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Malta & Italy

Walking Football For Inclusion & Togetherness

Training Handbook for Walking Football
Rules, Coaching Practice & Inclusive Participation Guidance
With Specific Reference to the Over-50s Age Group & Younger
Vulnerable Adults



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Grant Agreement Number 101245583

WALKFIT

Training Handbook for Walking Football

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With Specific Reference to the Over-50s Age Group & Younger Vulnerable Adults

Erasmus+ Sport Small-Scale Partnership

Grant Agreement No. 101245583
Master Consolidated Edition — 2026

Presidential Foreword

It is with great pride that I present this Master Consolidated Edition of the WALKFIT Training Handbook. WALKFIT is co-funded by the European Union under the Erasmus+ Sport Small-Scale Partnership programme, in alignment with the Erasmus+ Programme Guide 2024–2027 (European Commission, 2023) and the EU Work Plan for Sport 2024–2027 (Council of the European Union, 2022). Through Grant Agreement No. 101245583, this initiative promotes inclusion, equality, active ageing and health-enhancing physical activity across partner countries.

Walking Football is not merely a slower version of the game; it is a structured, regulated and socially impactful sport designed to promote dignity, wellbeing and community cohesion among older adults and individuals who require a lower-impact form of physical activity. The evidence base supporting the health benefits of Walking Football has expanded substantially in recent years, with peer-reviewed research now demonstrating meaningful improvements in cardiovascular fitness, musculoskeletal health, mental wellbeing and social connectedness among regular participants (Price et al., 2025; Goodison et al., 2025).

This handbook is a deliverable of the WALKFIT Project, it consolidates regulatory standards, applied refereeing guidance, coaching methodology, safeguarding procedures and competition management principles developed collaboratively by the WALKFIT partnership. It is designed to serve as a practical and authoritative reference for coaches, referees, programme coordinators and club administrators working with the over-50s population across Europe and beyond.

I commend this publication to every practitioner, volunteer and organisation committed to ensuring that football truly remains a game for life.

Dr. Justin Fenech

President of the Swieqi United FC

WALKFIT Consortium Coordinator

Section 0 — The WALKFIT Project

0.1 Project Overview

WALKFIT — Walking Football for Inclusion and Togetherness — is a transnational Erasmus+ Sport Small-Scale Partnership co-funded by the European Union under Grant Agreement No. 101245583. Submitted under Call Reference ERASMUS-SPORT-2025-SSCP on 5 March 2025, WALKFIT is a 12-month initiative implemented in partnership between Malta and Italy. It is designed to promote walking football as an inclusive, accessible and sustainable sport for individuals aged 50 and over, addressing the growing challenges of sedentary lifestyles, social isolation and the lack of tailored sporting opportunities for this age group.

The project sits firmly within the ambitions of the EU Work Plan for Sport 2024–2027, which identifies health-enhancing physical activity, social inclusion through sport and good governance as strategic priorities for the European sport sector (Council of the European Union, 2022). Walking Football, as a low-impact, non-contact team sport, is uniquely positioned to contribute to these objectives among the over-50s population as well as younger vulnerable adults — offering a safe, engaging and replicable model that can be embedded sustainably within grassroots sporting provision across Europe.

WALKFIT — Key Project Facts	
Full Title	WALK FIT: Walking Football for Inclusion and Togetherness
Programme	Erasmus+ Sport Small-Scale Partnership
Grant Agreement	No. 101245583
Call Reference	ERASMUS-SPORT-2025-SSCP
Project Duration	12 months
Total Budget	EUR 60,000 (lump sum grant)
Coordinator	Swieqi United Football Club, Malta — EUR 35,000
Partner	A.S.D. Real Sala Bolognese, Italy — EUR 25,000
Associated Partner	Swieqi Local Council (Municipality), Malta
Target Group	Adults aged 50+, coaches, referees, club administrators
Geographic Scope	Swieqi (Malta) and Bologna (Italy)

0.2 Aims and Objectives

WALKFIT was conceived to address a clearly identified gap: the absence of a structured, cross-border framework for delivering Walking Football training for practitioners working with older adults. It builds directly upon the prior success of the Swieqi United FC Walking Football League, a community initiative funded under the Malta Council for the Voluntary Sector Small Initiatives Scheme (Project Ref. No. SIS A1.26.2024), which demonstrated strong demand and positive community outcomes. WALKFIT formalises and internationalises this model under the Erasmus+ programme.

The project pursues four overarching aims to:

1. Develop and disseminate a harmonised, evidence-based training framework for Walking Football coaches and referees working with the over-50s age group, including the production and publication of this Training Handbook.
2. Promote health-enhancing physical activity and combat physical inactivity and social isolation among older adults through structured, community-based Walking Football programmes in Malta and Bologna.
3. Strengthen the capacity of grassroots sporting organisations to deliver safe, inclusive and high-quality Walking Football provision through targeted, blended-format coach and referee training.
4. Establish a replicable and scalable European model for Walking Football that can inspire similar initiatives across EU Member States, contributing to active ageing, social inclusion and healthy lifestyle priorities.

0.3 Partnership Rationale and Partner Profiles

The WALKFIT consortium is a bilateral partnership between two grassroots sporting organisations — one from Malta, one from Italy — united by a shared commitment to using sport as a tool for active ageing, social cohesion and community health. Erasmus+ Small-Scale Partnerships are specifically designed to reach grassroots organisations and those less experienced with European funding mechanisms (European Commission, 2023). The WALKFIT partnership reflects this ethos, prioritising practical impact and genuine knowledge transfer at community level.

