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Facilitating Motivation in Later Life: A Case Study of Coach–Player and Club Dynamics in Walking Soccer

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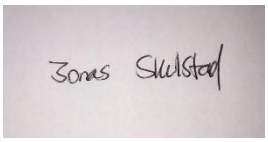
Navn Jonas Skulstad	**20230725**	
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Preface

As I near the completion of my master's degree, I find myself reflecting on the journey. It has at times been lonely and challenging—balancing life, work, and a sport-filled schedule—but it has also been incredibly rewarding. The sense of achievement I now feel makes me proud to have reached this final milestone.

I am deeply grateful for the warm embrace of the walking soccer group and the participants who generously shared their time and insights. Without you, this project would not have been possible, my sincerest gratitude.

To everyone I have met along the way, thank you for contributing to my growth, not only academically, but also personally. I would also like to extend my sincere gratitude to the faculty at Aalborg University, especially Niels Nygaard Rossing, for your ongoing support and thoughtful consultation throughout this project.

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Facilitating Motivation in Later Life: A Case Study of Coach–Player and Club Dynamics in Walking Soccer

Abstract

Background: Growing numbers of older adults and increasing levels of inactivity with age have expanded the research interest in experiences of sport and physical activity in older age. Despite several investigations into the experiences of walking soccer (WS) players, a lack of research exists on contextual factors such as coaching and club facilitation.

Purpose: To investigate the role of the coach and organizer in facilitating participation and motivation within for players within a specific WS group of players.

Theoretical Grounding: The data is seen in though Self-Determination (SDT) and grounded in hermeneutics.

Methods: Qualitative case study based on semi-structured interviews and observations, analysed through Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA). The data comes from a total of seven participants, five players, one coach and one organizer.

Results: Three themes were identified, *"Environmental, Structural and Leadership Characteristics", "Navigating Ageing through Acceptance, Adaptation, and Humour" and "Balancing Group Identity and Chang**e".*** Findings suggest that the coach and organizer were important in facilitating a supportive and age-adapted environment. Through inclusive leadership it fostered players' basic needs satisfaction (competence, autonomy, relatedness), while adaptations for aging enable continued athletic participation.

Conclusion: For practitioners and community organizers, this suggests designing sports programs for seniors with autonomy-supportive coaching, adaptive approaches, and opportunities for social connection. Ultimately, structured initiatives like walking soccer can promote active, successful aging by keeping older athletes engaged and socially connected.

Keywords: Physical Activity, Elderly, Age-Friendly Sport, Active Ageing

Dansk Abstract

Baggrund: Der ses et stigende antal af ældre og samtidig også et øget fald i fysisk aktivitet for denne målgruppe, hvilket har øget forskningsinteressen på dette område. På trods af flere undersøgelser af oplevelser hos spillere i gå-fodbold (GF), eksisterer der manglende forskning på kontekstuelle faktorer såsom træner- og klubfacilitering.

Formål: At undersøge trænerens og organisatorens rolle i forhold til at facilitere deltagelse og motivation for spillerne i en specifik gruppe af GF-spillere.

Teoretisk fundament: Data fortolkes ud fra Deci og Ryans Self-Determination Theory (SDT) og er metodisk forankret i hermeneutikken.

Metoder: Nærværende speciale er opbygget som et kvalitativt casestudie baseret på semistrukturerede interviews og observationer. Der er afholdt interviews med i alt syv informanter: fem spillere, en træner og en organisator. Endvidere er det analyseret gennem en refleksiv tematisk analyse (RTA).

Resultater: Tre temaer blev identificeret: “Miljømæssige, strukturelle og ledelsesmæssige karakteristika", "At navigere i aldring gennem accept, tilpasning og humor" og "At balancere gruppeidentitet og forandring". Fundene peger på, at træneren og organisatoren spillede en vigtig rolle i at skabe et støttende og aldersspecifikt miljø. Gennem inkluderende ledelse blev spillernes grundlæggende behov (kompetence, autonomi, tilhørsforhold) understøttet, mens tilpasninger af alder muliggjorde fortsat deltagelse i idrætsaktiviteter.

Konklusion: For aktører og konsulenter, som arbejder med denne målgruppe er det relevant at sikre at sportsprogrammer for ældre inkluderer autonomi støttende træneradfærd, aldersspecifikke tilpasninger og muligheder for social interaktion. Ultimativt kan strukturerede initiativer som gå-fodbold fremme en aktiv og succesfuld aldring ved at holde ældre idrætsudøvere engagerede og socialt tilknyttede.

Nøgleord: Fysisk aktivitet, Ældre, Aldersvenlig sport, Aktiv aldring

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1. Introduction

Ageing is generally characterized as a phase of gradually decreasing physical and cognitive abilities, increase in medicalizations and decline of social interaction (Center for Better Ageing, 2025). It is predicted a dramatic increase in the elderly and life expectancy worldwide over the coming years (Brunborg, 2012; Tabata, 2005). Older adults often experience a loss of independence, including difficulties managing daily activities, making personal decisions, and caring for themselves, placing increased responsibility on healthcare systems to provide necessary care (Fried et al., 2004). As the proportion of elderly increases, this will lead to increased cost of caring for elders and present a significant challenge for health care systems (Gusmano & Okma, 2018). Physical activity has been demonstrated as a strong predictor for maintaining independence into old age (Marques et al., 2014). Therefore, a surge in interest has occurred in examining the experiences of older people in sports and physical activity to better accommodate elders to stay active and reduce the loss of independence, thus ultimately lowering the cost of care (Marques et al., 2014). Several reviews on this topic have identified barriers and facilitators for physical activity amongst elderly, and include physical ability (pain), personal benefits, motivation and beliefs (self-efficacy), competing interests, social influences (social interactions) and access difficulties (affordability) (Franco et al., 2015; Ige-Elegbede et al., 2019).

Group-based activities have shown promising results in generating participation in programs with physical activity. It stands out by providing a safe, inclusive space and fostering feelings of social connectedness and belonging (Andersen et al., 2019; Hwang et al., 2019). Group-based activities offer not only opportunities for physical activity but also foster social interaction, an important benefit, as older adults are more likely to experience social isolation (Nicholson Jr, 2010). The ability to socialize and meet with peers is often cited as one of the most important factors for participation in sports and physical activity amongst the older population (Franco et al., 2015; Hwang et al., 2019).

Within these group-based activities, qualitative research has gone beyond simply determining what factors contribute to participation, often referred to as facilitators or barriers. Instead, qualitative research has emphasized that older adults' experiences of physical activity are shaped not only by physical ability but also by social and relational dimensions (Dionigi, 2006; Thomas, 2024). These include embodied, gendered, and social aspects of aging that influence how individuals perceive their own capacities and how they are perceived by others.

This holistic perspective is particularly important when studying physical activity among the elderly, as it highlights that participation is not solely driven by health-related motivations but also by the desire for social connection, recognition, and belonging. Understanding these dimensions is crucial because physical activity experiences can either challenge or reinforce ageist stereotypes. When older individuals engage in physical activity in ways that resist limiting narratives about aging, such as frailty or dependency, they may help redefine what is considered possible in later life (Sivaramakrishnan et al., 2023; Thomas, 2024). Conversely, when programs unintentionally reinforce these stereotypes, they risk discouraging participation or limiting autonomy. Therefore, exploring the subjective and social meanings of physical activity is essential for developing inclusive, empowering approaches that support older adults not just physically, but also socially and emotionally.

One of the group-based programs that have been promoted worldwide is walking soccer (WS). WS is a recently developed sport which has gained a large popularity across the globe, with over 40 000 participants in England alone (Corepal et al., 2020). WS is identical to regular soccer, but with no running, stripping large cardiovascular demands and moving the focus on technique, control and positioning, with the addition of offering social interaction amongst peers.

WS is therefore highly suitable for older adults, which gain the benefits of physical activity and social interaction. Within WS, several researchers have highlighted the experiences of the players and participants, identifying several benefits acquired through their participation such as social support, connectedness, responsibility for fellow participants, achievement, and confidence (Taylor & Pringle, 2022; Thomas, 2024). The experience of the players in WS is well established, but relationships within the context remain relatively unexplored, as WS requires facilitators and coaches to coordinate. Only one study was found where stakeholders' views and experiences were incorporated into the study. Sivaramakrishnan et al. (2023) aimed to explore stakeholder experiences of different community-based walking sport programs to gain a deeper understanding of their appeal among middle-aged and older adults, and to offer preliminary recommendations regarding the feasibility and long-term sustainability of such initiatives (Sivaramakrishnan et al., 2023). The research highlighted the importance of facilitators in bridging the gap between decision-makers and players and driving programs success.

In any sporting domain, the player-coach relationship is vital for successful participation and achievement (Enoksen et al., 2014). A plethora of research exists on this topic, with ties to the motivational models on building prosperous environments for athletes to thrive (Mageau & Vallerand, 2003). One of the most established motivational models is Self-Determination Theory (SDT). SDT is a model often used to describe how different factors influence motivation. Central to SDT is the idea that a motivating environment must support individuals' basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 2020). When these needs are fulfilled, intrinsic motivation, well-being, and long-term participation are more likely to flourish. In a sports context, this means that coaches and the surrounding environment should foster choice, a sense of mastery, and meaningful social connections (Mageau & Vallerand, 2003).

Recognizing the perspectives of multiple stakeholders is essential to developing a comprehensive understanding of WS. By combining the lived experiences of participants with contextual knowledge of the social and ecological factors shaping program delivery, this study highlights both the appeal of WS and the challenges involved in its implementation. Attention is given to the relational and practical dimensions of participation, with the aim of informing and improving how WS programs are delivered. This case study investigates how the coach, alongside other key organizer, fosters motivation and sustained participation

among older adults, particularly by supporting autonomy, relatedness, and competence in their interactions with players.

1.1 Research Question

What role do the coach and key facilitators play in supporting older adults' motivation to participate in walking soccer, particularly through the development of autonomy, competence, and relatedness, as understood through the lens of Self-Determination Theory?

1.2 Overview of the Thesis

This thesis is structured to guide the reader through the research process in a logical sequence. First, the theoretical framework and key concepts are presented to establish the foundation for the study. This is followed by a detailed methodology chapter outlining the research design, data collection, and analysis approach. The subsequent chapter presents the results, supported by interpretations of participant quotes. Finally, the discussion chapter reflects on the findings in light of the theoretical framework and existing literature, leading to concluding remarks and potential implications for practice.

2. Theory

Understanding motivation is essential, particularly in sports contexts, as it strongly influences whether individuals sustain or discontinue their participation. Identifying the factors that older adults encounter in WS is critical for effectively accommodating, facilitating, and sustaining future WS participation. SDT is particularly useful in this regard, as it addresses how satisfying fundamental psychological needs (autonomy, competence, and relatedness) influences motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2020). Therefore, SDT was selected as the theoretical framework guiding this case study.

Additionally, the coach-player relationship was examined through Mageau & Vallerand (2003) Motivational Model, chosen specifically because this relationship is considered pivotal in sports. The model emphasizes how coaching behaviours can significantly support or hinder the fulfilment of players' psychological needs, making it a valuable lens to explore how coaches contribute to player motivation and sustained participation in WS.

The theoretical framework with SDT was used to organize the study, while the lens of coach-player relationship focused attention on a specific dimension or relationships within the study.

2.1 Coach-Player Relationship

Within the sports domain, many relationships are formed between players, coaches and employees at the club. Within sports, the most prominent relationship developed is between the coach and the player, with different approaches used to conceptualize the relationship. The coach-player relationship is important to understand as it can be used to understand how the coach plays a role in facilitating participation of older adults in WS. Often, the relationship sets foundations for success and satisfaction of the athlete or participant (Jowett & Cockerill, 2003). Jowett & Cockerill (2003) investigated 192 athletes' attachment style and their link to the athlete's well-being. Athletes were categorized based of questionnaires as either avoidant, anxious or secure attachment, and then asked about the quality of their sporting relationship. The study found athletes with a secure attachment style felt they had better social support, more depth in relations and less conflict with their coaches. Building an effective coach–player relationship is considered a "crucial determinant" of athletes' motivation and satisfaction (Jowett & Cockerill, 2003). When athletes feel valued and understood by their coach, they are more likely to experience enjoyment and personal investment in the sport, which in turn facilitate sustained participation (Jowett & Cockerill, 2003).

The coach–player relationship plays a vital role in supporting older adults' sustained participation in physical activity, as highlighted across several qualitative studies. Coaches who foster trust, show empathy, and tailor their approach to the specific needs of aging participants help create an environment where older adults feel safe, respected, and motivated (Callary et al., 2015; Estabrooks et al., 2004) Effective coaches are not only technically competent but also capable of forming personal bonds, offering emotional support, and promoting social connection within the group (R. Cholerton et al., 2021; Cross et al., 2023). These relational qualities contribute to greater confidence, autonomy, and enjoyment, which are key to long-term engagement in physical activity later in life. Whether in recreational or structured health programs, the coach's role extends beyond instruction to include mentorship, encouragement, and adaptation—making the coach–older adult relationship a cornerstone of successful active aging (Sossa Rojas, 2024).

Hence, the relationship between coach and athlete plays a crucial role in shaping motivation and sustained engagement in sport. One influential model that captures how coaching behaviours impact motivation is the motivational model developed by Mageau & Vallerand

(2003), which is grounded in SDT. Before explaining this model in depth, the core concepts of SDT will be outlined below.

2.2 Self-Determination Theory

The SDT was developed by Deci and Ryan in 1985 and explores intrinsic and extrinsic motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2020). SDT distinguishes between different kinds of motivations. Intrinsic motivation is performing an activity or task purely for the enjoyment of that task directly. Extrinsic motivation is performing an activity or task for an external reward. Amotivation is the absence of motivation, where the individual sees no reason for participation. Introjected regulation is motivation for participation driven by internal pressures such as guilt or pride. Self-determined extrinsic motivation is when an activity is aligned with one's values and internalized goals. It can be introjected, where actors engage because they see personal meaning, relevance or benefit, but the activity itself is not inherently enjoyable. The other is integrated regulation, where the person fully assimilates the activity into their identity and life, as the activity is closely tied to their personal beliefs, values and sense of self.

SDT can be used to understand how people in sports groups interact and what is needed for them to thrive and succeed within the setting (Ryan & Deci, 2020). SDT explains how social environments influence attitudes, values, behaviours and motivations. The theory is rooted in that humans are naturally intrinsically motivated, inherently active and focused on natural development through integrative processes (Ryan & Deci, 2020).

For these natural processes to occur, such as intrinsic motivation and integrated regulation, humans need both psychological and biological sustenance. If absent, it can create experiences, behaviours and development sub-optimal. SDT focuses mostly on psychological needs within social contexts and how it affects the motivational aspect.

At the core of SDT are three fundamental psychological needs (Ryan & Deci, 2020):

- Autonomy refers to the need to experience self-direction and personal endorsement in one’s actions. When individuals feel they have control over their choices, they are more likely to internalize and sustain motivation.
- Competence is the need to feel effective and capable in one’s activities. Environments that offer optimal challenges, clear guidance, and constructive feedback help fulfil this need.

