

Walking Football – League of Ireland teams turning back the clock!



Walking Football is a gentler, less stressful version of football is being enjoyed by a large cohort of older fans of League of Ireland clubs. Saturday 13th June saw the latest League of Ireland Walking Football festival when over 160 players representing thirteen LOI clubs donned their team colours to participate in an event where the primary aim is to enhance their physical, mental and social well-being.

Walking Football is expanding rapidly and with Ireland's growing ageing population, Walking Football is now seen as an ideal vehicle to promote health and well-being and combat social isolation among this ever-expanding demographic.

Several of the LOI teams also feature female players happy to share a pitch with the men which is testament to the non-contact element of the game. One such player is former Irish International, Linda Gorman who enjoys playing weekly with the Bohemians' Walking Football group while Saint Patrick's Athletic has recruited several female players for their group.

With the advent of LOI clubs employing Social & Environmental Sustainability (SES) Officers in recent times, Walking Football is one of the programmes they keenly promote and as such, there has been an increase in the number of LOI clubs

participating from nine in 2024 to thirteen clubs in this latest LOI festival. Clubs have also acknowledged the support of agencies such as Healthy Ireland, Age & Opportunity and various Local Authorities who have been instrumental in helping the SES Officers establish their roles and promote and develop health promotion programmes such as this.

League of Ireland Football & Social Responsibility Manager Derek O'Neill said:

“Once again, our LOI Walking Football festival has been a huge success and I think everyone left with a big smile on their face. It’s always great to see the energy and enthusiasm generated among this group of players, not only on the pitch but in the social interaction and banter off the pitch. We catered for two age categories this year - over 50s and over 65s. We even have some 80+ year olds playing which goes to show that football is still playable and enjoyable no matter what age you are! It’s an amazing way to maintain physical and mental health and the players today are testament to the power of the beautiful game to create and build important social networks.”

Clearly, age is just a number and this is illustrated by this remarkable group of players who have now extended the traditional Player Pathway well beyond traditional retirement age. For most of this group, retirement from football is just not in their thinking!

<https://youtu.be/Y9SOYOVL5Ac?si=EJYxxEGG8yT5A6IV>

Here’s some of the highlights and views of participants in this year’s festival.