Swieqi United Football Club (SUFC) — Coordinator, Malta

Swieqi United Football Club (PIC: 876799491) is a non-profit sport club based in Swieqi, Malta. SUFC coordinates WALKFIT, managing overall project implementation, coach and referee training delivery, the production of this Handbook, and the organisation of the capstone International Walking Football Tournament. Its leadership team brings extensive experience in EU-funded project management: Dr. Justin Fenech (President) is a qualified Notary Public and co-founder of the Knowledge Innovation Centre; Diana Miceli (Project Coordinator) has over 17 years of experience managing Erasmus+ and Horizon Europe projects; and Timothy Gingell (CEO) holds a Postgraduate Certificate in Sport Management from Birkbeck, University of London.

Walking Football at SUFC is co-organised with Steve Mifsud, a seasoned Walking Football expert and accountant with over 40 years of professional experience. Steve introduced Walking Football in Malta in early 2022, growing the programme to over 350 sessions and approximately 60 regular players. He has organised two successful international tournaments which were held in Malta — in April 2024 with English teams and October 2024 with Cypriot teams — and was a key co-implementer of the SUFC Project funded by the Malta Council for the Voluntary Sector (MCVS) in 2024 Walking Football League. His fluency in English, Italian and Maltese combined with his deep technical knowledge of the game, makes him an invaluable bridge between the Maltese and Italian sides of the partnership. Further detail on Steve's role and contribution is provided in Section 2.

A.S.D. Real Sala Bolognese (RSB) — Partner, Italy

Associazione Sportiva Dilettantistica Real Sala Bolognese (PIC: 872867402) is a non-profit sporting association based in Sala Bolognese, near Bologna, Italy. RSB is responsible for the local implementation of WALKFIT in the Bologna area: community outreach, recruitment and training of over-50 year old and other younger vulnerable adult participants, organisation of an Open Day, and coordination of the Italian team's participation in the Malta tournament. RSB is represented by its President Luca De Bellis (Economics graduate, extensive sports facility management experience), with administrative oversight by Elena Berardi and activities coordination by Giuseppe Scali.

While RSB is new to Walking Football, it brings significant experience in senior sport engagement — including fitness courses for the 60–65 age group and intergenerational Grandparents-Grandchildren activities. This existing expertise in engaging older adults makes RSB well positioned to introduce and embed the sport in Bologna, a city with no prior organised Walking Football provision. WALKFIT therefore represents a genuine knowledge transfer, with SUFC's established Maltese model supporting RSB in building sustainable grassroots provision from the ground up.

Swieqi Local Council — Associated Partner, Malta

The Swieqi Local Council, represented by Mayor Noel Muscat, participates as an Associated Partner, providing community outreach support, local dissemination channels and promotional networks. The Council's formal Letter of Support confirms its commitment to promoting WALKFIT activities among Swieqi residents aged 50 and over and to amplifying the project's reach and visibility through its communication platforms.

0.4 European Policy Context

WALKFIT is firmly anchored in a robust European policy framework. The EU Work Plan for Sport 2024–2027 identifies the promotion of sport and physical activity for all — with particular attention to underserved groups including older adults — as a priority area (Council of the European Union, 2022). The Erasmus+ Programme Guide 2024–2027 further identifies health-enhancing physical activity, social inclusion and the promotion of common European values through sport as key funding priorities (European Commission, 2023).

At a global level, the World Health Organization's Guidelines on Physical Activity and Sedentary Behaviour recommend that adults aged 65 and over undertake at least 150–300 minutes of moderate-intensity aerobic physical activity per week, including muscle-strengthening and balance activities (World Health Organization, 2020). Walking Football, played at the moderate intensity levels documented in recent research — with players typically sustaining approximately 80% of maximum heart rate during play (Goodison et al., 2025) — directly supports the attainment of these recommendations.

The European Football for Development Network (EFDN) Walking Football Practitioner's Guide, developed under a previous Erasmus+ Sport-funded initiative and covering best practices from programmes delivered by 14 organisations across seven countries, provides an important European precedent for the type of capacity-building activity that WALKFIT continues and advances (EFDN, 2018).



Section 1 — About Walking Football

1.1 Origins and Development

Walking Football was created in 2011 by John Croot, Chief Executive of Chesterfield FC Community Trust, as part of the 'Extra Time' initiative — a programme designed to encourage people aged 50 and over to remain physically active and form friendship groups (Chesterfield FC Community Trust, 2024). The Trust launched its first walking football sessions in July 2011, making it the world's first organised walking football club. Chesterfield was formally recognised as the birthplace of the sport with the unveiling of a commemorative blue plaque in July 2024 (Derbyshire FA, 2024).

The sport came to wider public attention in the United Kingdom in July 2014, when a national television advertisement featured walking football, sparking interest across the country. By 2020, Walking Football had spread to over 55 countries worldwide, with more than 60,000 active participants in the UK alone, competing across age categories from over-50s through to over-75s (Wikipedia, 2025). The sport has since been formally governed in England by the Walking Football Association (WFA), established in November 2016 as the national governing body, and internationally through the International Federation of Walking Football Associations (FIWFA).

In Continental Europe, Walking Football has grown significantly through the support of Erasmus+ Sport-funded programmes. The EFDN delivered the 'European Legends' programme from January 2016 over a 24-month period, involving 14 organisations across seven countries and embedding walking football within the Health Enhancing Physical Activity (HEPA) framework of the European Commission (EFDN, 2021). This programme established an important pan-European precedent for the type of cross-border, community-based delivery that WALKFIT continues.