- Relatedness involves the need to feel connected, cared for, and a sense of belonging with others. Supportive relationships are essential for the internalization of values and persistence in activities.

The three needs will be further elaborated in the following section, showing how they relate to the coach-athlete motivational model by Mageau & Vallerand (2003).

2.2.1 The Need for Autonomy

Deci and Ryan defined autonomy as the experience the individual has to affect, make decisions and control their own actions (Ryan & Deci, 2020). Within SDT, autonomy is described as a part of a locus of control, either externally or internally. An internal locus of control is the belief that outcomes are results of the actor's own behaviours, while an external locus of control implies that outcomes are due to external forces. Individuals will vary whether they have an internal or external focus for their locus of control. An individual with an internal focus who participates in walking soccer attributes their own success to their own behaviours, such as the amount of practice. An external focus, however, might attribute one's own success to the easy tasks given by the coach. This is part of the Causality Orientations Theory, where autonomous, controlled impersonal causality orientations are a part of every individual to some degree (Koestner & Levine, 2023; Turner et al., 2012). Autonomous orientations have a high degree of internal locus of control and respond to external cues in a way that supports autonomous behaviour. Controlled orientations have a high external locus of control, where external cues, demands and rewards shape actors' behaviour and inclination to being controlled. Impersonal orientation, also called learned helplessness, refers to an external locus of control, where external cues are identified as indicators of incompetence and amotivation occur.

Plentiful research exists on causality orientations and their predictability of variance amongst adult actors' outcomes. Autonomous orientation has been positively correlated with self-actualization, self-esteem, and more intentional self-disclosure (Koestner & Levine, 2023; Turner et al., 2012). Motivational strategies that focus on external rewards or threats undermine autonomy and result in less internal motivation, less creativity and impaired problem solving (Ryan & Deci, 2020). Therefore, coaches who emphasize an autonomy supporting style, where athletes and participants actively have freedom of choices and are encouraged to find their own solutions, report greater psychological well-being (Lafrenière et al., 2011).

2.2.2 The Need for Competence

The need for competence exists in all human beings. Competence is defined as the feeling of mastery and being effective in the various tasks and achieved through experiences of trial and error, regardless of abilities (Turner et al., 2012). For example, when successfully scoring a goal, the individual feels competent.

To nurture competence within sports settings, research has identified several competence supporting behaviours. These strategies can easily be applied and involve optimal challenge, supportive feedback application and promoting engagement with the task (Ryan & Deci, 2020). A vital part for developing competence is the creation of a structured environment for participants. For example, coaches need to provide clear guidance and set well defined expectations for how and what the participants need to accomplish to reach their goals (Ryan & Deci, 2020). By providing structure in an autonomy-supportive way motivation can be further supported. An autonomy-supportive approach refers to coaches interacting with the athletes and to ensure the tasks are optimally challenging, meaning the tasks are appropriately matched to the athletes' competencies (Ryan & Deci, 2020). Challenges matching competencies allow for athletes to expand and test their capabilities leading to higher achievements. Tasks not suited or too simple may cause boredom and too difficult challenges can cause anxiety (Csikszentmihalyi, 1988; Ryan & Deci, 2020) Additionally, coaches also play a central role in encouraging sustained efforts and strategies such as positive feedback can boost an individual’s internal motivation positively, thus further increasing the feeling of competence amongst participants (Mouratidis et al., 2008).

2.2.3 The Need for Relatedness

Relatedness refers to the need to feel connected to others around us and have social belongings (Ryan & Deci, 2020). When athletes feel relatedness to others in the group, they feel safe and a part of something bigger, where each individual is working towards a common goal. To facilitate this, coaches need to express genuine interest and interactions in a caring and well-intended manner. This feeling of connectedness allows athletes to more effectively accept and internalize values, norms and guidance from coaches (Ryan & Deci, 2020). Internalization is an important principle as expressed by Ryan & Deci (2020), where an individual integrates the values of others into their own and feels attached to them. The process can happen both indirectly, but also directly where the individual consciously tries to

develop the values of others. A successful internalization of healthy values is therefore a fundamental premise for secure social adjustment and well-being.

2.3 The Coach-Athlete Relationship: A Motivational Model

Mageau and Vallerand (2003) developed a motivational model of the coach–athlete relationship based on Self-Determination Theory (SDT), which explains how coaching behaviours influence an athlete's motivation by either supporting or undermining their basic psychological needs. The model identifies three core dimensions of coaching that contribute to athletes' need satisfaction: autonomy support, structure, and involvement.

Autonomy-supportive behaviours involve acknowledging the athlete's perspective, offering meaningful choices, and minimizing controlling language and pressure. When coaches allow athletes to take initiative and express preferences, it supports their need for autonomy, which is the feeling of being the origin of one's own actions. Importantly, autonomy support goes beyond simply giving choice; it includes providing rationales for rules and tasks, acknowledging emotions, and using non-controlling feedback.

Providing structure means offering clear expectations, constructive feedback, and guidance that helps athletes understand how to improve. This addresses the need for competence, the feeling of effectiveness and capability in one's activities. A structured environment ensures that autonomy is not confused with a lack of guidance, which can be demotivating.

Involvement refers to the coach's level of genuine interest, care, and investment in the athlete. This supports the need for relatedness or feeling valued and connected to others. When athletes feel that their coach cares about them as individuals, they are more likely to develop internal motivation.

When these three needs, autonomy, competence, and relatedness, are satisfied, athletes are more likely to experience intrinsic motivation (engaging for enjoyment) and self-determined forms of extrinsic motivation (e.g., training because it aligns with personal values). In contrast, when coaching is overly controlling, vague, or emotionally distant, athletes may experience non-self-determined motivation driven by pressure, obligation, or fear of punishment, which can reduce persistence and enjoyment in sport.

Thus, the motivation model by Mageau & Vallerand (2003) provides a framework for understanding how specific coach behaviours influence the motivational climate and, ultimately, athletes' engagement and sustained participation. In the context of WS where

long-term enjoyment, inclusion, and personal meaning are critical, creating an autonomy-supportive, structured, and involved coaching environment is especially important for older adult participants.

2.4 Relations

Relations to others are seen as one of the most important factors for happiness and wellbeing amongst people (Haller & Hadler, 2006). The word relations stems from the latin word of *relation*, defined as *a significant association between or amongst two things* (Merriam-Webster, 2025b). Within the athletic domain, the coach-players relationship is particularly significant. The presence, action and words of the coach can impact the players and are seen as crucial for the players' development (Lafrenière et al., 2011) A good coach-athlete relationship is explained as situations where emotions, perceptions, and behaviours are intertwined factors between the individuals (Enoksen et al., 2014). It is seen as a dynamic process where the action of everyone is influenced by one another, and reciprocal interactions occur (Schibbye, 2009). The relationship is formed organically under practice, and the development of a positive coach-player relationship is dependent on relational skills to actively shape the relations between individuals (Schibbye, 2009).

Spurkeland (2012) defines relational skills as "skills, abilities, knowledge, and attitudes that establish, develop, maintain, and repair relationships between people.". Additionally, Spurkeland developed 14 dimensions of relational skills which are crucial for the ability of building strong relationships. Four key dimensions are identified as the most essential for building strong relations. The first is that there needs to be an interest in other human beings amongst both parties. The second is trust and it serves as the crucial foundation of any relationship. The third refers to emotional maturity, which helps develop, maintain and facilitate good relations. The fourth dimension is performance aid, where encouragement and support serve as tools to actively empower the individual (Spurkeland, 2012).

2.5 Trust

As mentioned earlier, trust is the foundation for any relationship. Trust ensures that both parties have good-hearted intentions and actions (Horrigmo, 2013). It is a feeling that requires time and effort to develop through consistent interactions yet can be quickly eroded by breaches in behaviour. Trust functions as the "glue" in a relationship and reduces the "transactional cost" of each interaction by removing the constant need to evaluate the other person's reliability (Horrigmo, 2013). Within the framework of SDT, trust is also an enabling

condition for the satisfaction of psychological needs, particularly relatedness, as it fosters a sense of safety, mutual respect, and emotional connection. Giving attention to trust within WS groups can give insights into how the coach supports autonomy, according to Mageau & Vallerand (2003). Spurkeland (2012) divides trust into five key aspects:

- **Integrity:** Correspondence between speech and action
- **Competence:** Professional and interpersonal knowledge
- **Consistency:** Predictability, uniform behaviour, and consequences
- **Loyalty:** Willingness to support and stand up for another person
- **Openness:** Honest and truthful behaviour.

Within the athletic domain, trust between the coach, players and the organization is instrumental for achieving optimal conditions for development. The coach must have the players´ trust to be able to give guidance and support, and must be nurtured continuously (Enoksen et al., 2014). Within walking soccer, a coach's focus might not be to optimize performance, but rather ensuring enjoyment, adherence and mental well-being of his players. Walking soccer players are often older, past their physical prime, and the focus is on the enjoyment of the activity and social aspect rather than performance (Sivaramakrishnan et al., 2023).

Nonetheless, coaches who emphasize care and support for their players demonstrate greater mental well-being (Enoksen et al., 2014). In both Callary et al. (2015) and Estabrooks et al. (2004), trust emerged as a central element in the coach–player relationship for older adults. Callary et al. (2015) found that Masters swimmers placed high value on coaches who demonstrated competence, respected their autonomy, and provided consistent support—factors that fostered a trusting and motivating environment. Similarly, Estabrooks et al. (2004) reported that older adults in group exercise programs trusted instructors who were perceived as knowledgeable, attentive to individual needs, and capable of ensuring safety. In both studies, trust was not only linked to the coach's technical skills but also to their ability to form personal connections, which in turn enhanced participant engagement and commitment to physical activity.

3. Methods

The formulation of the research question directly informs the choice of methodology. This study aims 1) to gain a deeper understanding of the motivation of WS participant and 2) how the coach and organizer facilitated and influences these behaviours. To explore these dynamics, a qualitative case study approach was adopted.

Research Question

What role do the coach and key facilitator play in supporting older adults' motivation to participate in WS, particularly through the development of autonomy, competence and relatedness, as understood through the lens of Self-Determination Theory?

3.1 Research Design

A qualitative approach was chosen for this study through interviews with participants and facilitators of a WS group. The aim of this research was to explore and understand the feelings, meanings, and behaviours experienced by participants involved in WS. I have through my studies a more natural tendency towards exploring the objective “truth” through control and prediction, aligned with positivism or quantitative research methods. Thus, considering myself rather inexperienced with the world of qualitative research methods.

However, adopting a purely positivistic approach would be problematic here, as such a paradigm seeks an objective, singular "truth," making it challenging to capture the nuanced, individual, and context-dependent realities participants hold. Instead, I therefor choose to adopt a social constructivist and hermeneutics approach, fundamentally concerned with how meanings are created and negotiated through social interactions and discourse. Rather than seeking control and objectivity, I searched for the subjective experiences and discourse which impacted the lives of the elderly and their participation in WS. According to Phillips (2007) knowledge from a social constructivist perspective does not reflect a fixed or universal reality but is contingent, socially, culturally, and historically specific, and thus variable across different contexts. This aligns with Foucalt (1972) arguing that knowledge should not be seen as merely mirroring reality, but rather as constructed within discursive practices, subject to change across time and space. Adopting this paradigm allows for deeper insights into how participants individually and collectively construe meanings from their experiences, contexts, and life events (Sparkes & Smith, 2013). By focusing on participants' own thoughts, interpretations, and subjective experiences regarding WS, the researcher can fully immerse

into the participant's world, thereby capturing the rich complexity of personal and collective experiences and perspectives.

By utilizing different methods throughout the study, I sought to immerse fully in the world of the participants. Both passive observations, participant observations and interviews were done. Table 1 shows the timeline of data collection methods used.

Table 1: Overview of timeline for data collection

Activity	Week	Purpose
Observation	**1**	Pre-practice and practice
	2	Practice and participation in walking soccer
	3	Post-practice social gathering
Interview	**4**	Pilot interview
	5	Interviews with participants/players
	6	Interviews with participants/players
	7	Interview with facilitator and organizer

3.2 Positionality

As a lifelong soccer player, my perspective in this research is shaped by years of experience within the sport. I have played soccer at various levels, from youth leagues to senior amateur and professional teams. These experiences have allowed me to engage in a wide range of coach–player relationships, each influencing my understanding of motivation, trust, and athlete development. During my youth, the coach–player dynamic was often built on support, familiarity, and enjoyment of the game. However, as I progressed into senior-level soccer the relationship often became more performance-focused and distant. At times, this shift diminished the sense of intrinsic motivation and made me feel less seen as an individual. Still, there were also coaches who fostered an inclusive, individualized environment, demonstrating how powerful a supportive coaching approach can be. These lived experiences form part of my interpretive lens and influence how I relate to and understand the participants in this study.

My insider role within the WS environment is central to my positionality. I was first introduced to the WS group through an existing connection with the organizer, who spoke highly of the group's commitment and sense of community. This initial encounter sparked the

curiosity that would later evolve into this master's project. When I proposed the idea for the thesis, the organizer expressed enthusiastic support, further reinforcing my position as an insider. By the time I began observations, the coach had already introduced me to the group via Spond, the communication platform they utilized, and my status as a well-known player gave me a degree of social capital among the older participants. Although I was not a local native, which slightly moderated my insider role, I was quickly accepted, asked to officiate games, invited into casual conversations, and included in social gatherings post-training.

Occupying a dual role as both researcher and someone embedded in the broader football environment occasionally led to feelings of ambivalence and tension. I found myself emotionally caught when participants expressed dissatisfaction about aspects of the club. For example, some remarked that the club's facilities were inadequate for the first team, but "good enough" for the WS group. In these moments, I felt pulled in two directions: on one hand, committed to representing participants' experiences authentically, and on the other, aware of my personal connection to the club and its community. These moments highlighted the complexities of doing insider research and reinforced the importance of reflexivity. To manage these tensions and maintain analytical balance, I engaged in regular reflexive exercises throughout the research process. I also employed data triangulation, drawing on interviews, field observations, and digital communication (e.g., Spond messages) to strengthen interpretation and minimize bias. In line with a hermeneutic approach, I recognize that my background and relationships inevitably shaped how I understood and constructed meaning from participants' experiences (Brinkmann & Tanggaard, 2010).

3.3 Case Study

A case study is an intensive analysis of one individual "unit", either a person or specific population group, emphasizing developmental factors in relation to that surrounding environment (Brinkmann & Tanggaard, 2010). This type of research uses a specific population, setting clear boundaries and gaining insights for that specific phenomenon. Often case studies have been treated as a subordinate of studies with inclusion of a larger population or variation in their sample. Occasionally, case studies have not been viewed as an independent methodology, but rather as a pilot study, where results are used to gather data for development of general theories or hypotheses about society, which then are tried and tested with larger studies. For such reasons, case studies have often been misunderstood, leading to neglect that in some circumstances, case studies provide insights and offer advantages that

can provide insights and basis for analysis that are not available by more rigorous approaches (Brinkmann & Tanggaard, 2010). Brinkmann and Tanggaard thoroughly review five common misconceptions about case studies and explain why they are incorrect displayed in table 2 (Brinkmann & Tanggaard, 2010).

