

WALKING FOOTBALL: Veterans who thought playing days over back in action

Match of the grey time as oldies return to the pitch

By Samuel Balls

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IT WAS the legendary Liverpool manager, Bill Shankly, who famously said that football was more important than a matter of life and death.

It is a quote which transcends the game itself and epitomises the fervour with which so many play the sport.

But for one walking football player, it is a sentiment which hit home four years ago. Alan Botten, 67, suffered a heart attack in 2010 and plays the new footballing phenomenon every week as part of his recovery.

Walking Football received unprecedented interest ever since a Barclays advert about the sport hit our television screens in July, and the retired architect has been galvanised by the game since joining Chelmsford Walking Football Club two years ago.

The Spurs fan was playing in the South East Regional Finals at the Chelmsford Sports and Athletics Centre on Sunday, and revealed his doctor has no qualms with his re-ignited love for the game.

Different

However, it could have been so different for the Great Baddow resident after his heart attack scare.

He said: "The doc says as long as you get sweat on the back of your neck you're fine. You don't expect it and then one Saturday morning it comes on. I couldn't get out of bed."

"I thought it was just indigestion but it wasn't. I had the pains in my arm and everything else."

"I started this about two years ago, and it's been good – it keeps you fit."

Chelmsford WFC were competing against a Folkestone outfit and a team from Wimbledon for the inter-county title, playing each side twice in an afternoon filled with pensioner passion.

Despite some hard football, Folkestone emerged victorious in the Football United-organised event after winning all four of their encounters.

Chelmsford WFC were worthy



WALKING FOOTBALLERS: Organisers Bob Willis and Terry Buck, front, and assembled veterans are ready for kick-off

Photographs by Gareth Morgan

runners up, having trumped Wimbledon 9-8 on aggregate over two games. The venue was paid for by the FA.

Team organiser Bob Willis said: "The weekday meetings are recreational and light-hearted, but when we play in tournaments such as this, everybody gets ultra-competitive."

The club meets for sessions on Tuesdays and Thursdays between 11am and noon at the Chelmsford Sports and Athletics Centre, and encourages new members over 50 to join them for £3.20 a go.

The rules are similar to the conventional version of the game, save for fact that running and slide tackles are not allowed.

It provides senior members of the community who may have retired from regular football, or who perhaps suffer from a mobility problem, to play again.

The slower pace of the game allows players to enjoy a less frenetic spectacle with like-minded people more accustomed to the breath-taking brilliance of Jimmy Greaves than Wayne Rooney.

Mr Botten said: "I wouldn't say I model my game on Greaves, but he was certainly my hero as a boy. He didn't play in the World Cup final but I was lucky enough to have tickets at Wembley in 1966."

"My ticket only cost £3.75, would you believe. We all went to Trafalgar Square to celebrate."



COME ON YOU SPURS FAN: Our reporter Sam is put through his paces by more experienced players



SLOW MOTION: Adam Field (yellow) walked down by Ross Winter



DRIBBLER: Alan Botten



FOOT IN: Steve Mundin goes in for a tackle

What you say

■ **Bob Willis, 61, Broomfield, self-employed. Defender, Spurs fan, models his game on: Alan Gilzean**

"We originally only played on Tuesdays but such was the level of interest that we now play on Thursdays, too. There's about 25 of us. The Barclays advert generated a lot of interest in the game."

"It's competitive but I don't think we have the physical problem where people make it dangerous. If you've played football at any level you want to win and people do take it seriously."

"It's extremely difficult to resist the urge to run because that's your instinct. If there's a ball a yard or two away you just want to make that couple of extra feet and that invariably means you want to run."

"If you've got good movement, you will do well. For example, one of our players is a great shuffler, some referees would probably criticise it, but he keeps both feet on the floor so he isn't technically running."

■ **Mick Andrews, 68, Wickford, retired engineer. Striker, Arsenal fan, models his game on: Dennis Bergkamp.**

"Everybody's really keen. I love playing. The walking side of it is a good way of stopping people like us dropping down dead, we can't be running around."

"You've got to play to feet, it's the only way to play the game. But it doesn't always work like that."

"When I used to play 50 years ago, you used to see a space and pass the ball into it, but you can't do that here."

"It's been 20 years since I kicked a ball before I started playing here. My first game in walking football was quite hard."

"I've never pulled a muscle in my life playing football. And then I came up here and was just knocking a ball against the wall and I pulled my quad."

"If you used to play and you're still relatively mobile you get back into it quite easily."

■ **Phil Taylor, 67, Tiptree, retired Ford employee. Striker, Liverpool fan, models his game on: Kevin Keegan.**

"It's very enjoyable and keenly competitive. It's very counter-cultural to resist the urge to run."

The instinct is to run and to play the ball ahead of someone, rather than to feet."

"I think it was Stanley Matthews who always used to want the ball to go to feet."

"The last time I played competitive football was in my early twenties, so it was very strange getting back into the game."

"After my first match, I was aching in muscles that I never knew I had."

"But it's just great to be back playing football again."