1.2 What is Walking Football?

Walking Football is a modified form of association football in which running is not permitted. The central rule — that at least one foot must remain in contact with the ground at all times — reduces the physical demands of the game while retaining its tactical, technical and social dimensions. Combined with a strict non-contact framework and a ball height restriction, the format creates a safe, accessible and enjoyable activity suitable for a wide range of older adults, including those with chronic health conditions or mobility limitations.

Walking Football is not just slow football — it is the same beautiful game, played at a different pace. It demands tactical awareness, spatial organisation, passing precision and communication. Experienced players recognise that the removal of pace places greater emphasis on positioning and decision-making — skills that often improve with age and experience. This makes Walking Football a genuinely competitive sport as well as a health-promoting activity.

Core Principles of Walking Football
1. Continuous walking — at least one foot in contact with the ground at all times
2. Strict non-contact framework — no physical challenges, pushing or slide tackles
3. Ball height restriction — ball must not exceed crossbar height (or designated maximum)
4. All free kicks are indirect
5. No offside rule
6. No heading of the ball is allowed
7. Player welfare takes priority over competition at all times

1.3 The Evidence Base for Walking Football

A growing body of peer-reviewed research supports the health benefits of Walking Football for older adults. A 2025 narrative review published in the *British Journal of Sports Medicine* examined walking football's potential as a public health intervention, confirming that its slower pace and reduced physical contact make it accessible and safe for individuals with a range of chronic conditions (Price et al., 2025). The same review identified emerging evidence of modest improvements in cardiovascular health and body composition among regular participants.

A comprehensive scoping review published in 2025 found that Walking Football can be considered a moderate-intensity activity, with players covering an average of 2,400–2,500 metres per session and maintaining approximately 80% of maximum heart rate during play (Goodison et al., 2025). This intensity, particularly when sustained over sessions exceeding 120 minutes per week, has been associated with physical, mental and social health benefits for older adults.

Qualitative research consistently highlights the psychosocial benefits of the sport. Studies report enhanced social connections, improved self-confidence, greater sense of purpose and reduced social isolation among regular participants (Goodison et al., 2025; Price et al., 2025). A pilot study among rural older adults found that a six-week walking football intervention produced small-to-large improvements in walking capacity, agility and both upper and lower body muscular strength (Corepal et al., 2025).

Research conducted in Sweden, involving 63 players with an average age of 70.9 years, found that a considerable number of participants had hypertension or regularly used prescription medication — yet all participated safely and benefited from regular sessions (Andersson et al., 2023). A 2025 analysis covering over 6,000 hours of community-based walking football play found that only around one-third of injuries led to missed training or matches, and that only 7–10% of injuries were attributable to underlying health conditions — reinforcing the sport's safety profile for participants with pre-existing conditions (Price et al., 2025).



Section 2 — Walking Football in Malta

2.1 Development of the Sport in Malta

Walking Football in Malta was introduced in early 2023 through the vision and determination of **Steve Mifsud**, who recognised the need for a safer, lower-impact alternative to traditional football for older adults who had stepped away from the game due to concerns about speed and injury risk. Starting with a small group of players, Steve rapidly grew the programme through well-organised sessions, the introduction of trained referees to ensure rule compliance and participant safety, and a consistent focus on the social as well as the physical dimensions of the sport.

Since the first formal session in May 2023, the Maltese Walking Football programme has delivered over 100 sessions, attracting around 45 regular players with numbers projected to continue growing. Steve has been instrumental in raising the international profile of Walking Football in Malta, organising two successful international tournaments: one in April 2024 involving teams from England, and another in October 2024 with teams from Cyprus. ***A larger international tournament — aiming to host a foreign team ASD Real Sala Bolognese — is planned for June 2026 as part of the WALKFIT project activities.***

The programme was formally supported through the Malta Council for the Voluntary Sector (MCVS) Small Initiatives Scheme in 2024 (Project Ref. No. SIS A1.26.2024: Walking Football League), which provided the foundation of community engagement and structured delivery from which the WALKFIT Erasmus+ project was subsequently developed.

2.2 Steve Mifsud — Walking Football Expert

Steve Mifsud serves as WALKFIT's Walking Football Expert and is the driving technical force behind the sport's development in Malta. A seasoned accountant and auditor with over 40 years of professional experience, Steve brings to Walking Football a meticulous attention to structure, rules compliance and participant safety that has been central to the sport's successful growth in Malta.

Steve is fluent in English, Italian, Maltese and spoken Arabic, enabling him to engage directly with the Italian partner (RSB) and to play a crucial bridging role in the cross-border knowledge transfer at the heart of WALKFIT. His language skills have been instrumental in building the Malta-Italy dimension of the project, ensuring that Maltese best practices in Walking Football delivery can be effectively communicated to and adopted by the Bologna-based partner.

Steve's approach to Walking Football reflects the principles at the heart of this Handbook: a sport that is strictly governed, carefully refereed, and designed first and foremost to be safe, inclusive and enjoyable for participants aged 50 and over. His experience managing over 350 sessions, training coaches and referees, and organising international tournaments has directly informed the regulatory and coaching content of this publication.

2.3 Swieqi United Football Club and the Maltese Community

The WALKFIT project is hosted and coordinated by Swieqi United Football Club (SUFC), a non-profit community sport club based in Swieqi, Malta. SUFC's commitment to community sport, active ageing and social inclusion through football makes it the natural home for Walking Football in Malta. The club's facilities, networks and institutional experience — including prior Erasmus+ project management — provide the operational infrastructure within which the WALKFIT programme is delivered.

The support of the Swieqi Local Council as an Associated Partner reflects the broader community endorsement for Walking Football in Malta. The Council's active promotion of the programme among Swieqi residents aged 50 and over demonstrates the alignment of WALKFIT's objectives with the priorities of local government: reducing social isolation, promoting active and healthy ageing, and building a more connected and resilient community.