Table 2: Five Common Misconceptions about Case Studies

Misconception	Explanation	Correction
"General, theoretical knowledge is more valuable than specific case knowledge."	The belief that abstract theories and universal principles outweigh context-specific knowledge.	Context-dependent case knowledge is essential for developing expertise, as human learning progresses from specific experiences rather than abstract rules alone. Predictive universal theories rarely apply to complex human and social phenomena.
"One cannot generalize based on a single case; therefore, case studies cannot contribute to scientific development."	The assumption that generalization is solely dependent on sample size.	Strategic selection of single cases can produce valuable, generalizable insights, as illustrated historically by critical case studies. Quality and strategic selection trump quantity in case-based research.
"Case studies are mainly suited for generating hypotheses, not for testing hypotheses or building theory."	The perception that case studies are preliminary and insufficiently rigorous for hypothesis testing.	Case studies effectively support both hypothesis generation and rigorous testing and are valuable for developing and refining theories. They are not limited to exploratory stages.
"Case studies are biased toward verification."	The idea that case studies inherently confirm pre-existing assumptions, making them methodologically weak.	Case studies frequently falsify initial assumptions and force researchers to reconsider their hypotheses. They encourage deeper, more nuanced understandings through detailed context-driven analysis.
"Case studies are difficult to summarize and generalize into broader theories."	The claim that narrative-rich case studies resist simple summarization, indicating a methodological weakness.	The complexity reflects reality rather than a methodological flaw. Detailed narratives provide essential insights into real-world complexities. Rather than oversimplifying, good case studies allow diverse interpretations and meaningful contributions to cumulative knowledge.

By addressing these misconceptions, case studies reveal their strength in generating deep, contextual insights, making them a fitting and valuable method for exploring this WS group.

3.4 Phenomenology and Hermeneutics

Within qualitative research, terms such as phenomenology and hermeneutics are often used. Phenomenology derives from the Latin word *Phainomenon*, which means *"what shows"* and logos which means *"reason"* (Merriam-Webster, 2025a). Phenomenology is the study of what appears or manifests itself into consciousness. The philosophical approach is intended to shine a light on phenomena, and go beyond the ideas, stereotypes and impressions of one-self. However, the idea of an individual to be free from prejudice and its own experiences to accomplish true "*objectivity"* when encountering phenomena is disputed, thus embracing the idea of social constructivism, where our own reality is shaped by the social, cultural and historical context (Phillips 2004). This is important in qualitative research stance, as one can never truly obtain objectivity that applies universally, as all humans create their own, and thus warrants that the data obtained is at best an interpretation.

Hermeneutics is the *"study of interpretation"*. It acknowledges that our past experiences and knowledge will affect how we interpret and make sense of experiences and impressions (Patton, 2014). This is essential in being able to consciously or unconsciously interpret the meaning of different contexts and information in WS. This can also be explained as our preunderstanding and plays a role in how we see the world (Gadamer, 2007). Hermeneutics scholars argue that interpretation is a process of continuous activity between different and changing, were one's preunderstanding, interpretations of parts and as a whole, and contextualization are constantly interacting. Contextualization refers to understanding parts of the text or findings in relation to the broader context and overall meaning.

To obtain the best possible results, the process should be iterative, meaning that one returns to the material a repeated number of times. This pattern is repeated until the content appear comprehensible and consistent; a process defined as the hermeneutic circle (Brinkmann & Tanggaard, 2010)

3.5 Participant Recruitment

Recruitment of participants was through a local soccer club close to Oslo, Norway. The inclusion criteria for participants were, 1) older adults who actively participate in the clubs WS team and at least six months of experience, 2) facilitators responsible for carrying out responsibilities on a day-to-day basis and implementation of WS 3) organizer at the club level for implementing WS and other community programs. Contact was established through the club executive and in conversation with the coach of the team, a list of players was given as suitable for interviewing. The selected players were chosen with the intent on variation in the sampling, including different ages, capabilities and experiences. In total, 5 players, 1 facilitator and 1 organizer were included in this case study. The players were between the ages of 64-83 years. In consultation with the thesis supervisor, a total of seven participants were deemed sufficient for the study. Consistent with Braun and Clarke's critique, the researcher rejected the notion of saturation, rather the focus was on depth and richness of the data, and how well the interviews could speak to the research question. (Braun & Clarke, 2019). The study adopted the concept of *information power*, prioritizing the richness and relevance of the data for theme development and interpretation over the quantity of interviews conducted (Malterud et al., 2016).

3.6 Data Collection

In this study, I wanted to gain insights from the participants, coach and facilitator at the chosen club. Therefore, both interviews and observations were utilized.

3.6.1 Interview

One on one semi-structured interview was selected as appropriate. The semi-structured interview utilizes an interview guide with prepared questions in advance to direct the interaction and the path of the interview (Sparkes & Smith, 2013). It relies on open-ended questions and usually some variation exists in the approach to the pre-planned questions, but the relatively tight structure allows the participant to elaborate and can go into full detail of each topic, as well as report their own feelings and thoughts (Sparkes & Smith, 2013). Following the chronological order of the questions is not necessarily prioritized, however, being flexible and asking the participant to elaborate on interesting takes are encouraged to gain more insights. Granting a certain degree of flexibility to both the researcher and participant potentially allows for more output of ideas, feelings and attitudes (Sparkes & Smith, 2013). The encouragement of a free-flowing conversation also comes with drawbacks, as the conversation can steer off and irrelevant topics occur. This was challenging at first, but as I gained more and more experience, the ability to steer the conversation back on track and ask the right follow-up questions improved.

In developing the interview guide, the theoretical framework served as the foundation. SDT was used as the foundation for developing the interview guide, and questions was developed in relation to *autonomy*, *relatedness* and *competence* which are the three basic psychological needs within the SDT (Ryan & Deci, 2020). Questions regarding autonomy related to how the participants felt involved in the decision making around practice and other autonomy supportive behaviour from the coach. For example, *"In what way do you feel that you take part in the decision-making process regarding the training sessions and the overall setup?"*. Relatedness revolved around the sense of connection the players felt to their teammates and coach. For example, *"What do good relationships mean to you in your role as a player/coach? "*. Competence questions focused how the players perceived their own abilities and sense of mastery. For example, *"In what way do you feel that you contribute to the team or group – either on the field or socially?"*. The interview guide was discussed with the supervisor and adjusted accordingly. A pilot interview was performed to filter out or restructure certain questions to improve the interview guide. In total, 15 questions were

included in the interview guide for the coach and 13 for the players. (Appendix A) Interviews were performed both physically and online. The physical interviews took place in a meeting room at the clubs' facilities, or in their own home. The online interviews utilized Microsoft Teams. All interviewing were done in places where the participants felt comfortable, either at the club or in their own homes, making the participants more relaxed in safe environments (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2018). Clear and stable internet connection was also a priority to reduce interference when performed online (Johnson et al., 2021). It was recorded via an iPhone or direct screen recording via Teams. Each participant was given clear information on how the data would be stored and the confidentiality, as well as signing or agreeing to a consent form in line with GDPR-guidelines (Appendix B). Each interview lasted about 30 minutes to one hour and gave plenty of time for reflection and in-depth answers. When unforeseen or surprising topics arrived, follow-up questions were asked when suitable to gain more insight and reassure the participant the interviewer was actively listening. This is also consistent with a hermeneutical approach, which emphasizes an open and reflective attitude during interviews, allowing the researcher to engage dialogically with the participant's lived experience while remaining aware of their own pre-understandings in the process of interpretation (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2018). The main goal is to understand the participants' world through their own descriptions of it through the conversation (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2018). A focus point for the interview was the limitation for the interviewer to use more non-verbal cues to encourage the participants rather than verbally. This was to reduce interference of the recordings and encourage deeper reflection from the participants (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2018). This was most prominent in the physical interviews, as body language and verbal cues were less easily noticed by the participants, and the tendency for verbal encouragement was greater (Johnson et al., 2021). During online interviews, the ability to mute oneself helped reduce verbal encouragement from interviewer and interference. Attention was given also to the disadvantages of online interviewing, where body language was less noticed, both in terms of non-verbal feedback from interviewer, but also from participant, due to camera being only in the upper region (Johnson et al., 2021). However, facial cues were available and the ability to go back through video recordings, which gave sufficient non-verbal feedback.

While aiming for an equality-based conversation, I tried to remain mindful of the inherent asymmetrical power dynamics within the interview setting, where the interviewer typically guides the dialogue and determines what is considered relevant knowledge. This imbalance

was potentially reinforced by the researcher's social position, as being a soccer player for the club may have carried status among participants (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2018). To help reduce these dynamics, each interview began with informal small talk to build rapport before transitioning into the main topics. Before the interview commenced, the researcher was transparent about their role and clearly outlined procedures concerning data storage, confidentiality, and the participant's right to withdraw at any time. Each interview concluded with an open invitation for the participant to share any final thoughts, allowing them to shape the closing of the conversation and reassert their voice in the exchange.

3.6.2 Observation

A total of three participant observations were conducted with the group. The first observation focused on pre-practice routines and the training session itself. During the second observation, the researcher took on an active role, participating in the training as well as observing post-practice interactions. The third and final observation focused exclusively on post-practice routines. Several reasons informed the use of participant observation as a methodological strategy.

According to Brinkmann & Kvale (2018), participant observation enables researchers to identify phenomena that may lie outside their initial research design, thereby opening up new avenues for inquiry. By engaging directly in the field, the researcher can build rapport and trust with participants, which often leads to richer, more candid responses. This was particularly valuable during the recruitment phase and throughout the interviews, as I had already established a relationship with the players. This rapport was instrumental in fostering openness, potentially enhancing the depth and quality of their responses.

Additionally, participant observation offers important insights into the social norms and cultural context of the setting, helping the researcher to formulate more relevant and context-sensitive interview questions. For instance, during one observation, the researcher noticed the coach offering various forms of support and encouragement to players. This prompted the addition of the interview question: *"What does the coach do to engage you and give you support?"*—a question that helped elicit deeper reflections on the coach-player relationship.

Pre-observation reflections were also documented prior to the researcher's first attendance. Initially, I held the assumption that older adults might be more serious or reserved in group settings. However, after the first session, this assumption was quickly challenged. I was pleasantly surprised by the humour, banter, and lively interactions that characterized the

group dynamic. This early reflexive insight underscored the importance of entering the field with an open and self-critical perspective.

Furthermore, participant observation supports a more intuitive, experience-near understanding of the practice being studied, helping to guard against premature or decontextualized interpretations, an issue often cited in critiques of qualitative research, where the risk of misreading seemingly straightforward elements is significant (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2018). In this study, observations contributed to the overall interpretive process. Patterns and themes that emerged during interviews were triangulated with observational data, and field notes were revisited in a reflexive manner.

One illustrative example is the participants' tendency to run during sessions, despite the formal rule that only walking was permitted. Before participating myself, this behaviour seemed contradictory. However, once I joined the game, I experienced the physical and emotional drive to run, to reach a ball or make a tackle. I also found the game more exerting than anticipated. This embodied experience led to a more nuanced understanding of the physical and motivational dimensions of WS. As a result, new interview questions were developed, including those exploring participants' initial expectations and how they evolved over time.

3.7 Data Analysis

Interviews were transcribed using AAU UCloud platform (Aalborg University, 2023) through an automated transcription service called Whisper (Alec Radford et al., 2022). Whisper is an AI transcription tool based on the language model Whisper from Open AI and transcribes speech to text. Large model was used, with language put to Norwegian, maximum number of speakers 2 and merging consecutive text entries from the same speaker. After transcription, the researcher listened through each sound file with the transcript data to correct any mistakes, increase familiarization and ensure quality in the transcription.

3.7.1 Reflexive Thematic Analysis

The data was analysed in a step-by-step and flexible way using reflexive thematic analysis (RTA), following the approach by Braun and Clarke (2019). Later updates to their work (Braun & Clarke, 2019) highlight how the researcher plays an active role in shaping the findings. RTA's flexible nature allowed me to explore the data without fixed ideas in mind, helping me to uncover both surface-level meanings and deeper, underlying themes through

close and thoughtful engagement with the material. Computer software program NVivo (QSR International Pty Ltd, Version 15, 2025, Burlington, MA, USA) was used throughout the entire RTA process.

The initial phase focused on familiarization and coding of raw data (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Text was highlighted and labelled with codes such as “ageing” or “physical fitness”, making sure the codes captured what that raw data was about. Familiarization with the data was also emphasized to really get a feel for what each participants expressed. This phase was repeated twice for each participant transcript, to not only increase familiarity with the data, but also ability to revise and improve coding throughout the process. This process helped the develop more latent codes such as *“desire to stay active”* and *“recruitment uncertainty”*.

The next phase involved organizing codes and coded further into novel themes, then again revisiting those themes and codes to get finalized themes (Braun and Clarke, 2019). During this phase, thematic mind maps were drawn to better get an overview of the themes and revised along with the analysis (Appendix C). Codes such as *“Coach positive”*, *“Organizational support”* and *“Ease of Access”*, were all codes that had something to do with the how the club and coach facilitated participation through either environmental, structural or leadership factors. Thus, this became an overarching theme “*Environmental, structural and Leadership Characteristics”*. Themes were also revised once created, such as the initial themes “Feeling Contributary, Competent and Resourceful” and “Social Connection and Group Belonging” was clustered together to make a new theme called “*Balancing Group Identity and Change*”, as the overarching idea of the themes were how one feels socially connected with strong sporting identities, with changes to the potentially threatening this. Finally, when all themes were finalized, suitable quotes were made to support themes. Table 3 displays codes used to develop the finalized themes.

Table 3: Codes used to identify and develop themes with references.

