

Having a ball!



In 2022, Joy, back row third from right, took part in a campaign for England Netball promoting the walking form of the game

With walking sports, the exhilaration and camaraderie of team games is open to all. **Jane Yettram** meets two passionate players of walking netball

Every Thursday lunchtime, at The Portland Centre in Nottingham, women gather together for an hour that for many is the highlight of their week – a walking netball session. ‘Everybody’s so friendly – it’s like a sisterhood,’ says Joy Williams, 65, who has been coming since May 2016. It was injury that took Joy, a keen netballer, away from the standard form of the game. ‘I’ve had loads of ankle injuries and I’ve also got a knee that’s not the best,’ she says. ‘So I decided to see what else was out there. Walking netball



Sue warming up

seemed to fit the bill – and it was a lot more challenging than I expected!’ Sue Vryenhoef, 67, hadn’t played in 30 years when she joined the group. ‘I played at school and into my 30s but found it difficult to fit around work, family and life.’ Then Sue retired. ‘As I’d torn both hamstrings, I looked for something I thought would be easy. It’s quite strenuous though! And faster than I expected, despite not being allowed to run.’ Jumping is banned too, making it easier on your joints – as Joy confirms. ‘My ankles and knee don’t trouble me at all when playing walking netball.’ As well as the no running, no jumping rules, you can take one extra step after catching the ball and can hold it for one extra second before passing. The idea is that anyone – regardless of age, injury, experience or fitness level – can play.

SPORT FOR ALL ‘Walking sports can be a great opportunity for those who have previously enjoyed playing sport but may no longer have the physical capability or desire to participate in traditional forms,’ says Dr Claire Jenkin, Senior Lecturer in Sports Development at the University of Hertfordshire. Plus there are clear fitness benefits. ‘Walking sports are a good form of cardio exercise, with walking netball or basketball also providing a workout for the upper body,’ Dr Jenkin explains. Certainly, both Sue and Joy have seen improvements to their fitness. ‘It helps you tone up through stretching your arms, extending your legs and walking fast,’ says Joy. ‘It simply helps my body move,’ adds Sue. ‘When I was working, I think I’d

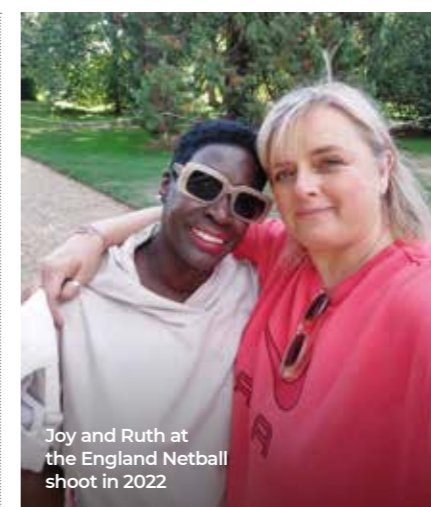
stopped moving some parts of my body. The first couple of times I came to walking netball, I thought I was going to collapse! But I don’t feel like that now, so it must be doing me good.’ Joy and Sue’s session at The Portland Centre is run by England Netball’s Ruth Pickthorn. ‘Ruth does warm-up exercises with us – from ball control and shooting to general fitness. Then we split into two teams and play a match. We’re encouraged to play every position, though people do have favourites!’ says Sue, who loves playing defence. ‘Ruth makes everyone feel at ease,’ adds Joy – favourite positions goal defence or goal keeper – ‘and if there are exercises you can’t do or you’ve had an injury, she takes that into account. She’s encouraging, supportive and makes sure everybody’s included.’

Ruth herself loves to see participants flourish during her sessions. ‘Walking netball gives ladies of any age a chance to play in team sport again,’ she says. ‘I have seen ladies’ confidence and self-esteem improve. They become part of the community, making new friends – walking netball is very social. It’s also great for fitness, including balance, cardio and mobility, and for mental health – we all laugh and talk a lot, which benefits everybody!’ As well as weekly hour-long sessions at the Portland, Joy and Sue attend another local group. And they take part in walking netball festivals across the East Midlands throughout the year. ‘About eight teams might take part,’ says Joy. ‘As soon as we get on the court, everybody’s demeanour changes – we get quite competitive!’

TEAM SPIRIT Along with the improved fitness comes friendship. ‘I didn’t know anybody



The netball group (Sue back row in blue T-shirt, Joy front row in blue T-shirt)



Joy and Ruth at the England Netball shoot in 2022

Ruth loves to see participants flourish during her sessions

when I joined two years ago but now we socialise,’ says Sue. ‘What I love is that it’s all women – you can chat so openly.’ ‘We talk about all manner of things,’ agrees Joy. ‘And we go out for meals, we go to the theatre... When the Commonwealth Games were on, we’d meet in the pub and watch the netball on TV. In the summer, a couple of us went to South Africa to watch the Netball World Cup.’ Such social benefits are well documented. ‘Research has shown the benefits of team sport,’ says Dr Jenkin. ‘It can provide the opportunity to socialise with others who have similar interests, which is really important as we age.’

The women are passionate about spreading the word about walking netball and getting more people involved. ‘You speak to so many women who say they played netball at school and loved it,’ says Joy. ‘Then they get to age 14 or 15, their interests change and they give up.’ ‘Women and girls drop in and out of sport for

many reasons throughout their lifespan, usually at key life stages,’ says Dr Jenkin. ‘People’s physical activity preferences and opportunities also change throughout life. Walking sport enables people to play the sport they love in a modified version.’ Joy finds that once women hear about walking netball, they’re interested. ‘When you say you play walking netball they’re intrigued and want to know more. I’ve definitely recruited a few players. It just needs to be publicised better, getting more women to come and try a taster session.’ When women do sign up, they find that their mind as well as their body receives a boost – as Dr Jenkin confirms. ‘We researched a walking basketball programme and one key benefit participants self-reported was that they felt it stimulated their brain and made them think – for example, where to pass the ball.’

Joy feels it has definitely enhanced her mental wellbeing. ‘I still work part time as a mental health liaison nurse, and the days I’m rostered to work and can’t go to netball I really miss it. That one hour makes such a difference to me. I look forward to it every week.’ Sue feels the same. ‘I would have struggled without netball. I’d left work where there were loads of people around, and suddenly I was at home, retired, with no family close by and most of my friends having moved away. My husband was still working, so I knew I had to get out. I simply don’t know what I’d have done without walking netball. I love it!’



Joy at a recent netball session

GIVE IT A TRY!

Find out more about walking netball, and search for sessions near you, at www.Englandnetball.co.uk/play/walking-netball. Interested in other walking sports from hockey to football? Visit www.walkingsports.com.