The Mediterranean context presents both opportunities and specific considerations for Walking Football delivery in Malta. Year-round outdoor play is feasible given the climate, but session scheduling and safe practice protocols must account for high summer temperatures. The specific considerations for warm-weather delivery are addressed in Section 9 of this Handbook. Malta's compact geography and well-established community sport networks support the development of regular, accessible sessions that are integrated into the broader fabric of local sporting provision.



Section 3 — The Principles of the Game

The following principles underpin Walking Football and govern all aspects of play. Coaches, referees and administrators must be fully conversant with these principles, as they inform not only the application of specific rules but also the overall spirit and culture of the sport.

Principle 1 — The Walking Requirement

Definition: A player must always have at least one foot in contact with the ground when moving. Running, jogging or any form of propulsion that involves both feet leaving the ground simultaneously is not permitted.

Rationale: The walking requirement is the central safety mechanism of the sport. By eliminating high-impact locomotion, it substantially reduces the forces transmitted through joints, lowers the risk of musculoskeletal injury, and ensures the game remains genuinely accessible to older adults, including those with cardiovascular conditions, joint replacements or reduced balance.

Referee Interpretation: Referees assess the rhythm and intent of movement, applying a pragmatic standard appropriate to the age and physical capabilities of participants. Isolated moments where both feet may briefly leave the ground during balance adjustment — for example when changing direction on an uneven surface — should not automatically be penalised. Persistent, deliberate propulsive running must always be sanctioned.

Sanction: Indirect free kick at the point of infringement. Persistent or flagrant breaches may result in a verbal warning, temporary dismissal (sin bin) or, in extreme cases, dismissal from the field of play.

Principle 2 — The Non-Contact Framework

Walking Football is a non-contact sport. The following actions are prohibited: charging, shoulder-to-shoulder challenges, pushing, pulling, blocking with force, slide tackling and any other form of deliberate physical challenge. Even minimal contact that would be considered acceptable in traditional association football may be penalised in Walking Football.

Rationale: Participants in Walking Football may have reduced reaction times, underlying musculoskeletal conditions or cardiovascular vulnerabilities. The threshold for what constitutes 'careless' contact is significantly lower than in standard football and must be interpreted accordingly by referees.

Sanction: Indirect free kick at the point of infringement. Serious, reckless or violent conduct warrants temporary dismissal (sin bin) and may justify permanent dismissal from the field of play.

Principle 3 — Ball Height Restriction

The ball must not travel above crossbar height (approximately 2.0 metres at standard goal height) or the designated maximum height where an alternative specification has been set for a particular competition or venue. An offence occurs only when the whole of the ball exceeds the height limit.

Rationale: Restricting ball height reduces the risk of aerial challenges, head impacts and unexpected high-pace ball movements that could compromise participant safety in a slower-paced game.

Special Scenario: If a goalkeeper deflects a ball above the designated height during a save, the restart procedure shall be determined by the applicable competition rules. In most formats, this results in an indirect free kick to the opposing team; some competition rules specify a kick-in from the point of exit.

Principle 4 — Indirect Free Kicks

All free kicks in Walking Football are indirect, meaning that a goal cannot be scored directly from a free kick — the ball must touch at least one other player before entering the goal. This applies regardless of the nature of the offence that led to the free kick. Opponents must retreat to the required minimum distance (typically 2–3 metres) and must remain static until the ball is played. The ball must be stationary before it can be played.

Principle 5 — Penalty Kicks

A penalty kick is awarded for offences committed by a defending player within their own penalty area. The penalty taker must walk during the approach to the ball and may not use an extended run-up. All other players (excluding the penalty taker and the goalkeeper) must remain outside the penalty area and at the required distance until the ball is struck. Walking during the penalty approach is non-negotiable and must be enforced by the referee.

Principle 6 — Goalkeeper Regulations

Goalkeepers must comply with the walking requirement and are typically restricted to a designated area (usually the penalty area or a defined goalkeeper zone). Drop-kicks and overarm throws that would cause the ball to travel above the designated height limit are not permitted. Goalkeepers cannot score directly from distribution — any distribution that enters the opposing goal without touching another player shall not stand as a goal.

Principle 7 — Kick-Ins

Kick-ins replace throw-ins in Walking Football. When the ball crosses the touchline, it is returned to play by the non-offending team using a kick from a stationary position on or behind the touchline at the point of exit. The kicking player must not run and opponents must retreat to the minimum required distance. This modification removes the overhead throwing action of a conventional throw-in, which can be physically demanding and carries injury risk for older participants.

Principle 8 — No Offside

There is no offside rule in Walking Football. This modification simplifies the game, reduces demands on both players and referee, and opens the pitch for more fluid, attack-minded play. However, the spirit of the game and the welfare of participants require that players do not exploit the absence of offside through persistent goal-hanging behaviour — positioning themselves in or near the opposing goal throughout play without meaningful engagement. Referees and coaches should address such behaviour through guidance rather than sanction, except where it becomes a persistent pattern.

Principle 9 — Discipline and Temporary Dismissals

Referees in Walking Football have access to a disciplinary framework that includes verbal warnings, temporary dismissals (commonly indicated by a blue card — the 'sin bin') and permanent dismissal (red card). The use of temporary rather than permanent dismissal as the primary sanction for most offences reflects the welfare-centred culture of the sport. Typical grounds for temporary dismissal include persistent running infringements, repeated minor fouling, persistent dissent and minor unsporting behaviour. During the dismissal period, the offending team plays with one fewer player. Serious foul play, violent conduct or discriminatory behaviour warrants immediate permanent dismissal.