		References		References		References
Themes	***Environmental, Structural and Leadership Characteristics***	277	***Navigating Ageing through Acceptance, Adaptation, and Humour***	289	***Balancing Group Identity and Change***	240
Codes	Facilitators at club	23	Barriers to participation	16	Desire to stay active	27
	Initiative to active and socialize	12	Desire for flexibility	18	Responsibility as a group effort	27
	Facilities	29	Self-doubt	8	Lifelong meaning of football	24
	Ease of access	5	Restrictions	19	Social connection	62
	Previous experience	25	Previous experience	25	Recruitment uncertainty	10
	Effort	12	Desire to stay active	27	Footballing journey	17
	Supportive integration	19	Humour to Manage vulnerability	15	Collective teamwork	20
	Mastery of skills	26	Physical fitness	37	Bein resourceful at the club	13
	Training fun	43	WS negative	10	Supportive Integration	19
	Safety	8	Expectations	9	Providing Support	21
	Experience at start	12	Providing support	21		
	Bein resourceful for the club	13	Ageing	48		
	Organizational support	17	Safety	8		
			Extrinsic Motivation	14		
			Cognitive stimulation	14		

4. Results and Analysis

To address the research question on how the coach and key facilitators support older adults' motivation in walking soccer, observations and a reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) of the interviews (with players, the coach, and club organizers) was conducted through the lens of SDT. Four key themes emerged, each reflecting the interplay of autonomy, competence, and relatedness in sustaining participation. These themes capture both the appeal of WS and the practical challenges in its implementation, as described by facilitators and organizers The identified themes are:

- *Environmental, Structural and Leadership Characteristics*
- *Navigating Ageing through Acceptance, Adaptation, and Humour*

- *Balancing Group Identity and Change*

Each theme contains subthemes focusing on specific aspects of the participants' experiences. Together, they illustrate how lifelong football identities, inclusive group dynamics, and supportive leadership practices foster motivation and long-term engagement in WS. Table 4 shows the different themes and the subthemes with explanations.

Table 4: Themes, subthemes and explanations

Theme	Subtheme	Explanation
Environmental, Structural and Leadership Characteristics	Environmental Factors: Facilities and Social Spaces	Focuses on how the club's facilities and equipment support the practical needs of WS while also fostering opportunities for social interaction.
	Structural Supports: Scheduling and Accessibility	Looks at how practical structures like consistent scheduling and accessible venues make participation easier and more age appropriate.
	Facilitative Leadership and Autonomy-Support in Practice	Explores how leadership, especially from coaches and organizers, indirectly supports participation by minimizing barriers and fulfilling psychological needs.
Navigating Ageing through Acceptance, Adaptation, and Humour	Confronting Ageist Perceptions	Addresses how older adults may internalize ageist views, seeing themselves as less capable or valued due to societal stereotypes.
	Redefining Walking Soccer	Examines the initial scepticism or negative view of WS among participants, and how actual experience changed their perception and self-image.
	Inclusive and Non-Judgmental Team Environment	Shows how the team environment embraces physical limitations without judgment, creating an inclusive and accepting space for everyone.
	Humour as a Coping Mechanism for Vulnerability	Highlights how humour helps participants manage vulnerability and maintain a sense of identity and belonging despite ageing and physical decline.
Balancing Group Identity and Change	Group Identity	Explores how strong group identity, built through shared history and friendships, motivates continued participation and reinforces team cohesion.
	Negotiating Change: Tensions Between Group Stability and Growth	Analyses the tension between welcoming new members and preserving the group's established dynamic, reflecting a need for balance between inclusivity and cohesion.

4.1 Environmental, Structural and Leadership Characteristics

Encompassing the practical enablers and contextual factors that have supported the WS program, in essence, it covers the characteristics of the environment around the WS players. The subtheme *Environmental factors: Facilities and Social Spaces* revolve around how facilities and equipment provided by the club fit their purpose of playing WS and supports the ability for socialization. The subtheme *Structural Supports: Scheduling and Accessibility* looks at how structural decisions like scheduling and format provides participants with low-barrier, age-friendly settings for participation. The last subtheme *Facilitative Leadership and Autonomy-Support in Practice* is about how the leadership, including the coach and the

organizer, facilitates participation by reducing external obstacles and fulfilling psychological needs indirectly.

4.1.1 Environmental Factors: Facilities and Social Spaces

Participants repeatedly noted how fortunate they were with the facilities and equipment provided by the club. A suitable physical environment can significantly affect older adults' willingness and ability to engage in sport (André & Agbangla, 2020). In this case, the participants were provided a high-quality artificial turf pitch and access to locker room and clubhouse space for post-game gatherings. The pitch was seen as ideal for their age group because of its good traction and even surface, which reduces injury risk. As one member cheerfully put it, they were *"super happy"* with the pitch. Morten remarked:

> *Morten: "We're really lucky — for us… For those of you who are active, this pitch might seem terrible. But for the rest of us, we've never played on such a nice surface before."*

This quote highlights how, compared to the rough fields of their youth, the current generation of older players has access to amenities they could only dream of before. As Einar expressed, they *"grew up in a world where we didn't have any of this."* In earlier decades, many of them played on gravel or natural grass (sometimes even frozen, uneven ground in winter). Now, having a modern artificial grass pitch with proper maintenance means fewer falls and strains, and generally more confidence in accelerating or changing direction. This boosts their sense of competence because they can play without constantly fearing a twisted ankle or bad knee from the field conditions. It also supports autonomy in a way: the players can focus on playing the way they want, rather than being limited by a poor surface.

Beyond the pitch, the locker room and clubhouse access were highly valued. What might seem like simple facilities are central to the weekly routine and the social experience. Morten emphasized the importance of the post-game coffee tradition in the clubhouse:

> *"Oh, the coffee is important. And sometimes you're not able to come, and it never feels good... And that's a very good sign. Because it means it matters."*

In other words, missing the coffee and chat afterward leaves a real void, indicating just how much that ritual means to them. The availability of a comfortable space to gather after

playing transforms the activity from just exercise to a holistic social event. It reinforces relatedness by allowing deeper conversations and friendships to flourish.

Players noted that while good facilities help, it is the *people* that create the locker room atmosphere, not the bricks and mortar. As Geir wisely stated,

> *"You can have a good time even without impressive facilities. It's really the environment that creates the locker room atmosphere, not the other way around."*

In practice, they had both: a nice clubhouse area *and* a group of people who actively generate a welcoming environment. The facilities simply enabled these interactions to happen more conveniently. Everyone having a warm place to sit and share a snack post-training undoubtedly strengthens the habit of sticking around, thereby strengthening the group bond.

The coach and club staff were very cognizant of the value of these informal social spaces. The coach observed that for many participants, the social aspect is *"perhaps the most important thing.".* The coach said, *"Gathering after the session up here – having a cup of coffee and some fruit, having a chat – it's incredibly valuable for the people. And for me as well."* This underlines how critical those moments are for cohesion and identity reinforcement. From an SDT viewpoint, these informal gatherings satisfy the need for relatedness in spades, people leave feeling more connected and supported, which feeds back into their motivation to return.

The organizer affectionately called these post-match sessions *"memory lane",* where players will reminisce, tell old stories, and collectively relive their past glories. It's rejuvenating, helping them establish connections that might have faded over time. This blending of past and present in a shared social space contributes to that sense of continuity and belonging. This was also reinforced thorough observations, that the majority participated in the social gathering after practice in good spirits. Here, the coach had an agenda with some points to be discussed, one of them being parking facilities for practice. A participant also brought pancakes for the group to enjoy while discussing recent games played in international soccer competitions and stories from the past.

Another key environmental support has been the active involvement of the club's organizer in providing and maintaining these facilities. Participants gave high praise to the club

leadership for their efforts behind the scenes. Tangible actions like making sure the pitch was cleared of snow, or the clubhouse was always accessible did not go unnoticed. Geir recalled, *"One day at training, when it was snowing a bit, he [the club leader] came and shovelled the sideline so we could see what was going on while we played."* These small but significant acts by the club's staff or volunteers sent a clear message that the WS group mattered. Seeing a leader literally clearing snow for them reinforced the sense of community and made the players feel valued by the organization. In practical terms, it also removed barriers (snow or ice) that might have hampered play or made it dangerous, thus ensuring continuity of the activity.

In summary, the environmental factors – quality pitch, dedicated space for socializing, and attentive facility support – all served as enablers for participation. They reduced external frictions (like unsafe conditions or lack of meeting space) and enhanced enjoyment and safety. This supportive environment, created by the club, complements the motivational climate by addressing the practical needs of older athletes (safety, comfort, routine), thereby allowing the psychological needs (relatedness, competence) to be met through the activity itself.

4.1.2 Structural Supports: Scheduling and Accessibility

Structural factors refer to how the program is organized in terms of time, format, and accessibility. A central structural element of this WS initiative is its consistency and low-pressure scheduling. The group meets once a week, every Thursday at 11:00 AM, and this routine has remained stable over time. Such predictability and moderation in frequency have been critical in fostering long-term engagement. Participants appreciated that the commitment was reasonable and sustainable – it fits well into their lives without becoming burdensome. As Svein, the coach, described, having it once a week during daytime was a structure that *"has proven sustainable over time."* This regular schedule helps players build the session into their weekly rhythm, almost like an appointment they plan around.

Importantly, there was explicit resistance to introducing more formal or competitive structures (like leagues or multiple weekly practices) because those could introduce unwanted pressure or obligation. Geir shared,

> *"At the beginning there was talk about signing up for some leagues and stuff. And I'm really glad that we didn't, because just training and having a good time is more than enough."*

This sentiment was echoed by others – the goal of the program is enjoyment and health, not competition and results. By keeping it purely for fun (non-competitive) and just once a week, the organizers supported the players' sense of autonomy. Participants don't feel dragged into something with heavy expectations; instead, they come because it's enjoyable and fits their goals. It also means they have freedom to pursue other interests on other days (cycle, hiking, etc., as noted), which is important to them. The once-weekly format strikes a nice balance: enough frequency to build cohesion and habit, but not so much as to conflict with other aspects of their autonomous lives.

The organizers have also made thoughtful practical accommodations to reduce barriers to participation. For example, they shifted the session slightly earlier to ensure there would be free parking available, making it easier for participants to attend without worry or extra cost. They try to make everything *"run smoothly,"* removing common hassles like figuring out logistics. Keeping the threshold low (*"dørstokkmila,"* as one organizer called it – meaning the mental barrier to getting out the door for physical activity) has been a priority. Essentially, the players just need to show up; everything else is taken care of – the field is ready, equipment like balls are provided, parking is sorted, even coffee is made. This hassle-free setup is crucial for older adults, as even small inconveniences can become reasons to skip an activity. By minimizing effort and maximizing convenience, the facilitators have increased consistent attendance. One can see this as supporting autonomy indirectly: participants are more likely to choose to come when it feels easy and entirely on their own terms, rather than a slog.

That said, the group discovered that even minor changes to the routine can impact turnout, highlighting how sensitive this demographic is to schedule adjustments. For instance, moving the start time a bit earlier (even if for good reason like free parking) drew some complaints. Harald pointed out, *"The only thing I find a bit unfortunate is that training has been moved a bit earlier. Older folks need a bit of time in the morning; they have to go through the newspaper and read a few things."* This illustrates that many retirees have established morning routines and may not want to rush. Even a small shift can disturb their comfort. Past experiences reinforced this: Einar recalled a previous older-adult football initiative where

sessions were in the evening and required paying for pitch rental – participation there dwindled because it was *"much more unorganized"* and a hassle, whereas the current program's stable, convenient timing keeps people coming. The lesson is that consistency and simplicity in scheduling are key. Facilitators learned to avoid too much change and to maintain a stable, low-threshold environment. By doing so, they support habit formation — attending WS becomes ingrained and expected each week.

Another structural support has been effective communication, primarily through a digital platform (in this case, an app called *Spond*). Communication might seem ancillary, but it turned out to have both logistical and motivational benefits. The facilitators use the platform to announce any schedule changes, send weekly updates or summaries of the sessions, and inject some humour and sarcasm into group messages. Participants loved these weekly write-ups; Einar described them as *"well written"* and *"funny."* Receiving a light-hearted summary of last week's antics or an encouraging message mid-week helps keep the group connected between sessions. It sustains the *momentum* and anticipation for the next meet-up. The coach noted, *"You need something that ties them together. And yes, Spond has actually been a great help with that."* In essence, the communication platform acts as a social glue and a reminder of their commitment. It reinforces group identity (inside jokes or highlights are shared with all) and ensures everyone is on the same page regarding practical info. This likely improves turnout (fewer people forgetting or getting days mixed up) and also fosters relatedness, as even those who miss a session can read about it and feel included. The gentle humor used in messages also aligns with the group's culture of fun, making even the communications autonomy-supportive rather than controlling. There's no spamming or guilt-tripping in the messages, just camaraderie and useful info.

In summary, the structural design of the program — regular timing, minimal competitive pressure, ease of access, and good communication — has been central to its success. These structural choices, largely guided by the coach and organizers, create an environment where older adults feel comfortable and self-determined in their participation. They can engage without feeling overwhelmed or inconvenienced, which means their energy can go into enjoying the game and social connections (which then satisfy their psychological needs). The consistency also helps the group self-regulate and sustain itself, as habits form and everyone knows what to expect.

4.1.3 Facilitative Leadership and Autonomy-Support in Practice

A final critical factor is the leadership style within the WS initiative. By all accounts, the coach's approach, strongly supported by the club's organizers, is *facilitative rather than authoritarian*. This style has been instrumental in fostering an environment where autonomy, competence, and relatedness can flourish, directly aligning with SDT principles. The coach was universally praised in the interviews. As both a coach and a fellow player (he participates in the sessions himself), with decades of football experience across all ages, he had a unique rapport with the group. He understood their love of the game and the adjustments needed for older bodies, and he treated the players with respect and warmth.

Autonomy support: The coach consistently encouraged inclusive decision-making and a sense of shared ownership of the sessions. While he provided structure (setting up drills, refereeing games, etc.), he did not impose rigid control. Players felt comfortable suggesting changes or trying new ideas. For example, the adoption of the two-touch rule was a collaborative effort. Initially, the coach was sceptical of the rule (concerned it was too difficult), but after some time, one of the players suggested giving it another go once skills had improved and to curb certain rule-bending habits. The coach listened to this input and agreed to implement the change. As one participant recounted:

> *"I brought up the idea that maybe we should try with two-touch, right? Because that naturally limits the amount of running. Everyone then has to stay a bit more in position. And that was really positive. So, we've done that now for three training sessions, and I've found it to be a lot of fun."*

This example shows the coach's willingness to adjust practices in response to group dynamics and feedback. Rather than feeling his authority challenged, he embraced the suggestion, which ended up improving the experience for all. Such responsiveness makes players feel heard and respected, key elements of autonomy support. They are not just passive recipients of coaching; they are active contributors to how the training is run. The coach's balancing of some structure (to ensure safety and coherence) with flexibility (to accommodate the group's preferences and evolving abilities) created a sense that *"we are doing this together."* This likely increased the players' intrinsic motivation, as they had a hand in shaping their play environment. It also enhanced their sense of competence, since being part of decision-making shows that the coach trusted their judgment and that they have

agency in solving problems (like too much running or dribbling). When the two-touch rule succeeded, the group could take pride in that collective achievement.

Competence support: The coach also fostered competence by structuring sessions to allow *progression and mastery*. He built up drills and games in ways that challenged the players just enough to keep improving without overwhelming them. The earlier discussion on skill development (e.g. eventually mastering two-touch play) highlights this. His approach was patient and encouraging rather than critical. If someone struggled, he was supportive and maybe injected humour to keep the mood positive. Over time, players clearly experienced mastery, they talked about feelings of improvement, getting the hang of new rules, and small victories on the field. The coach frequently acknowledged successes (even minor ones) to the group, creating a culture of celebrating competence. For instance, when a usually clumsy player makes a good pass, it's likely the coach and others cheer or make a light-hearted compliment. This continuous positive reinforcement made players feel *capable and proud,* feeding their motivation to continue.

