Oldest wingers in town

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writes Anabel Unity Sale

When football fanatic and TV cook Delia Smith shouted the immortal words, "Come on, let's be havin' you!" to supporters at a Norwich City match she probably had no idea how far her rallying cry would echo.

Fast forward four years and a group of over 60-year-olds are sitting in the lounge of Norwich City's Carrow Road stadium talking to ex-player Craig Fleming. In between cups of tea and coffee they ask the once star defender about his 10 years with The Canaries (Norwich City's nickname). "That's a very good question," he says when one man asks who was the best player he played against. "It has to be Thierry Henry. His footwork's fantastic."

The participants are from the Extra Time project, which aims to encourage older people in England and Wales to take part in physical activity. Last year, Norwich received £10,000 to start its own Extra Time scheme operated by charity Football in the Community (FITC), which is based at Norwich City's stadium.

Steven Girling is Extra Time's project co-ordinator and FITC finance director. He believes Norwich's bid for the cash won because it focused on providing different sporting activities followed by social activities. "The idea of Extra Time is to get people together so they can make new friends and enjoy themselves," he says. "It gives people the chance to do a sport they may have done when they were younger or try something completely new."

Norwich's Extra Time provides three 10-week blocks of activities for two hours a week. The first hour is devoted to exercise and the second hour is for participants to have refreshments and socialise during another activity. Previous exercise sessions have included yoga, tai chi, short tennis, badminton, aerobics, hockey and basketball. This week is football. Social activities include creative writing, day trips to football grounds such as Stamford Bridge (Chelsea), the Emirates Stadium (Arsenal) and Wembley, healthy eating talks, Indian head massage and Q&A sessions with past Norwich players such as Fleming. If participants do not want to do a particular sport they can go swimming or use the equipment at Riverside Gym.

Girling says encouraging older people to become active or maintain their physical health improves their overall well-being. "There is a misconception that when you get to a certain age you no longer play sport or enjoy it. We've shown that no matter what age you are you can enjoy participating. Whatever activity we run, people always do it to their maximum capacity."

In the first 10 weeks of Extra Time, which began last November, 19 older people signed up. There are 28 involved in the second block and 35 are expected in the third. It is advertised at GP surgeries in the local press and at Norwich City's ground, and has links with Age Concern Norfolk and the Sports Partnership Around Norwich network. Girling says the initiative has been so successful that FITC will consider funding it itself if further funding is not secured by the time its current grant ends in June.

FITC part-time football coach Peter Brown, 61, co-ordinates the sports sessions. He spent the morning playing football with a group of six people in a sports hall. Brown says it is important a man of his age plays such a role in Extra Time. "I was chosen because it's better to get an active old guy like me running around than a 21-year-old."

One of the people who played football with Brown earlier, and who is listening intently to Fleming sing the praises of majority share-holder Delia Smith, is...
Christine Elsey. She laughs when she says she'd never played football before "but I have a go at everything". The previous week's tai chi was a hit with her because she found it very relaxing. Her husband, Paul, who also attends, was not so keen, preferring to play table tennis or swim instead. He adds: "The talks they do are really good."

Clare Richards liked Extra Time so much that she signed up for a second block: "Having a go at everything is very appealing. It's as much doing it with a group that is the fun. We've also had a coffee with [former Norwich City player] Darren Huckerby. What more can you ask for? He's a legend."

More on the Extra Time Project

Exercise and the elderly

Tips on how to get older people involved in exercise:

- Build a rapport with participants by asking them what they want to do.
- Have different activities to choose from so participants feel they are involved.
- Remind people they are never too old to have fun.
- Get other older people to help deliver the activities.
- Remember people have different abilities and encourage them to exercise at their own level.

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