Principle 10 — Spirit of the Game

Walking Football prioritises participant welfare, dignity and enjoyment over competitive outcomes. Respect for referees, opponents, teammates and spectators is not optional — it is a fundamental requirement of participation. Coaches, referees and club administrators are responsible for

cultivating and maintaining a culture in which the spirit of the game is understood and honoured. The application of advantage should be approached with particular caution in Walking Football: while advantage can enhance the flow of play, safety must always take precedence, and the referee should be prepared to bring play back for a free kick where any doubt exists about the physical wellbeing of a player following an infringement.



Section 4 — The Laws of the Game

The following laws govern Walking Football and are derived from the FA Walking Football Laws of the Game (The Football Association, 2025a) and the Walking Football Association Laws of the Game, Edition 1 (Walking Football Association, 2025). Where competition regulations specify variations, these shall apply within that specific competition context. All laws must be read in conjunction with the principles set out in Section 3.

Law	Provision
Law 1 — Field of Play	A reduced-size pitch is used, suitable for 5v5 or 6v6 formats. The pitch must have clearly marked penalty areas and touchlines. The penalty mark is positioned outside the penalty area line at the prescribed distance specified by the applicable competition regulations. Pitches should be inspected before each session for hazards including uneven surfaces, pooled water and inadequate boundary marking.
Law 2 — The Ball	A standard size 5 football is used unless the applicable competition regulations specify otherwise. Where the game is played indoors, some competition rules specify a size 4 futsal ball to reduce rebound speed. The ball must be in good condition and properly inflated before each session.
Law 3 — Players	Matches are typically played 5v5 or 6v6, including goalkeepers. Rolling substitutions are permitted throughout the match, enabling all squad members to participate and supporting fatigue management. There is no offside rule. A minimum number of players required to start or continue a match may be specified by competition regulations.
Law 4 — Equipment	All players must wear appropriate football kit. Shin guards are mandatory and must be of adequate protective size to cover the lower leg. No jewellery of any kind is permitted during play. Appropriate footwear must be worn; studded boots are not recommended for artificial turf or indoor surfaces.
Law 5 — The Referee	The referee has full authority to enforce the laws and maintain the spirit of the game. The referee's decision on matters of fact is final. Advantage may be applied but should be used cautiously, with safety taking absolute priority. The referee must monitor player welfare throughout the match and is empowered to suspend or abandon a match where safety cannot be assured.
Law 6 — Duration of Play	Matches are typically played in two halves of 10–20 minutes each, depending on competition format and the physical condition of participants. A short half-time interval should be provided, during which players should be encouraged to hydrate. Referees must factor participant welfare into decisions about match duration in warm conditions.
Law 7 — Start and Restart of Play	Play is started and restarted by a kick-off at the centre of the pitch. Opponents must respect the required minimum distance from the ball at kick-off. All free kicks are indirect. The ball must be stationary before it is played at any restart.
Law 8 — Ball In and Out of Play	The ball is out of play when the whole of the ball has crossed the touchline or goal line at ground level or above, or when play has been stopped by the referee. The ball is also out of play when it exceeds the designated height restriction (see Law 9). The ball is in play at all other times, including when it rebounds from the goalposts, crossbar or corner post.
Law 9 — Height Restriction	The ball must not travel above crossbar height (or such alternative maximum height as has been designated for the specific competition, up to a maximum of 2 metres in some formats). An offence occurs only when the whole of the ball has exceeded the limit. Special provisions apply for goalkeeper saves (The Football Association, 2025a).

Law	Provision
Law 10 — Scoring	A goal is scored when the whole of the ball has crossed the goal line within the frame of the goal. A goalkeeper cannot score directly from distribution. Goals scored directly from a kick-off or a kick-in are not permitted under most competition regulations.
Law 11 — Offside	There is no offside rule in Walking Football. Players must not exploit this through persistent goal-hanging behaviour that contradicts the spirit of the game.
Law 12 — Fouls and Misconduct	Running, jogging, charging, pushing, pulling, slide tackling and any form of dangerous play are offences punishable by an indirect free kick. Persistent or serious offences are subject to the disciplinary sanctions set out in Law 17. The threshold for what constitutes an offence is lower than in standard football, reflecting the age and physical vulnerability of participants.
Law 13 — Free Kicks	All free kicks are indirect. Opponents must stand a minimum of 2–3 metres from the ball (as specified by competition regulations) and must be static until the ball is played. The ball must be stationary before it is played. The kicker may not play the ball twice before another player has touched it.
Law 14 — Penalty Kicks	A penalty kick is awarded for any offence committed by a defending player within their own penalty area that would otherwise result in a free kick. The penalty taker must walk during the approach — no run-up is permitted. All other players must remain outside the penalty area and at the required distance from the ball until it is struck. The goalkeeper must remain on the goal line until the ball is struck.
Law 15 — Kick-In	Kick-ins replace throw-ins when the ball crosses the touchline. The ball must be placed stationary on or immediately behind the touchline at the point of exit. The kicking player must not run. Opponents must be at the required minimum distance and static until the ball is played. A goal cannot be scored directly from a kick-in.
Law 16 — Goalkeeper Distribution	The goalkeeper may be restricted to a designated area, as specified by competition regulations. The goalkeeper must comply with the walking requirement. Distribution must comply with the height restriction — drop-kicks, overarm throws and punts that exceed the designated maximum height are not permitted. A goal cannot be scored by the goalkeeper directly from distribution.
Law 17 — Discipline	The disciplinary framework includes: verbal warning (informal caution); temporary dismissal indicated by a blue card, known as the 'sin bin', during which the player's team plays with one fewer player for the duration of the suspension; and permanent dismissal indicated by a red card for serious foul play, violent conduct or persistent refusal to comply with the laws. Referees should seek to manage the game educationally before escalating to formal sanctions.