Relatedness support: Relatedness was fulfilled not only through peer interactions but also through the tone the coach and organizers set. They were described as welcoming, humorous, and attentive to everyone. The coach, by virtue of his personality and approach, made sure no one felt like an outsider or "less important." As Morten remarked appreciatively, *"No participant out there is more important than anyone else… everyone is a co-owner through their participation."* This sentiment likely originates from how the coach treated the group — equally and with good-naturedness. He often plays on one of the teams during scrimmages, positioning himself as a teammate as much as a coach. This blurs any hierarchy and strengthens the feeling that *"we're all in this together."* Organizers (like the club leader) also interacted as part of the group (joining coffee, chatting, etc.), further dissolving any of us-vs-them dynamic. Such inclusivity ensures each player feels personally connected to the leadership and the group, fulfilling the need for relatedness.

It's important to note that the entire leadership and support structure is informal and mostly volunteer-based, yet it functions effectively due to the dedication of key individuals. The coach`s sustained commitment was crucial, especially in the early stages when launching the project. He recalled the effort it took:

> *"It was just about putting in the effort and creating something. We had to invest quite a lot of energy to get a project like this off the ground – to get people to show up and to keep them coming. It doesn't happen on its own. Nothing happens by itself. So, it's important to stay in close contact with them — to make sure people are happy that we can meet."*

This quote shows his understanding that active facilitation was needed to build momentum. He personally called or checked in with people to ensure they returned, especially at the start. This kind of hands-on nurturing is a form of autonomy support, interestingly he wasn't forcing anyone, but by keeping in close contact and ensuring they felt good about coming, he removed barriers like uncertainty or initial inertia.

As the program became established, the leadership approach remained collaborative and "low threshold." The aim was never to "manage" participants with strict rules or top-down commands, but rather to enable participation by smoothing out logistics and creating a welcoming atmosphere. This facilitative mindset extended to all players and the organizer.

For example, tasks like setting up the field, communicating schedules, or bringing fruit were done reliably so that participants could just enjoy. They consciously tried to avoid any sense of obligation or formality that might deter attendance. An organizer noted that keeping the participants themselves at the centre – essentially letting them run it *"under the coach`s leadership"* – gave the men a feeling of ownership. The organizer reflected, *"It's a good feeling to know you've helped create something that's not just good for yourself, but good for the other guys around you."* This highlights how even the leadership model was empowering for the participants: they are not passive consumers of a service; they are co-creators of this weekly experience. That belief likely enhances their commitment and satisfaction, as it taps into a sense of purpose and community contribution.

Interestingly, the desire to contribute extended beyond the pitch, as several participants expressed a "volunteering spirit". A wish to give back to the club for its facilitation. Geir expressed:

> *"We could probably get a bit more involved. We do help out once or twice a year with things like ticket sales. But it could definitely be more. There are many here who could pitch in."*

However, the coach and club have been careful not to pressure anyone into volunteering. They understand that it must come from intrinsic motivation – people should help out because they want to, not because they feel obligated. The coach emphasized that any increased contribution should be *"an organic development and not coerced."* As the coach noted about the club leadership's stance,

> *"He wants it — many of us want it — but we don't want to push ourselves into it again. ... He doesn't put any pressure on us."*

This comment reveals a delicate balance: the leadership (the organizer) would welcome more help, and the players themselves have interest, but everyone is cautious not to let volunteering become a burden. They intentionally maintain an autonomy-supportive climate by making sure any extra activities are wholly voluntary.

The leadership also recognized the wider benefits of the program, reinforcing to the participants (and themselves) why it's worth sustaining. The organizer remarked that many of the men felt it:

> *"Helped ignite a positive energy in all parts of their lives — keeping them feeling younger and not sitting passively. Because that kind of passivity is the beginning of dementia for many older people."*

By articulating this, the leadership validates the participants' efforts and encourages them that what they're doing is truly valuable for their health and well-being. It's a gentle form of extrinsic encouragement that aligns with their own values (health, staying active), thus bordering on identified regulation (in SDT terms). The key is it's communicated in a supportive way, not as a scare tactic, but as an acknowledgment of their positive lifestyle choice.

In sum, the coach and facilitators provided adaptive, effortful leadership that is very much in line with SDT best practices: they supported autonomy (through shared decision-making and a no-pressure atmosphere), competence (through praise, gradual challenges, and ensuring success experiences), and relatedness (through humour, personal attention, and building a friendly community). This leadership approach cultivated a self-sustaining model of engagement — meaning the group largely runs itself now with everyone invested, and the coach can gently guide rather than push. The result is a program where older adults feel *in*

control, capable, and connected, which has led to high enjoyment, strong group cohesion, and sustained participation over time.

4.2 Navigating Ageing through Acceptance, Adaptation, and Humour

The second theme explores how participants navigate the realities of ageing and challenge ageist stereotypes through an accepting and supportive group culture. The first sub-theme is *Confronting Ageist Perceptions* and is about how older people see themselves in an ageist perspective, often as undervalued and overlooked. The second sub-theme *Redefining Walking Soccer* revolves around the initial negative perception of the elderly towards participation in WS and how the positive experience helped them overcome ageing stereotypes. The third sub-theme *Inclusive and Non-Judgmental Team Environment* involves how physical disabilities and constraints were accepted without judgement to foster an inclusive environment for all. The last sub-theme *Humour as a Coping Mechanism for Vulnerability* looks at how the role of humour within the group contributes to inclusivity and managing vulnerabilities in their physical decline and adds to their preservation of their self.

4.2.1 Confronting Ageist Perceptions

For many individuals, growing older can threaten one's sense of self and competence. Physical abilities diminish, and older adults may feel overlooked or undervalued in traditional sports settings simply due to age. Several participants reflected on encountering ageism or the fear that society deems them "too old" to invest in. As one man, Harald, admitted, *"I don't know if the Norwegian Football Association in general cares much about old folks like us."* Such sentiments show how older players might internalize the notion that they are less worthy of attention or resources. These identity-threatening narratives can contribute to a feeling of disposability and undermine intrinsic motivation by eroding one's perceived competence and autonomy. In other words, if they believe they no longer *belong* in the sports world, they may start to doubt their abilities and lose the sense of control over their athletic participation.

However, key facilitators in this WS program actively worked to counteract those negative perceptions. Organizers at the club fostered an inclusive and supportive environment that made the older players feel seen and respected. One participant highlighted the involvement

of the organizer, the club's top executive, noting how leadership can signal that older players *do* matter:

> *Lars: "Yeah, and when the top executive kind of takes on that role, right? When it's anchored at the top… He shows up and serves fruit and coffee, and tells us all about what is happening at the club."*

The presence of the club executive at sessions – pouring coffee, chatting with the group, keeping them informed – sent a powerful message of relatedness and value. It helped the participants feel connected to the broader club community rather than sidelined. According to SDT, feeling belongingness is essential for motivation and well-being, especially for those who might otherwise feel marginalized by age. By taking an interest in the WS group, the club executive bolstered the players' sense that they are respected members of the club family, fostering relatedness. The players were reminded that *they still have a place and can contribute*, which combats the narrative of decline.

4.2.2 Redefining Walking Soccer

Another challenge the participants had to overcome was the initial stigma or misunderstanding surrounding the term "WS" itself. Several admitted that before they joined, the concept sounded unappealing or even insulting. The phrase conjured images of frailty and low intensity. Einar described his first impression: *"'Walking soccer?', it's kind of a derogatory term. I thought, is it like... disability football or something?"* Such preconceived notions – that WS would be *"meaningless"* or *"boring"* – posed a barrier to the initial participation. The label implied to some that it was a lesser version of "real" football, perhaps only for those with serious health issues.

What changed these perceptions was direct exposure to the activity. Many older adults overcame their doubts by first coming to observe a session, and when participating was surprised by the intensity and physicality of the game. This notion was echoed by the researcher, who initially held similar stereotypes about walking soccer being a lesser version of the original game. However, after observing and taking part in a session, it became clear that the activity was physically demanding and required sufficient technical skills. As one recalled his reaction after finally joining in, Morten exclaimed, *"Once you actually get into it, you think: Wow, this is so much more than it sounds like!"* Experiencing WS firsthand

immediately dispelled the notion that it was a trivial or "weak" form of exercise. Einar, who had been sceptical, was likewise astonished by how demanding and engaging it turned out to be:

> *Einar: "I have to say, I was surprised by the pace – that it was actually that fast. It wasn't walking soccer in that much-maligned version where you're almost sabotaging the game — but rather very active. There was a lot more energy in it than I had expected."*

This positive first experience was pivotal. Initial worries and stereotypes were reversed, and participants discovered that WS could be challenging and rewarding. Importantly, it allowed them to feel *physically capable* again. Realizing that they could still play a form of football at a relatively "high" intensity and even competitively gave them a confidence boost. In essence, trying out walking soccer helped reframe their self-image: instead of feeling "old and weak," they began to see themselves as athletes who are *still in the game*. This reframing tied directly to an increased sense of competence. Participants often commented that knowing what it actually takes to play – and meeting that challenge – made them feel stronger and more assured of their abilities. The coach noted that once the men saw how intense the sessions were, their *competitive spark* returned, further motivating them to participate regularly.

That said, the group also had to contend with practical age-related issues like injuries. Physical strains and injuries were not uncommon and were cited as a concern. The organizer was keenly aware of this risk, explaining: *"There are a lot of weak, frail muscles in these bodies. We see a fair number of muscle strains."* To maintain motivation, participants had to balance awareness of their own limits with a determination not to become afraid of participating. The facilitators addressed this by encouraging proper warm-ups, emphasizing safety, and normalizing the need to sit out or modify activities when necessary. By proactively managing injury risks and acknowledging them openly, the coach and organizers helped the players continue participating without undue fear, thus preserving their sense of autonomy (they didn't feel forced beyond their comfort) and competence (they weren't made to feel like failures for getting hurt).

4.2.3 Inclusive and Non-Judgmental Team Environment

A crucial finding was the inclusive, non-judgmental culture that had developed within the team. Despite vast differences in age and physical capabilities, the environment was described as remarkably tolerant and supportive of everyone's capabilities and limitations. This created a safe space where participants felt comfortable being open about what they could or couldn't do on the pitch.

One long-time player, Lars, explained how the group accepts a teammate with a severe health condition:

> *"You can see he struggles quite a bit — and that's simply because he has severe health issues. He even says, 'My legs won't obey me today, sorry guys.' But everyone knows that... it's very rare that things work out for him — maybe one out of three passes. But everyone understands, and he gets so much joy out of it."*

Instead of judging performance, the team celebrates that individual's presence and effort. Lars further described the overall spirit:

> *"People [are] hobbling around and falling all the time… The group has become more diverse. But it happened gradually. People are very friendly and inclusive."*

He noted:

> *"a strong culture of accepting mistakes, and a lot of cheering when someone succeeds. It's all upside, really, being part of walking soccer."*

This forgiving atmosphere means no one feels embarrassed by their limitations. Mistakes and falls are literally laughed off or met with encouragement, not criticism. Such an environment is vital for older adults who might otherwise feel self-conscious or ashamed of declining abilities. A few members initially seemed uncomfortable and insecure, perhaps struggling with shame. For instance, one player recounted how a former teammate appeared a bit embarrassed when he first joined and wasn't instantly recognized.

> *"Not in his best shape, struggling with some health issues, it also turned out that his [well-known] shooting legs didn't work as before. But he started coming, evidently because he enjoyed meeting us old guys again and appreciated the game. The shooting legs soon improved, and he came all the time that first autumn."*

Over that season, through the consistent warmth of the group, this individual regained a sense of belonging without feeling judged by his past or present condition, also regaining more control over his feet.

Another example is a participant with dementia who often forgets the rules, he might run when running is against the rules or accidentally score an own goal. Geir described how the group handles this:

> *"We have one guy who struggles with dementia. He can do things like take a throw-in instead of a goal kick, and he forgets things now and then... We have to be a bit tolerant with each other. It's actually fantastic that he's even participating at all... It's a bit sad, but it's good to have him there. I can see he's enjoying himself."*

The emphasis is on empathy and patience. Rather than seeing cognitive lapses as an annoyance, the team views this man's participation as a victory in itself.

Notably, the coach wholeheartedly shares this vision of inclusivity. He sees one of the greatest values of the program in welcoming those who are struggling in life to have a *"bright spot in their week."* As the coach expressed,

> *"That might be what I find most valuable – that these people who are struggling, who have a tough time at home, have this as a bright spot in their week. They come here and get that feeling of belonging and being present. For me, that's perhaps the most enriching thing to witness."*

This statement underlines the importance of relatedness and emotional support: the coach derives satisfaction from seeing players gain a sense of belonging and presence in the moment, regardless of their troubles outside.

Within this accepting arena, participants are free to be themselves without fear of censure, which greatly supports their motivation. This unconditional acceptance fulfils the SDT need for relatedness by fostering strong group belonging and emotional safety. Simultaneously, it can bolster competence in a subtle way: by acknowledging what they *can* do and not fixating on what they can't, it reinforces their self-worth and recognize their preserved abilities. Some even reflected that playing in this environment made them appreciate what their ageing bodies *could* still do, rather than lamenting what was lost. In this way, the walking soccer group helps reframe aging not as a story of decline, but as one of adaptation and continued engagement. As Harald states: *"you shouldn't let go of the things that interest you just because you're getting older."* Together, these experiences – feeling accepted, valued, and still capable – enhance intrinsic motivation for the participants. They *want* to keep coming because it feels good emotionally and affirms their identity and abilities.

4.2.4 Humour as a Coping Mechanism for Vulnerability

A perhaps unexpected but important element of the group dynamic is the use of humour. Humour emerged as a kind of social glue and coping strategy that helps members manage the vulnerabilities of aging. The ability to laugh at oneself and with others served multiple purposes: it eased any tensions or awkwardness, reinforced solidarity, and allowed the men to confront age-related challenges in a light-hearted way. By joking about their stiff joints, slower pace, or occasional memory lapses, participants collectively reclaimed a sense of agency over these issues. Instead of letting health problems or mistakes undermine their confidence, they turned them into shared laughs, which normalized the experience of growing older. This reframing promotes resilience and psychological well-being, turning potentially sensitive issues into benign, even bonding, topics.

