important aspect of participation, emphasises how walking cricket was valued as pleasurable and meaningful rather a results-orientated activity, with enjoyment acting as a key mechanism to enhance sustained participation. Gareth's account further emphasises the significance of enjoyment and shared laughter as central to the meaning of participation in walking cricket:

> We have a laugh. At the end of the day, it doesn't matter who wins, who loses, but we all start off thinking yeah, I'd like to win, but it doesn't matter. At the end of the day, we just think well who's won and I couldn't care less. I've enjoyed it and that's what it's all about (Club 1).

While he states that he would like to win, the repetition of 'it doesn't matter' suggests that winning is not the most central aspect of participation for Gareth. Instead, he highlights enjoyment as the primary value. Sivaramakrishnan et al. (2023) found that the motives for participating in walking sports differed between players and was typically linked with their past sporting experience. Nonetheless, sharing fun and laughter with others appears to instil a deeper sense of team camaraderie, and has been previously documented in the literature

exploring older adults' motivations for sporting and physical activity participation (Berlin et al., 2018; Stenner et al., 2016).

Many participants acknowledged and appreciated the structured nature of walking cricket, knowing that the indoor scheduled sessions could not be disrupted by weather created a sense of routine and obligation that supported regular engagement. Knowing that sessions would proceed regardless of weather conditions appeared to foster a sense of responsibility and prioritisation among participants. Gerald's account illustrates this as he describes walking cricket as a chosen commitment that introduced consistency and structure into his daily life: 'If it's a cold, wet, horrible day in the winter, you don't go out for a walk, but you do go to Walking Cricket because its indoors and so and its structure, so I do prioritise it' (Club 2). His description highlights how he perceives walking cricket as an intentional routine activity, which was crucial for sustaining participation, compared to other informal types of physical activities which might otherwise be avoided. These findings are consistent with Ericson (2018) who similarly reported that regular exercise sessions for older women generates structure and meaning to their lives, reinforcing the importance of routine in maintaining ongoing engagement.

Alongside, the sense of structure and routine provided by walking cricket, the participants in our study also expressed the importance of having a sense of purpose in retirement. Engagement in walking cricket provided structure and routine, which instilled feelings of purpose and meaning:

> I had a very active social life through work and all of a sudden that finished. Now for a couple of months, in fact it took me twelve months to get over being retired and I joined

> Walking Cricket and it's the exercise, the mixing, everything to do with life. It got me out of the house, given me a purpose to get up instead of putting the TV on (Gareth, Club 1).

The phrase 'I had a very active social life through work' and 'it took me twelve months to get over being retired' highlight the disruption caused by retirement and the emotional and social adjustment involved. Through Gareth's description, we can see how he positioned walking cricket as a transformative process, which empowered him to re-engage with others and life more broadly (Thomas, 2025). Similarly, Paul echoed this, as he describes walking cricket as: 'it keeps me going, it gives me something to aim for. So yeah, if it wasn't for Walking Cricket I wouldn't have that aspect in my life' (Club 1). Paul's account further emphasises the value of walking cricket as a meaningful activity in retirement which offers direction, continuity, and routine. These accounts illustrate how the habitual and routinised nature of walking cricket proved transformative for those who were retired, by re-establishing routine, structure, and renewed sense of purpose in their day to day lives. This interpretation aligns with Phoenix and Orr (2014), who explored the embodied pleasures of physical activity amongst older adults, and identified 'the pleasure of habitual action', which was the habit of doing the activity itself, and the structure and purpose it provides enhanced pleasure and sustained enjoyment. Pursuing engagement in walking cricket not only provided them with a sense of renewed purpose and pleasure, but it also enabled the participants to reject stereotypes about ageing which refer to ageing as aimlessness, 'roleless', and inactive (Barbaccia et al., 2022; & Humboldt, Low, and Leal, 2024)

Inclusive and accommodating environment

The inclusive and accommodating nature of walking cricket enabled participants to feel supported and valued, rather than marginalised on the basis of age, gender, physical capacity, or health status:

'it makes everybody feel equal, you know, the equality, there's no, you know, everybody, as you say, wants to have fun and there's no you're better than me, I'm better than you' (Debra, Club 2) and 'I quite agree with what this person said about the egalitarian nature of it and the inclusivity of it was incredible and that makes a huge difference' (Gerald, Club 2).