Section 5 — Coaching Model for Walking Football (Over-50s)

5.1 Principles of Coaching Older Adults

Effective coaching of Walking Football for the over-50s age group demands an understanding of the physiological, psychological and social characteristics of older adults. Coaches must appreciate that participants in this age group are highly diverse in their physical capacity, prior sporting experience and motivations for participation. A coaching philosophy that prioritises inclusion, safety, enjoyment and progressive development will consistently deliver better outcomes than one focused primarily on competitive performance.

Research on physical activity adherence among older adults consistently demonstrates that enjoyment, social connection and perceived competence are the primary drivers of sustained participation (Goodison et al., 2025). Coaching practices should therefore be designed to maximise these factors at every session.



5.2 Participant Registration and Pre-Participation Requirements

Before any individual can participate in a WALKFIT Walking Football session — whether as a player, coach or referee — they must complete and submit a Participant Registration Form. Under the WALKFIT framework, this form is based on the registration documentation developed by Swieqi United FC and covers six essential areas: personal details (name, date of birth, address, contact number and email); emergency contact information; medical consent (including confirmation of medical clearance from a healthcare professional and acknowledgement of the

inherent risks of physical activity); a Waiver of Liability (confirming that the participant accepts personal responsibility for their participation and will not hold the organisers liable for unforeseen incidents); consent for media use (authorising the use of photographs and video recordings taken during project activities); and consent to the processing of personal data in accordance with the applicable privacy policy.

Participants must confirm that they have consulted with a doctor or medical professional and have received clearance to participate. They must also acknowledge that they understand when to stop activity and seek medical attention — specifically, if they experience chest pain, shortness of breath, dizziness or any other concerning symptoms during a session. This pre-participation health screening is not a barrier to inclusion; it is a mechanism for ensuring that every participant can engage safely and that coaches and programme coordinators are equipped with the information they need to respond effectively in the event of a medical situation. The registration and consent process must be completed before a participant's first session and records should be maintained securely and updated annually or whenever a participant reports a change in their health status. Programme coordinators are referred to Section 7 of this Handbook for fuller guidance on safeguarding, data protection and welfare obligations.

5.3 The 60–75 Minute Session Structure

The following session framework represents best practice for Walking Football coaching with the over-50s population. It is designed to be both safe and effective, providing appropriate warm-up and cool-down phases that reduce injury risk while maximising the quality and enjoyment of the playing time.

Session Phase	Duration	Key Activities and Coaching Points
Welcome and Safety Briefing	5 minutes	Greet all participants by name. Confirm any medical updates or new participants. Conduct a brief pitch and environment safety check. Review session objectives. Confirm emergency contact details are available.
Warm-Up: Mobility and Ball Activation	10–15 minutes	Gentle dynamic mobility exercises targeting hips, ankles, knees and shoulders. Incorporate a ball early to retain engagement and motivation. Progress gradually from low to moderate activity. Monitor any participants showing signs of discomfort.
Technical Skill Development	15–20 minutes	Focus on one or two technical themes per session (e.g., passing angles, receiving on the back foot, turning in confined space). Use small-group exercises and positive reinforcement. Ensure activities are achievable for all ability levels — adapt where necessary. Keep demonstrations simple and clear.
Conditioned Games	15–20 minutes	Small-sided conditioned games that reinforce the technical theme. Introduce constraints that promote the desired behaviour (e.g., two-touch limit to develop quick decision-making). Intervene constructively and keep stoppages brief. Maintain a positive, competitive but respectful atmosphere.
Match Play	15–20 minutes	Free-flowing match play applying the laws of the game. Referee neutrally but educationally — use the whistle to manage safety, not to dominate the session. Encourage players to self-manage minor disputes in the spirit of the game. Celebrate good play from all participants.
Cool-Down and Reflection	5 minutes	Gentle static stretching of key muscle groups (quadriceps, hamstrings, calves, hip flexors). Invite brief reflections from

Session Phase	Duration	Key Activities and Coaching Points
		players on what went well. Signpost the next session. Ensure all participants leave in good order and are not showing signs of post-activity distress.

5.4 Coaching Behaviours and Communication

The most effective Walking Football coaches share a number of consistent characteristics: they are attentive to the individual needs of their participants; they communicate clearly and positively; they prioritise safety without diminishing the competitive and social enjoyment of the session; and they model the respectful culture that characterises the sport at its best.

When correcting technique or managing behaviour, coaches should adopt a constructive, solution-focused approach. Avoid public criticism. Use the 'praise–correct–praise' framework to maintain participant confidence. Remember that many participants in this age group may not have received formal sport coaching since childhood and may initially be self-conscious.

Coaches should be alert to signs that a participant may be struggling — not only physically but emotionally and socially. The social dimension of Walking Football is often its most important feature for older participants, and coaches play a vital role in ensuring that sessions are welcoming, inclusive and free from exclusionary behaviour.

Section 6 — Refereeing and Match Management

6.1 The Role of the Walking Football Referee

The referee in Walking Football occupies a unique role that blends the traditional authority of match officiating with a pastoral responsibility for the welfare and enjoyment of participants. Walking Football referees must be educators as much as enforcers — their primary task is to create and maintain an environment in which the game can be played safely and enjoyably, not simply to identify and sanction infringements.