One participant mentioned that in their group *"there's quite a bit of humour in this."* The coach was identified as a key figure in setting this tone. He often uses gentle teasing to acknowledge someone's limitations without offending them. This was observed during the first meeting with the group, where the coach introduced me to each player and said a significant accomplishment or contribution for each individual, for example *"This is Hans, he's never been beaten by a ball played in behind".* This immediately set the tone for me, as a playful and light-hearted tone that continued throughout the acquaintanceship with the group. Lars states:

> *"What [the coach] is really good at is noticing and commenting on all the different guys, and commenting things a bit – like, 'Yeah, yeah, that leg of yours, I get it, it's not so easy' or, 'that move isn't quite there yet, but you're making progress.' He sees the individuals in the group. We're not doing individual training."*

In these examples, the coach playfully calls out a player's weak leg, but he does it with a cheeky smile and encouragement (*"you're making progress"*). Such comments, delivered in a joking tone, help players feel seen *as individuals* (he knows each person's story) and accepted as part of the group despite their difficulties. They all understand the humour and nobody feels picked on – rather, they feel *acknowledged*. As a result, people can be themselves, openly, "flaws and all," which further strengthens group cohesion.

Both Morten and Einar emphasized that the sessions must be *"playful"* and *"light-hearted."* This extends even to how games are refereed. When the coach plays on one side, the players joke about how often the calls seem to go his way. Einar recounted with a laugh: *"When we're on the opposing team to Svein (the coach), it's funny how often those referee decisions seem to go his way... There's some good humour in that."* Instead of anyone getting truly upset about contentious calls, they use it as fodder for banter.

Humour is not only dispensed by the coach; it permeates the group culture. Many participants expressed appreciation for the high tolerance of jokes and the occasional sharp remark delivered in good spirit. One said, *"I'm not a grumpy guy — I try to joke around a bit. And it's reciprocated. That means a lot too."* The back-and-forth "mickey taking" (teasing) among teammates conveys a *sense of equality*: everyone is fair game to be teased, which means no one is seen as too fragile or out of place to participate in the fun. This kind of *"mickey talk"* was described as a subtle yet powerful social mechanism. Far from being negative, it challenges stereotypes of aging (such as the notion that older adults are overly serious, depressed, or incapable). This was also the researcher's standpoint prior to observation, that elderly were always serious, but was quickly reversed when getting to know the group. The laughter and quick wit on display highlight the group's vitality and confidence. It shows that these men still have sharp minds and a sense of mischief, countering any narrative that aging equals losing one's spark.

Moreover, humour has fostered mutual respect and psychological safety. Because everyone is comfortable joking, they have created an atmosphere where mistakes truly are no big deal – they will likely be met with a chuckle and a supportive pat on the back. This makes participants more willing to take risks, try a new move, or simply not feel humiliated if they stumble. In turn, this encourages continued engagement: the sport remains fun, not stressful. The group is built through humour has undoubtedly strengthened group cohesion; players often mentioned the joy and solidarity they derive from this banter as one reason they keep coming each week. Ultimately, navigating the aging process with a dose of laughter and mutual support has allowed the group to maintain dignity and optimism. It has reinforced their relatedness (through shared jokes and equality) and even their autonomy – in the sense that they, not societal stereotypes, define what it means to be an older athlete. They choose to laugh in the face of challenges, which is a form of agency over their circumstances.

4.3 Balancing Group Identity and Change

The third theme examines the balance between individual contributors' sense of personal significance and the cohesive unity of the group. The first subtheme is *Group Identity*, looking at how they are connected and feel like they have a strong group identity. This is not only from playing together in WS, but many having played together in their younger days and have life-long friendships, further strengthening this group identity and cohesion, and the motivation to persist. The last sub-theme is *Negotiating Change: Tensions Between Group Stability and Growth* and revolves around recruitment of new members to the group, but with an underlying tension, as the group strives to remain inclusive and open but also fears disrupting the close-knit dynamic that has formed. It underscores a nuanced point: inclusivity is embraced, but *not at any cost* – the psychological needs of the group (for relatedness, competence, and even autonomy) must continue to be met.

4.3.1 Group Identity

A strong motivator was the sense of social belonging and tight-knit cohesion of the group. Many participants described the WS team as providing companionship, shared identity, and an almost family-like environment that they deeply cherish. The emotional bonds formed – often rooted in decades of knowing each other – give the activity a meaning far beyond just exercise. It fulfils a profound need to belong to something. Lars captured this sentiment:

> *"It's about having something to reflect yourself in — the ones you played with so many times. There's something in being seen by those who remember who you were, as the person you used to be."*

Here, he is touching on a powerful aspect of group identity: being among old teammates who *"remember who you were"* provides continuity and validation of one's life history. In this group, they are not just anonymous "seniors" – they are recognized as the strikers, wingers, or goalkeepers they once were, complete with nicknames and stories from the past. That recognition gives a sense of dignity and continuity to their lives. It's a reminder that they still matter and are still fundamentally the same people who scored goals or made great plays years ago. This is socially and emotionally restorative; it combats any feelings of invisibility that often come with older age.

A strong sporting-identity within the group was also present, with all participants having been involved in sports their entire lives. As Harald states, *"I saw it more as a nice ending to a long soccer career."* Soccer was ingrained in them from early childhood to later life, where watching games, discussing tactics and sharing histories on the field was important. A strong-sporting identity was there for apparent in all participants.

Many players highlighted the importance of long-standing friendships in their enjoyment of WS. Geir explained, *"No, it's the old, old gang who used to play. It's a very close-knit group, and we know each other really well."* Shared history is a powerful binder – they have countless stories, jokes, and experiences in common. This means the relatedness in the group is extremely high: there is an inherent trust and familiarity that makes every session not just about playing football, but also about social reunion.

Having a core of members with rich shared backgrounds sets a welcoming tone. It even affects how the group views those members who now have serious health challenges. Because many remember each other from their athletic prime, they tend to see a "whole person" – the youthful footballer and the current older adult – rather than just an old man with limitations. As Lars recounted about one teammate:

> *"Now he's a pensioner, right? A single, older man on disability benefits with poor health, with several strokes and perhaps a troubling past. But then he gets recognized — he's Bjørn. And then everyone starts telling stories: 'Remember this?' and 'Remember that?', and I could see how much it lifted him. It's such a*

> *real joy, that feeling that you can still matter — because the guys you played with 40 years ago still remember you. It's a gift."*

This moving example shows how being remembered and acknowledged by old friends gave that individual a tremendous boost in spirit. It affirmed that despite all his past and present troubles; he *still* has an identity as a valued teammate and friend. Such recognition fulfils the need for relatedness in a profound way and undoubtedly feeds into a sense of competence or self-worth (he is not "just a sick elderly man," he's *their friend*). For many, this kind of social validation is at the heart of why the WS group is so precious. This was further affirmed during my observations, where his physical struggles on the pitch were clearly visible, underscoring the contrast between past and present. In conversation, he spoke openly about his vulnerabilities, yet there was a distinct spark when he reminisced about his glory days, once a gifted player with an impressive career. The pride and meaning he still attached to that chapter of his life were unmistakable.

Of course, not every participant has decades of shared history with the others. The group has also grown with new members who might not have been part of the old teams. The unanimous view was that successfully welcoming newcomers is vital for sustaining participation long-term. Everyone recognized the importance of making new members feel accepted and valued from day one. As Harald said about joining the group himself, *"I really enjoy the environment I'm in, and that probably has a lot to do with the fact that I've been very well received. I feel that I've been accepted."* That positive first impression can determine whether someone sticks with the program.

The coach plays a proactive role in integrating new players. He makes a point to introduce and include them, often by chatting and learning about them, and then highlighting their arrival in the group's communications. He outlined his strategy:

> *"No, it's about being inclusive with them, talking to them and encouraging them. Like getting them to join us at the end, for some coffee, cakes, and fruit, so they feel part of the group. Most of those who have joined now already know at least someone in the group. But there have been a few who didn't know anyone — but still fit in."*

The coach's approach ensures that newcomers are not left on the fringe. Inviting them to the post-practice coffee and snack time is crucial—that's where a lot of bonding happens. By

encouraging that, the coach helps new players quickly become part of the social fabric and fostering their relatedness.

The post-practice gathering itself has proven to be an essential tradition that strengthens group cohesion (this was also noted under the first theme as a structural support). After each session, players sit down together for coffee, fruit, and often some home-baked treats. This is where they can relax, share stories, and get to know each other beyond the pitch. One memorable anecdote was shared by Lars about the first day a new participant came:

> *Lars: "That whole thing with baking buns is really a symbol; it shows that people feel appreciated and welcomed. When you're new, like Jørgen for example, and you show up with some pancakes and get a round of applause, well, then you feel more welcomed in the group. And you become a bit more comfortable. Because he didn't know many people in the group."*

In this instance, the new member brought a treat (pancakes) to share, which the group warmly applauded. Such gestures both ways – the newcomer contributing something, and the group enthusiastically appreciating it – accelerate the sense of belonging. It communicates, *"You are one of us; we celebrate you being here."* Acts like these, whether it's bringing baked goods or simply conversing over coffee, significantly increase relatedness for each member. They validate individuals as full members of the group rather than outsiders. This in turn motivates people to keep attending; they aren't just coming for exercise, they're coming to see friends who care about them.

4.3.2 Negotiating Change: Tensions Between Group Stability and Growth

While the group values inclusion, there is an interesting tension when it comes to recruiting many new players. Participants reflected on the dilemma of expanding the program: on one hand, they wanted others to discover the joy of WS (and indeed felt it could benefit many); on the other hand, they were protective of the close-knit, familiar atmosphere they had established. There was a subtle preference to keep the group from growing too large or too unfamiliar, to preserve its character.

Some members were enthusiastic about bringing in more people. They recognized the inclusive mission of offering WS to any interested older adult. However, others voiced reservations. Geir admitted,

> *“I’m a bit concerned that maybe the group doesn’t need to grow much more, especially not with people coming in from outside that old environment we used to have. Because that’s what it is. So, the core still stays intact... That way, we keep the camaraderie going.”*

His concern was that an influx of strangers (with no connection to the club or the existing players) might dilute the camaraderie that came from their shared background.

This reveals an *ambivalence*: they are proud of being friendly and open, yet they fear losing the very qualities (camaraderie, understanding, shared history) that make the group so enjoyable if it becomes too large or too mixed. Participants implicitly favoured new members who had sporting-identity, soccer experience or social ties that resonated with the current group culture. Einar articulated this tension candidly:

> *“If we went out and promoted this, we could probably bring in a lot of people. But do we want that?... You end up with a bunch of people who’ve never done sports, who are dangerous to have on a pitch... Here, we’re talking about people who’ve played football all their lives. So, if we go out and start actively recruiting a bunch of new people, you have to really think about what you’re doing. I’m not so sure I’d do that. I’d go for more targeted recruitment.”*

He points out a practical safety issue — completely inexperienced players might increase injury risk (*“more dangerous to have on a pitch”*), which is a valid concern given the age group. But beyond safety, his comment underscores a desire for like-mindedness: the current players all share that lifelong passion for football, which bonds them. Bringing in people who perhaps don’t have that background might change the dynamics. He suggests “targeted recruitment,” meaning perhaps inviting those who used to play or have some affinity, rather than open calls to anyone.

The coach also plays a role in “gatekeeping” this group, as participants often seek to the coach when wanting to introduce new players. One Einar expressed:

> *"I talked to a friend of mine who plays in Oslo — he plays on that walking soccer team in Oslo. Apparently, it's very good. He asked if he could join here, but I said I had to ask Svein (the coach) first. I'm not sure we want more people."*

Understandably, the coach also wants to preserve the core and making sure the sessions are still at a decent level. The coach was open about having a "try out" for new players, seeing how they fit in and if they can play football, but only in a jokingly manner. He states:

> *"I remember when he came— I didn't know him. He came from another club. Yeah, I thought, well, we'll see. I was joking with him, just messing around. I said, 'You're getting a trial session. If it works, you can come back next time. If not, you're out.' People understand that it's just joking around. But Harald... he got up to speed right away."*

The coach understands that having too many new players can impact the groups cohesion and make impact the sustainability of the program. If introducing many new players with little ability on the field, it reduces the joy of playing together.

The organizer of the club was also mindful of the group's sentiments regarding expansion and expressed concern that pushing too hard for new members might lead to participant dropout. He emphasized the importance of allowing the group itself to shape its direction, cautioning against efforts to "streamline" or overly formalize its structure. From his perspective, the current members are generally content with how things are, and any developments should respect the group's established identity and cohesion. He proposed alternative ways to broaden the program without compromising its core:

> *"Well, there are quite a few others who aren't former active football players like these guys are, but who also have a need for physical activity. And who might have benefited from a... we could have had a B-team... But not necessarily in the same way. Because these guys... most of them have played football before and kind of have it in them. But this could be a variation."*

This perspective illustrates a *facilitative rather than authoritarian* leadership style. The organizer respects the existing group dynamic and acknowledges that bringing in too many new or inexperienced players could not only disrupt the social fabric but also pose practical risks such as injuries. His approach aligns with the principles of autonomy support outlined in Self-Determination Theory, ensuring that participants retain ownership of their experience while exploring inclusive and sustainable growth.

4.4 Summary of Findings

In summary, the results of this case study show that the coach and key facilitators play a multifaceted role in motivating older adults in WS. By nurturing an environment that supports autonomy (giving players choice and voice, keeping things pressure-free), competence (celebrating skill, enabling improvement), and relatedness (fostering group identity, inclusion, and mutual support), they have helped create not just a weekly exercise session, but a thriving community. These elements collectively contribute to the participants' high levels of intrinsic motivation, enjoyment, and commitment to continue playing. The WS program's success lies in this blend of personal passion and supportive context: the older players bring their lifelong love of the game, and the coach and facilitators provide the conditions that let that love flourish in later life

5. Discussion

Findings from this case study reveal several elements illustrating how the coach and key facilitators supported older adults' motivation within in this particular WS group. Besides facilities and structures within the group, especially noteworthy is how the coach and organizer navigated age and different physical capabilities within the group, fostering a strong group identity within the WS group. They demonstrated a clear respect for, and awareness of, the participants' deeply rooted sporting identities.

5.1 Environmental, Structural and Leadership Characteristics

Environmental supports, particularly facilities and accessibility emerged as essential for maintaining older adults' participation. Participants frequently emphasized the importance of the pitch and social spaces provided by the organizers. High-quality facilities, such as artificial grass, reduced fears of injury and physical discomfort, fulfilling the psychological need for competence by allowing participants to engage confidently in the activity. This aligns with previous findings that safe, elder-friendly environments enhance older adults' sporting involvement significantly (André & Agbangla, 2020; R. C. Cholerton, 2021). The organizer also played a central role in ensuring these facilities were available and accessible. By proactively addressing practical issues, such as clearing the pitch during snowfall and maintaining social rooms, organizers directly supported the participants' sense of competence

and autonomy. Participants explicitly noted that whenever practical barriers emerged, swift organizational responses reinforced their commitment and trust in the program.

Additionally, the consistency and predictability of scheduling were critical structural supports. Participants had varied commitments and interests, and regular, predictable session times allowed them to integrate WS comfortably into their weekly routines. In other WS studies, convenience of time for practice was a facilitator for participation (R. C. Cholerton, 2021) and statements from participants on previous experiences with sports in later life also confirmed that inconsistencies in structure led to decreased participation. Research has highlighted that some organizers assume WS participants possess high levels of flexibility in their day-to-day schedule, unintentionally reinforcing ageist stereotypes about older adults' (Jenkin et al., 2018; Sivaramakrishnan et al., 2023) The organizer's deliberate scheduling approach facilitated participation and autonomy by allowing participants to reliably plan their involvement, further underscoring the practical implications of structured program design.