These accounts by Debra and Gerald, highlight how walking cricket was experienced as an inclusive space, in which hierarchies of ability, status, or experience were deliberately minimised. Debra's repeated reference to 'everybody', and 'equality', emphasises that inclusion was not just about access, but how participants related to and supported one another. Further, the description of 'there's no you're better than me, I'm better than you', illustrates the rejection of competitive sporting norms.

Some participants explicitly highlighted the contrast between the inclusive nature of walking cricket and other walking sports such as walking football:

> I went to Walking Football and they'd kill you to get the ball, you know, and women went at first and they hadn't time for you, so they'd knock you out flying and you know, I've seen fisty cuffs and that. That's not what we come out for (Joan, Club 1).

The phrase 'they'd kill you to get the ball' and description of women being 'knock[ed]… out flying', characterises walking football as aggressive and exclusionary, highlighting how competitive dominance and physicality was normalised. The contrasting experiences described

across the two walking sports, positioned walking cricket's egalitarian ethos as deliberately produced through actively rejecting rivalry-driven and aggressive sport cultures (Sacks, et al., 2016), and prioritising shared values of enjoyment, respect, and equality. This is further reflected in Paul's account 'But the beauty of the game is we can accommodate people where they are, rather than making them conform to the game. So, because I can't run between the wickets, I always have a runner' (Club 1). The phrase 'beauty of the game', emphasises the deliberate prioritisation of flexibility over competition, to 'accommodate people where they are at'. By normalising and embedding adaption to the sport, enables the participants to continue meaningful engagement, rather than being excluded or marginalised. Although Stenner et al. (2016) focused on the reasons for older adult's golf participation, their findings reflect the importance of accommodating environments as a motivating factor for continued participation. However, they also found the handicap system in golf fulfils their need to compete with others. Whereas the participants in the current study do not emphasise the need to compete, but the need to play with others to fulfil their need to socialise and have a sense of purpose in later life.

Reflections

There are some limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings of this study. Firstly, we did not record the socio-economic status (e.g., income, education, occupation) of participants, which has been recognised as an important determinant of health and wellbeing because it can influence an individual's attitude, experiences, and exposure to health risk factors across their lifetime (Marmot, 2005). However, the evidence for associations between socio-economic status and physical activity levels in older adults is currently equivocal and can vary based on how physical activity is measured (Stalling et al. 2022).

Secondly, the studied relied on a single data source – focus groups, to explore participants' experiences and perceptions of walking cricket. While focus groups facilitated collective and shared sense-making of their participation, the use of additional qualitative data sources could have strengthened the analytical depth of the study. Participant driven visual methods such as photovoice may have offered complementary perspectives and visual insights to expand the interpretative depth and understanding of the embodied experiences (Gould et al., 2010).

Third, this was an exploratory study to investigate the perceived benefits of walking cricket on psychological health and social wellbeing, but further intervention-based research is needed to evaluate the effectiveness of walking cricket to improve health and wellbeing.

Conclusion

This study offers nuanced insights and understanding of the motivations for participation in walking cricket and how participation is experienced as meaningful in later life. The perceived benefits captured by the participants in the study extended beyond enhanced physical health to also include enhanced confidence, enriched social connections, and ongoing opportunities for learning and development in later life. These benefits were shaped by the inclusive and accommodating environment of walking cricket, which enabled participants to feel competent, valued, and socially connected. In doing so, walking cricket enabled the participants to re-shape ageing identities and resist traditional deficit-based ageing narratives.

To our knowledge, this is the first study to qualitatively explore the reasons for participation in walking cricket and the embodied meanings the participants attach to their involvement. Therefore, the findings provide a new and valuable contribution to the existing literature on walking sports participation, by demonstrating how inclusive and accommodating

environments foster a sense of support, belonging, and perceptions of physical competence. These appear central to not only shaping sustained participation but also providing opportunities to challenge conventional assumptions about ageing, ability, and sport participation in later life. The results of this study show promise for the incorporation of walking cricket in social prescribing initiatives that aim to improve social wellbeing and increase physical activity amongst older adults.

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