6.2 Core Refereeing Principles

1. Safety first — always. No advantage, competitive consideration or time pressure justifies compromising participant welfare. If in doubt, stop play.
2. Establish standards from the first minute. Referees who allow early running or minor contact create an expectation that these behaviours are acceptable. Consistent, calm authority from kick-off prevents escalation.
3. Monitor walking compliance continuously. Establish a pitch-wide scanning rhythm, not just watching the ball. Running infringements frequently occur off the ball.
4. Manage the game educationally. The blue card and verbal warning are powerful tools. Use them early and consistently rather than allowing minor infringements to accumulate before taking action.
5. Apply advantage sparingly. In Walking Football, the benefit of allowing play to continue rarely outweighs the risk of leaving a safety-relevant infringement unaddressed. Be prepared to bring play back.
6. Intervene early in potential conflicts. Address dissent and raised voices calmly but firmly at the earliest opportunity. The culture of respect that characterises good Walking Football is partly created by referees who model and demand it.
7. Communicate clearly and respectfully. Brief, clear explanations of decisions reinforce player understanding and reduce frustration. Avoid lengthy discussions on the pitch; any necessary post-match dialogue can take place after the final whistle.

6.3 Managing Specific Situations

Running infringements: Whistle promptly, position the free kick correctly, and deliver a clear, brief explanation where helpful. For a first offence by a player, a calm verbal reminder may suffice. For persistent infringement, a formal verbal warning should be issued, followed by a blue card if behaviour continues.

Height restriction breaches: Stop play immediately if there is any risk from a high ball. Apply the restart calmly and consistently. Be particularly alert to goalkeepers distributing above the limit.

Contact situations: Act decisively. Any contact that was deliberate or reckless must result in a free kick, irrespective of apparent intent. Brief, dignified explanations help players understand and accept decisions.

Medical situations: If a player falls, appears distressed or requests to stop, halt play immediately. Follow the emergency action plan. Ensure first aid is available and that the welfare of the participant takes absolute precedence over resumption of play.

Section 7 — Safeguarding and Welfare

7.1 Safeguarding Framework and Policy Obligations

All Walking Football programmes operating under the WALKFIT framework must have a clearly defined, written safeguarding and welfare policy. This policy must be communicated to all coaches, referees, volunteers and participants at the outset of their involvement with the programme and must be reviewed at least annually. The policy should be accessible to all participants and publicly available where possible.

Safeguarding in the context of Walking Football encompasses both the protection of adults from abuse, neglect and exploitation, and the broader duty of care that programme organisers hold towards participants whose age, health status or social circumstances may make them vulnerable. Older adults are entitled to participate in sport in an environment that is safe, respectful and free from any form of harm. This obligation rests with every person involved in delivering or administering the programme, not only designated welfare officers.

7.2 Minimum Safeguarding Requirements

1. Appointment of a designated Welfare Officer for the programme or club. This individual must have clearly defined responsibilities, appropriate training in adult safeguarding, and a named line of accountability. Their contact details must be shared with all participants.
2. A documented, accessible and confidential reporting procedure for concerns relating to the welfare of participants. This procedure must make clear how concerns can be raised, who will receive them, and how they will be acted upon. All staff and volunteers must be familiar with this procedure before they begin working with participants.
3. Appropriate background checks for all staff and volunteers who have regular unsupervised contact with participants. Records of checks must be maintained securely.
4. A zero-tolerance policy for all forms of abuse, discrimination, harassment and bullying, applicable to participants, coaches, referees, volunteers and spectators alike. This policy must include clear consequences for violations and must be enforced consistently.
5. An accessible and confidential mechanism for participants to raise concerns about their own welfare or that of others, without fear of negative consequences. Participants must be made aware of this mechanism at the point of joining the programme.
6. Regular safeguarding training for all staff and volunteers, with mandatory induction training before first contact with participants and refresher training at least every three years.

7.3 Pre-Participation Health Screening and Medical Information

The **registration and consent process** described in Section 5.2 forms the foundation of WALKFIT's health and welfare framework. Coaches and programme coordinators must maintain a secure, up-to-date record of all participants' health information, including: any diagnosed medical conditions relevant to physical activity; current medications that may affect participation or emergency response; any prior injuries or surgical procedures affecting mobility; and emergency contact details.

This information must be accessible — in a confidential but retrievable format — to the session lead during every session. It must never be shared with other participants but must be immediately available in the event of a medical emergency. Participants should be reminded at registration, and periodically thereafter, of their responsibility to update the programme coordinator whenever their health status changes.

The requirement for participants to confirm prior medical clearance from a healthcare professional is not a bureaucratic formality; it is a genuine safeguard. For older adults who may not have been physically active for some time, or who are managing chronic conditions, a brief conversation with

their GP or specialist before commencing Walking Football is sound preventive practice. Programme coordinators should actively encourage this and should not permit participation by individuals who have been specifically advised against physical activity by a healthcare professional without appropriate authorisation.

7.4 Data Protection and Confidentiality

All personal data collected through the registration process — including health information, emergency contacts and consent declarations — must be processed in compliance with applicable data protection legislation. In Malta, this means the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) as implemented through the Data Protection Act (Chapter 586 of the Laws of Malta); in Italy, the GDPR as supplemented by the Italian Data Protection Code (Legislative Decree 196/2003 as amended). Across all WALKFIT activities, the data protection principles of purpose limitation, data minimisation, accuracy, storage limitation and security must be observed.

Participants must be informed clearly and in plain language about how their data will be used, who will have access to it, how long it will be retained, and how they can access or request deletion of their information. The privacy policy of the coordinating or partner organisation must be provided at the point of registration. Consent for media use (photographs and video recordings) must be obtained separately and must be genuinely voluntary — participation in the programme must not be conditional upon consent to media recording. Participants must be able to withdraw media consent at any time without affecting their right to participate.