Leadership style profoundly impacted participant motivation, with the WS coach and organizer employing a *facilitative rather than authoritarian approach*. This autonomy-supportive leadership involved tailoring activities to individuals' abilities and consistently emphasizing personal choice and minimal performance pressure (Mageau & Vallerand, 2003). The coach's empathetic style directly supported SDT needs participants felt autonomous because their individual choices and capacities were respected, competent due to adjusted expectations, and related through the coach's genuine care and personalized interactions (Ryan & Deci, 2020). Literature supports the value of such empathetic, participant-oriented coaching as pivotal for sustained older adult engagement (R. Cholerton et al., 2021; Staley et al., 2019). Additionally, the coach's dual role as a peer-coach, being of similar age and actively participating alongside players and participants appreciated this interaction of equal status and mutual respect, also significantly enhanced relatedness within the group. Research on peer-led models with elderly, where leaders act more like fellow teammates or guides, have shown increased sustained participation through the increased relatability and support (Ginis et al., 2013; Stevens et al., 2021). This furthers the argument of the coach fostering relatedness.

An unexpected yet critical finding was the coach's successful use of the digital platform *"Spond"* for communication. Despite being mentioned as a potential barrier for older adults in previous WS research and recommendations on reducing reliance of digital technology

(Sivaramakrishnan et al., 2023), participants found it to be highly engaging and motivating. The coach leveraged humour, inclusivity, and personal engagement through the app. This thoughtful implementation significantly enhanced participants' relatedness, demonstrating how digital tools, when applied with sensitivity, can bolster group cohesion and continuity (Sampaio et al., 2019).

5.2 Navigating Ageing through Acceptance, Adaptation, and Humour

Ageing introduces physical and social challenges, influencing older adults' self-perceptions and motivations. Traditional definitions of successful ageing stress independence, social connectedness, and physical activity (Brown et al., 2008; Dionigi, 2006). In contrast, negative ageing stereotypes often emphasize loss and decline, undermining older adults' sense of autonomy and competence. Participants in our study actively navigated these tensions, with critical support from both the organizer and coach.

The organizer's visible and consistent involvement played a crucial role in combating ageist perceptions. Regular presence, social interaction, and tangible gestures (such as providing coffee or facilitating social gatherings) affirmed participants' value within the club. Such direct, positive engagement from leadership figures strongly validated their sense of worth, fulfilling their needs for relatedness and competence (Ryan & Deci, 2020). This organizational care explicitly reinforced participants' intrinsic motivation, illustrating how administrative leadership can profoundly shape older adults' experiences in sports contexts.

Moreover, the initial perception of "Walking Soccer" as frail or weak posed an unexpected barrier to participation. Similar findings were seen in Sivaramakrishnan et al. (2023) amongst WS players. To reduce this initial barrier, organizer and stakeholders could strategically reconsider naming and marketing approaches to reduce initial misconceptions and barriers, enhancing the program's attractiveness and accessibility. For example, calling it *"60+ Soccer"* or *"Social Soccer"* could be a more attractive name and marketing approach.

The inclusive group dynamic fostered by the coach was essential for participants' successful navigation of ageing. By emphasizing acceptance of diverse physical abilities and varying health conditions, the coach created a safe environment where individual limitations were normalized. Participants felt competent and respected, even when adjusting their physical performance expectations. Such adaptations align closely with R. C. Cholerton (2021) concept of "ability acceptance," emphasizing the coach's critical role in facilitating ongoing

engagement through tailored support. Additionally, Cholerton's findings further support the importance of social connections in WS initiation and maintenance, particularly for older adults managing multiple health conditions, where they found participants with greater health-related challenges were especially motivated by interacting with peers experiencing similar issues compared to them without health conditions. This supportive peer environment not only alleviated feelings of isolation but also strengthened participants' motivation to continue their involvement, demonstrating the combined value of the inclusiveness of the coaching and social connectedness in sustaining older adults' participation.

Humour, strategically encouraged by the coach, emerged as a powerful coping mechanism and facilitator of relatedness. The playful, humorous interactions actively reduced anxieties related to ageing and vulnerability, creating a supportive atmosphere. Participants felt free to acknowledge and joke about physical limitations openly, enhancing their emotional well-being and group cohesion. This aligns with gerontological literature highlighting humour as critical for sustaining positive ageing experiences (Damianakis & Marzoli, 2011). Importantly, humour within this WS group appeared uniquely effective in binding the group closer together, underscoring the additional social value provided by team-based sporting contexts for older adults.

5.3 Balancing Group Identity and Change

A strong sense of group identity was integral to sustained participation, largely developed through regular social interactions explicitly facilitated by the organizers and the coach. Organizers structured dedicated social time, creating an environment that encouraged informal interactions, while the coach complemented this through humorous, engaging communication that significantly reinforced feelings of relatedness among participants. These interactions emerged as weekly highlights, demonstrating how essential social belonging was to participants' ongoing motivation.

Critically, this highlights the importance of early facilitation—not just logistically but also in cultivating a social atmosphere essential for group cohesion. Sivaramakrishnan et al. (2023) underscore that facilitators attuned to participants' social needs and community dynamics greatly enhance the success of health-oriented interventions. This aligns closely with findings from the REACT trial (Cross et al., 2023), a large-scale physical activity program for older adults, which found that facilitators played a critical role in promoting social interactions,

especially during the initial months of the intervention. Facilitators in the REACT trial initially guided and nurtured social connections, ensuring participants felt comfortable and included, but by the 12-month follow-up, these social bonds had become self-sustaining, independent of facilitator support (Cross et al., 2023). Similarly, in the walking soccer context, the early relational efforts and emotional leadership provided by the coach and organizers effectively laid the foundation for lasting group cohesion. Over time, the participants developed autonomous social relationships, emphasizing the significance of intentional and supportive early leadership in establishing self-sustaining and intrinsically motivating group cultures.

Strong football-related identities among participants created a sense of ambivalence toward introducing new members, posing a practical challenge for organizers. While the group valued inclusivity in principle, many feared that bringing in unfamiliar individuals—especially those without a sporting background—might disrupt the established cohesion and sense of mutual understanding within the group (Cholerton, 2021; Cross et al., 2023). From a SDT perspective, this cautious stance reflects a desire to protect the social environment that meets participants' psychological needs for relatedness, competence, and autonomy. A sudden or indiscriminate expansion could threaten this motivational climate: adding newcomers without shared football experience could dilute the sense of belonging, require slowing down the game (thus impacting competence), or necessitate more formal structures that undermine the group's valued autonomy. To manage this, both the coach and the organizer collaborated to strategically manage group growth. New members were integrated incrementally and with care, often through personal networks, ensuring alignment with the group's ethos. This proactive approach allowed the group to remain welcoming while safeguarding the informal, peer-led culture that made WS meaningful. In practice, recruitment occurred organically—through word of mouth and existing social ties—rather than mass outreach, a strategy that helped maintain both continuity and sustainability. Rather than being exclusionary, this approach illustrates how participants and facilitators alike work to preserve a self-sustaining, intrinsically motivating environment that continues to meet their psychological needs even as it evolves.

5.2 Practical Applications

Findings of this case study provide some practical considerations for organizer and facilitators for sustainability and future implementations of WS programs for older adults:

- Coaches with autonomy-supportive and empathetic leadership styles are seen highly positive by the participants of this case study and can facilitate participation. Peer-led coaching can also be positive within WS. Facilitators who emphasize personalized adaptations and minimalize performance pressures can sustain intrinsic motivation from participants.
- Organizers should prioritize consistent, predictable scheduling, safe, accessible facilities, and minimal costs to enhance sustained participation amongst older adults in WS programs.
- Thoughtful use of digital communication can be of value for an elderly WS group in fostering social connectedness. However, too complex or overreliance on the use of digital technology can have opposite effects and feel like a barrier for elderly.
- Organizers and coaches for WS groups can actively combat ageist stereotypes through direct engagement and validation of participants' worth.
- Recruitment strategies for strong sporting-identity WS groups might require a more careful balance to protect the established group identities. Facilitators can employ incremental integration, and organizer can potentially implement supplementary groups for diverse skill or social profiles.

5.3 Limitations

Several limitations should be considered. Firstly, the selection of participants by the coach introduced potential selection bias, although deliberate efforts ensured diversity. To ensure a range of perspectives, participants were purposefully selected to reflect variation in background, age, and experience with WS. The sample included individuals who did not share the same hometown and had not necessarily grown up together or played football in earlier stages of life. This diversity was important for avoiding a homogenous group shaped by shared history or locality. Additionally, the sample included participants across different age groups, as well as both long-term participants and relative newcomers to the WS initiative. This allowed for a more nuanced understanding of how individual backgrounds and the stage of involvement might influence motivations and experiences. However, all participants were male, which might influence findings exclusively to WS groups of males.

Secondly, the insider status of the researcher may have influenced data interpretation despite ongoing reflective dialogue with an external supervisor. As an insider of the club, one might

be more inclined unconsciously to highlight the positive rather than the negative of the participants experience. The involvement of an additional researcher could have resulted in more reflexivity in the analytical process.

6. Concluding Remarks

This case study underscores the pivotal role that both the coach and the organizer played in sustaining older adults' motivation to participate in WS. More than simply managing logistics, they cultivated an inclusive, respectful, and autonomy-supportive environment that addressed the psychological needs of participants. Their leadership extended beyond the field, embedding themselves in the social fabric of the group, responding to practical barriers, and promoting a culture of shared ownership and humour.

The coach's relational, peer-like approach and consistent use of inclusive communication strategies, including digital tools like *"Spond,"* significantly enhanced feelings of competence, relatedness, and autonomy. Likewise, the organizer's commitment to providing accessible facilities, structured scheduling, and visible care was instrumental in creating a safe and welcoming context where participation felt meaningful and valued.

Together, their efforts illustrate that sustaining motivation in later-life sport requires more than adapting rules or providing facilities, it demands relational sensitivity, proactive inclusion, and a shared ethos of respect and empowerment. Through intentional, supportive leadership, where leadership is *facilitative rather than authoritative*, allowing the group itself to find a way that suits them, the coach and organizer enabled a group of aging footballers to reclaim an important part of their identities and forge new meaning through sport, offering a powerful model for aging-friendly community sport initiatives.

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During the preparation of this work the author used OpenAI´s ChatGPT in order to enhance readability and transitions of paragraphs. Additionally, it was used in translation of participants quotes where appropriate. All analytical content, interpretations and conclusions are my own.

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9. Appendix

Interview Guide A)

Intervjuguide til spillere

Hei, og tusen takk for at du vil være med i dette intervjuet.

Jeg gjennomfører en masteroppgave hvor jeg ser på hva som motiverer eldre til å delta i gåfotball, og spesielt hvilken rolle treneren og miljøet rundt spiller i dette. Målet med intervjuet er å få innsikt i dine egne erfaringer og opplevelser, og det finnes ingen riktige eller gale svar.

Intervjuet tar utgangspunkt i noen temaer, men vi kan gjerne snakke litt fritt – det viktigste for meg er hva **du** tenker og opplever.

Alt du sier blir behandlet konfidensielt, og navnet ditt eller andre personopplysninger vil ikke bli brukt i oppgaven. Du kan også når som helst velge å hoppe over spørsmål eller avslutte intervjuet. Er det greit for deg at jeg tar opp samtalen på lyd for å kunne gå tilbake og høre nøyaktig hva som ble sagt? Derfor kan det være jeg er litt stillere enn vanlig for å få god lyd kvalitet.

Har du noen spørsmål før vi begynner?

Oppvarming spørsmål

1. Hvordan ble du introdusert for gåfotball?
2. Kan du fortelle litt om dine tidligere erfaringer med fotball?
3. Hva var dine forventninger til denne idretten?

Self-Detemination Theory (Ryan & Deci)

4. Hva var din motivation for å delta? A) Har den endret seg, altså er det noe annet som motiverer deg nå? (MOTIVATION)

5. På hvilken måte føler du at du deltar i medbestemmelsesprosessen rundt treninger, og opplegget generelt? (AUTONOMI)

6. På hvilken måte føler du at du bidrar til laget eller gruppa – enten på banen eller sosialt? (KOMPETANSE)
7. Har det å være med i gåfotball ført til at du har vokst som person eller lært noe nytt – også utenfor banen? (KOMPETANSE)

8. Hva betyr det for deg å ha gode relasjoner i gruppa? (RELATEDNESS)
9. Hvordan vil du beskrive forholdet ditt til treneren? (RELATEDNESS) a) Har det endret seg fra du begynte?
10. Opplever du at du kan stole på treneren og de andre på laget? A) På hvilke måter viser det seg i praksis? (RELATEDNESS)
11. Hva gjør treneren for å engasjere deg og gi deg støtte? (COACH FEEDBACK STYLE)

Sammensatt

12. Hvilke fasiliteter og forhold må være til stede for at du som spiller skal trives både med selve gåfotballen og i fotballmiljøet generelt?
13. Hvilke områder tenker du det er rom for forbedring når det gjelder å *øke* deltagelsen, eller *vedlikeholde* deltagelsen av dette tilbudet?

Da har jeg vært gjennom de spørsmålene jeg hadde forberedt.

Er det noe du selv tenker på som du føler vi burde ha snakket om, eller noe du vil legge til helt på slutten?

Tusen takk for at du delte av dine erfaringer – det har vært veldig verdifullt. Dette vil bidra til å gi et bedre bilde av hva som skal til for at eldre trives og motiveres til å delta i gåfotball.

Ønsker deg masse lykke til videre – både som [spiller/trener] og med gåfotballen!

Interview Guide TRENER

Hei, og tusen takk for at du vil delta i dette intervjuet. Jeg skriver en masteroppgave om hva som motiverer eldre til å delta i gåfotball, med særlig fokus på trenerens og miljøets betydning. Intervjuet tar utgangspunkt i noen temaer, men vi kan gjerne snakke fritt – det viktigste er dine egne erfaringer. Det finnes ingen riktige eller gale svar.

Alt du sier behandles konfidensielt, og ingen personopplysninger vil bli brukt i oppgaven. Du kan når som helst hoppe over spørsmål eller avslutte intervjuet. Er det greit at jeg tar opp samtalen med lyd, så jeg kan høre nøyaktig hva som ble sagt?
Har du noen spørsmål før vi begynner?

Oppvarmings spørsmål

1. Hvordan ble du introdusert for gåfotball?
2. Kan du fortelle litt om din erfaring/reise med fotball? Fra liten til stor.
3. Hva var dine forventinger til å trene laget? ELLER hvordan ble du trener for gå-laget.
4. Hvilke ansvarsområder har du som trener for laget og hvordan føler du at du er egnet til å være trener?

