

It's a slower form of football, but you still score and tackle. I just want to see folk going into sports halls saying: 'Yes I'm able to play this game again...'

Football coach Phil wants to attract as many people as possible to a popular sport that's energising the over 50s

Fraser Clarke

It can be easy to give up exercise later in life as bones begin to ache and recovery takes a little longer.

But a former football coach in West Dunbartonshire is looking to encourage more people of a certain age to keep active through a sport which has become one of the country's fastest growing - walking football.

Phil Dawson is keen to attract as many members as possible to join his latest venture.

Walking football has become a popular sport among the older generation as they keep up their team spirit in a competitive environment.

There are more than 800 registered teams and thousands of players taking part every week.

But this hasn't been the case in West Dunbartonshire - until now. Phil, 52, said: "I had seen Mike Bushell try it on the television a couple of years ago and thought it was quite interesting. I've been desperate to find a team locally in the West

Dunbartonshire area ever since but there hasn't been anything.

"Glasgow Sport have been advertising that they do sessions, so I've been going to various places across the city to watch and play - Bellahouston Park, Glasgow Green, Kelvin Hall and the Donald Dewar Centre in Drumchapel.

"But I've been trying to find something locally.

"I believe Helensburgh is in the process of setting up something but I don't know how long that's going to take.

"So I thought to myself, 'I'm enjoying it so much, I'm just going to set up some sessions in the local area and see if I can get a few people along'.

"I started by contacting Dunbarton Football Club to ask if they were interested in getting a team together, just using their name, but I didn't get a reply.

"I'm also on the committee at Vale of Leven Football Club, so I spoke to the guys there and said that I was looking to organise these sessions and wondered if it would be possible to use the Vale of Leven name to help promote it.

"They were quite happy for me to do that."

Bringing walking football to West

Dunbartonshire is about much more than just following a trend for Phil, it's about providing a wider boost to the community.

He said: "The major benefits are that it will help people both mentally and physically.

"It will help reduce the rate of cardiovascular disease and strokes while reducing blood pressure.

"It promotes positive changes in postural balance and works to lessen the heart rate.

"It lowers cholesterol, improves blood sugar levels, bone density and reactions while slashing the odds of developing type-two diabetes.

"It's about more than the health benefits though.

"I just want people to come along and enjoy themselves. There are people who might not have kicked a ball for ten or 15 years, 20 even in some cases. I want to see that look on their faces when they realise they can actually still play the game.

"Alright, it's a slower form of football but they can still score a goal or win a tackle.

"I just want to see people walking into the sports hall thinking, yes, I am able to play this game again.

"Especially the people who have not been able to play it, or thought they would never play again."

Although participation and social benefits are the main aims, Phil has his sights set on growing walking football throughout West Dunbartonshire in an attempt to help it catch up with other areas.

He said: "With the Glasgow groups, it's not a club it's just sessions. I wanted to set up a group where we could actually go and play football against other teams, because walking football at the moment is very big in Ayrshire, it's very big on the east coast, down south and around the borders as well."

The English FA officially launched the laws of walking football last year, highlighting just how quickly the sport has developed in recent years.

For football fanatics like Phil however they are unlikely to take long to learn.

"There aren't too many differences between it and normal football," said Phil.

"There's no running, the ball has to stay below chest height or crossbar height depending on how high the crossbars are.

"There's no point having crossbars six-foot high if you're having to keep the ball below waist height.

"That's about it though. There are not a lot of differences. If you're

caught running three times, you generally give a penalty to the other team, so there are implications but it's not too strict.

"It's really just a slower version of the beautiful game."

Vale of Leven are looking for anyone interested in getting involved in walking football to get in touch - and Phil knows exactly what sort of individual would relish taking part in the sport.

He said: "If you're aged over 50 and not active, or even if you are still active, it's well worth doing.

"If you thought that you'd kicked your last football but you still have a dream and a passion for the game, then I want to hear from you.

"I want to see that spark again that I know I get when I walk into the sports hall and see the bibs and footballs placed and ready to play."

Vale of Leven walking football club play on a Monday evening between 8pm and 9pm in the sports hall at Vale of Leven Academy, Alexandria.

Anybody interested can get in touch with Phil on 07701 312747, or by messaging the club's social media pages. On Twitter they can be found @LomondWFC, or on Facebook by searching for 'Vale of Leven Walking Football Club'.