7.5 Identifying and Responding to Welfare Concerns

Coaches and session leads are often the first people to notice signs that a participant may be experiencing difficulties beyond the physical demands of the session. These signs may be physical (unexplained bruising, signs of poor nutrition or self-neglect, frequent unexplained absences), emotional (withdrawal, distress, expressions of hopelessness or fear) or relational (signs of conflict, controlling behaviour by a companion, or anxiety about leaving after sessions).

All programme staff and volunteers must be trained to recognise these potential indicators of abuse, neglect or other welfare concerns, and must know how to respond. The response should always prioritise the immediate safety and wellbeing of the participant; concerns should be reported promptly and in confidence to the designated Welfare Officer; records of concerns and actions taken should be maintained securely; and referrals to statutory services should be made where the situation warrants.

Coaches must never attempt to investigate concerns themselves, nor promise confidentiality they cannot guarantee. In situations involving immediate risk to a participant's safety, the appropriate emergency services must be contacted without delay.

7.6 Mental Health and Social Wellbeing

Walking Football's most significant and consistent impact, as documented across qualitative research, is its contribution to the mental health and social wellbeing of participants. The reduction of social isolation, the development of social connections and friendships, the restoration of a sense of purpose and identity, and improvements in self-confidence are among the most frequently reported benefits (Goodison et al., 2025; Price et al., 2025). These outcomes are not automatic; they depend on the culture and environment that coaches, referees and programme coordinators actively create and maintain.

Coaches should be alert to participants who appear socially isolated within the group, who show signs of low mood or distress, or who report difficulties in their lives outside the programme. A brief, private check-in with a participant showing these signs can make a significant difference. Where coaches have concerns about a participant's mental health or social circumstances, they should discuss these with the Welfare Officer and consider whether any additional support or

referral is appropriate. Walking Football can be a powerful protective factor for mental health, but it is not a substitute for professional mental health support when this is needed.



Section 8 — Inclusion and Mixed Ability Adaptation

8.1 Principles of Inclusive Walking Football

Walking Football is inherently an inclusive sport — its rule modifications remove many of the barriers that prevent older adults or those with physical limitations from engaging with traditional football. However, effective inclusion requires more than the removal of barriers: it requires active, thoughtful facilitation that ensures all participants are able to engage meaningfully and enjoyably regardless of their physical capacity, prior experience or background.

8.2 Practical Adaptations

1. Adjust pitch size to match the capabilities of participants in each session. A smaller pitch reduces the physical demands of covering ground and keeps the game more dynamic for lower-mobility players.
2. Introduce neutral or floating roles (players who are always on the team in possession) to increase involvement and reduce physical demands for participants with limited mobility.
3. Apply touch restrictions temporarily (e.g., a maximum of three touches) to encourage passing and sharing of the ball, reducing the advantage of more mobile players.
4. Rotate players through positions regularly to ensure equitable participation and to manage fatigue.
5. Match teams thoughtfully where ability levels are mixed, to ensure all participants have meaningful involvement.
6. Ensure that the physical environment is accessible — consider participants using walking aids, those with visual impairments and any other specific access needs.

8.3 Cultural and Gender Inclusion

Walking Football programmes should actively seek to include women as well as men. Research consistently shows that women over 40 are active and enthusiastic Walking Football participants, and that the sport's social and health benefits are equally pronounced across genders (Goodison et al., 2025). Programme coordinators should consider whether mixed-gender sessions are appropriate for their participant group or whether separate sessions may initially lower barriers to participation for women who have not previously engaged with organised sport.

Programmes should be welcoming to participants from all cultural backgrounds and must ensure that sessions, communications and environments are free from discrimination and respectful of diverse needs.

Section 9 — Safe Practice and Risk Management

9.1 Pre-Session Risk Assessment

A brief but systematic pre-session safety check must be completed before every session. This check should confirm that the playing surface is safe, that goalposts are securely anchored, that there are no trip hazards or obstacles within the playing area, and that weather conditions are appropriate for outdoor activity.

9.2 Safe Practice Requirements

7. Conduct a written pitch and environment risk assessment before each session and record any hazards identified and the steps taken to address them.
8. Ensure all goalposts are securely anchored or weighted to prevent tipping. This is a mandatory safety requirement — unsecured goalposts present a potentially fatal hazard.
9. Ensure that appropriate first aid provision is in place for every session. At minimum, a trained first aider and a stocked first aid kit should be available on site at all times.
10. Schedule and enforce hydration breaks, particularly in warm weather. Dehydration poses a specific risk to older adults and can occur rapidly in conditions that would not concern younger players.
11. Monitor participants for signs of fatigue, distress or medical deterioration throughout every session. Coaches and referees share responsibility for this monitoring.
12. Maintain an up-to-date written Emergency Action Plan (EAP) for each venue, including the location of the nearest defibrillator (AED), emergency access routes, and emergency contact numbers.
13. Ensure that all participants have completed a health registration form prior to their first session and that relevant medical information is accessible to the session lead during play.

9.3 Weather and Environmental Considerations

Outdoor Walking Football sessions should be adapted or suspended in conditions that present an unreasonable risk to participants. In high temperatures (above 28°C or as locally advised), sessions should be shortened, hydration breaks increased, and participants encouraged to wear appropriate sun protection. In wet or icy conditions, sessions should be suspended or moved indoors where the playing surface presents a slip hazard.

In Malta and other Mediterranean settings, particular attention should be given to session scheduling during summer months, with early morning or early evening sessions preferred to avoid peak heat. Shade, adequate water supplies and appropriate emergency contact information must be available at all outdoor venues.

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