Self-Detemination Theory (Ryan & Deci)

1. Hva motiverer deg til å trene gåfotball-laget?
2. Hvordan gir du spillerne mulighet til å påvirke eller være med å bestemme ift. opplegget?
3. På hvilke måter legger du til rette for at spillerne skal føle mestring i gåfotball?
4. Hvordan støtter du spillerne når de møter utfordringer, eller hvis de sliter med motivasjonen?
5. Hva betyr gode relasjoner for deg i rollen som trener?
6. Hvordan vil du beskrive forholdet ditt til spillerne? A) Hva gjør du konkret for å bygge gode relasjoner til spillerne?
7. Hvor viktig er tillit i trenerrollen, og hvordan merker du at det er til stede?
8. Opplever du at spillerne har tillit til deg både som trener? Hva tror du er grunnen til det?

Sammensatt

1. Hvilke utfordringer har du opplevd når det kommer til tilretteleggelse?
2. Hvordan har Asker fotballklubb tilrettelagt for å kunne tilby et gåfotball-lag?
3. Hvilke områder tenker du det er rom for forbedring når det gjelder å *øke* deltagelsen, eller *vedlikeholde* deltagelsen av dette tilbudet?

Ferdig, noe mer?

Consent Form B)

Dataansvarlig:

Aalborg Universitet
Cvr. nr. 29102384
Frederik Bajers Vej 5
9220 Aalborg

Samtykkeerklæring

Aalborg Universitet (AAU) skal bruge dit samtykke til at behandle personoplysninger om dig i forbindelse med forskningsprojektet En kvalitativ studie om trener-spiller-relasjonen i gangfotball blant seniorer. Dette vil ske i overensstemmelse med databeskyttelsesreglerne.

Forskningen vil blive udført af forskere, der er ansat på AAU og eventuelt i samarbejde med forskere, der har en tilknytning til AAU (f.eks. gæsteforskere) og eksterne samarbejdspartnere.

Det er frivilligt, om du ønsker at give dit samtykke til, at AAU behandler dine personoplysninger, men mangel på samtykke kan betyde, at AAU ikke kan bruge dine personoplysninger til projektet.

Du kan til enhver tid ændre eller trække dit samtykke tilbage. Samtykket kan ikke tilbagekaldes med tilbagevirkende kraft og vil derfor kun påvirke fremtidige behandlinger af dine personoplysninger.

Ønsker du at ændre eller trække dit samtykke tilbage kontakt:

Niels Nygaard Rossing
Email: nnr@hst.aau.dk
+45 22776140
inst.issa.kom@socsci.aau.dk

Efter databeskyttelsesreglerne har Aalborg Universitet pligt til at give dig en række oplysninger i forbindelse med, at dine oplysninger bliver anvendt til forskningsformål. Hvis du har spørgsmål er du velkommen til at kontakte projektleder.	
AAU indsamler og behandler følgende personoplysninger: - Alm. personoplysninger *(navn, adresse, mail, alder, selvoffentliggjorte data mv.)* - Fortrolige personoplysninger *(cpr., karakterer, væsentlige sociale problemer, mv.)* - Følsomme personoplysninger *(Helbredsoplysninger, race, politisk overbevisning mv.)*	☐ Almindelige personoplysninger ☐ Fortrolige personoplysninger ☐ Følsomme personoplysninger
Hvis dine oplysninger ikke indsamles af AAU, er de modtaget af:	

AALBORG UNIVERSITET

Eventuelle af modtagere personoplysninger:	Dine personoplysninger vil i forbindelse med projektet blive videregivet til: *Ingen*
Grundlaget (hjemlen)i loven:	Dine oplysninger indsamles på baggrund af reglerne for samtykke, jf. databeskyttelsesforordningens artikel. 6, stk. 1 litra a og artikel 9, stk. 2, litra a.
Rettigheder:	Berigtigelse Du har ret til at få urigtige oplysninger om dig rettet i overensstemmelse med databeskyttelsesreglerne. Sletning Du kan anmode om, at Aalborg Universitet sletter dine oplysninger. Såfremt dine oplysninger ikke længere er nødvendige til at opfylde forskningsformålet, og sletning af dine oplysninger ikke medfører, at det sandsynligvis vil være umuligt eller i alvorlig grad forhindre gennemførelse af forskningsprojektet, vil AAU slette dine oplysninger. Begrænsning af behandling Du kan anmode om, at AAU begrænser behandling af dine oplysninger. Dette kan f.eks. være relevant, såfremt AAU ikke kan slette dine oplysninger, idet at der så kan ske den begrænsning, at AAU alene opbevarer dine oplysninger i en nærmere afgrænset periode. Indsigelse Du har ret til at gøre indsigelse mod at AAU behandler dine oplysninger, medmindre at behandlingen er nødvendig for at udføre en forskningsmæssig opgave i samfundets interesse.
AAU's databeskyttelsesrådgiver:	Dpo@aau.dk
Overførsel til lande udenfor EU:	Dine oplysninger vil ikke blive overført til lande uden for EU.
Tidsperiode:	Dine personoplysninger vil som udgangspunkt blive slettet, anonymiseret eller arkiveret den 27.juni 2025 Det er muligt, at dette tidspunkt ændres, såfremt forskningsprojektet forsinkes eller såfremt data fra projektet, herunder dine oplysninger genbruges i et nyt forskningsprojekt i overensstemmelse med databeskyttelsesreglerne.
Klage:	Du kan klage til Datatilsynet, såfremt du mener AAU tilsidesætter databeskyttelsesreglerne i forbindelse med universitetets behandling af dine oplysninger til forskningsformål/forskningsprojektet. Du opfordres til at kontakte projektleder eller AAU's Databeskyttelsesrådgiver inden du klager til Datatilsynet, da sagen eventuelt vil kunne løses eller afklares.

Udfyldes af den registrerede:

Jeg giver samtykke til, at AAU må behandle mine oplysninger til interjuv Sæt kryds ☐

Dato/navn:
Mobil nummer:

Underskrift _____

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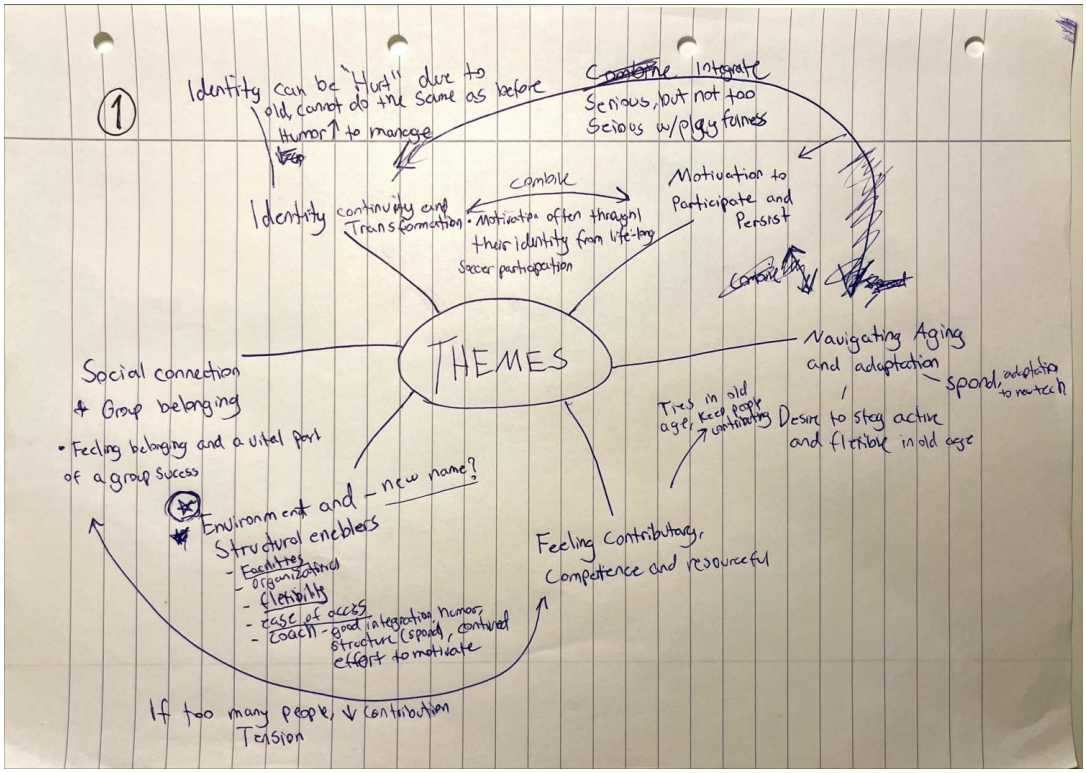
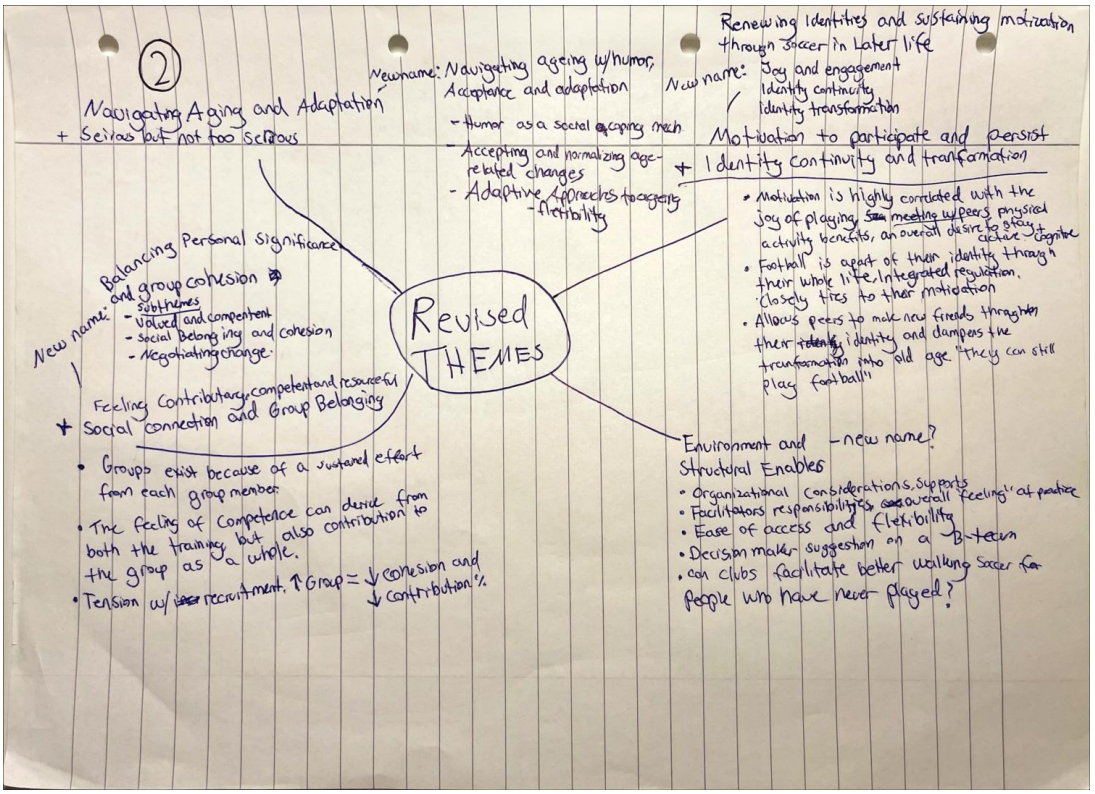
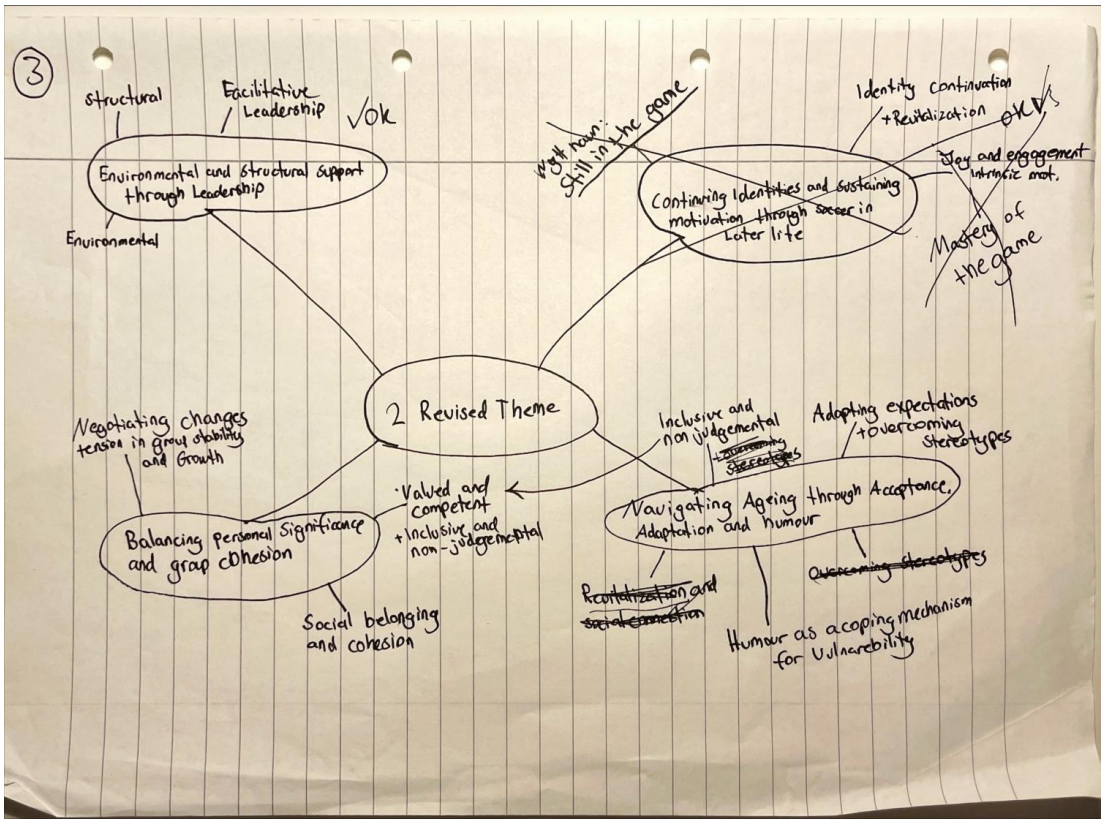
Thematic Maps C)






3
structural
Facilitative Leadership
√ok
Environmental and structural support through Leadership
Environmental
Identity continuation
+Revitalization
Joy and engagement intrinsic mot.
Mastery of the game
Continuing Identities and sustaining motivation through soccer in Later life
2 Revised Theme
Negotiating changes tension in group stability and Growth
Inclusive and non judgemental
Adopting expectations
+overcoming stereotypes
Valued and competent
+Inclusive and non-judgemental
Balancing personal Significance and group cOhesion
Navigating Ageing through Acceptance, Adaptation and humour
Social belonging and cohesion
Humour as a coping mechanism for Vulnerability