



Keep on

Kicking

Know You Can

Foreword



Playing team sports offers a multitude of benefits, from improving mental and physical health to developing resilience and building teamwork.

In fact, lots of the same skills set us in good stead whether we're in the boardroom or on a sports pitch.

But for many women, staying engaged with sports throughout their lives is challenging.

To mark AXA's sponsorship of the Women's EURO in Switzerland this summer, we set out to explore why and at what life stages women step away from team sports and what would encourage them to re-engage.

Our research – one of the biggest recent studies examining female participation in sport – found that only seven per cent of women in the UK currently play team sports, with pregnancy, menstruation and menopause cited as key reasons for not taking part.

And while almost half of those polled said they played team sports regularly up to the age of 25, the number fell to single figures for women in their 30s, 40s and 50s. The majority believe men have an easier time continuing to play team sports as they get older.

For our study, we polled 3000 women across the country who've played sport to find out their challenges. The results are highlighted in this report, together with stories from inspirational women such as Paralympic basketball player Amy Conroy, Antarctic explorer Cat Burford and Liverpool FC legend Tash Dowie.

Once women have stepped away from sport, it can be tough to return. Lack of confidence and social anxiety keep some away, while others say better facilities and more local groups would encourage them to take part.

Our sponsorship of both the Women's EURO and Women's Walking Football in the UK sets a powerful example of how major

brands can support women, raise awareness of issues and inspire positive change.

At AXA UK, we want to help our customers and colleagues be the best version of themselves and develop the resilience required to flourish in their work and personal lives – no matter what their age.

In our own business, we provide support for colleagues at challenging times of their life such as when they're going through the menopause or managing mental health. Being part of a supportive team can make a real difference to people's lives and help them grow.

And as a health insurance provider, we know the long-term benefits of staying fit and healthy – both mentally and physically – and we provide the support to help facilitate positive change.

We hope this report and our sponsorship of women's sport, whether it's an international

tournament like the Women's EURO or at grass roots level like Women's Walking Football, will shine a spotlight on these activities and inspire women of all ages to prioritise their physical and mental health both now and for the future.

Tara Foley, CEO AXA UK & Ireland

Introduction

For millions of Brits, sport plays a major role in their social lives and has a positive impact on their health and wellbeing. Whether through supporting a team or regularly playing, sport has the power to enrich our lives and bring people together. And nothing unites us more than enjoying the experience with others through team sports.

However, for women it can be more challenging than for their male counterparts to continue playing team sports through different life stages.

AXA UK's 'Keep on Kicking' report explores the challenges that women face, from female health concerns to family commitments, and features inspirational stories from high-profile athletes including Liverpool FC legend Tash Dowie, England Paralympic basketball player Amy Conroy and Antarctic explorer Cat Burford.

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Not Just In It to Win It:
The benefits of team sports

A snapshot of the impact team sports have on the nation’s women is encouraging, though the number of women regularly playing on a team is low. In our study of 3,000 women aged 18+ across the UK, just 7% play a team sport.

And while 47 per cent of those polled said they played team sports regularly up to the age of 25, the number participating falls dramatically into single figures with women in their 30s, 40s and 50s.

Of the 7% of women regularly playing a team sport, three in five (59%) do so because they find it great fun. Improving physical fitness is a priority for 55%, and 46% believe the activity helps with teamwork skills and building resilience.

As a result of these benefits, nine in 10 women who regularly play a team sport would encourage others to sign up with their local team. And for those who are mothers, the vote was almost unanimous - 94% of mums think playing as part of a sports team sets a good example to their children.



Top benefits to playing team sports

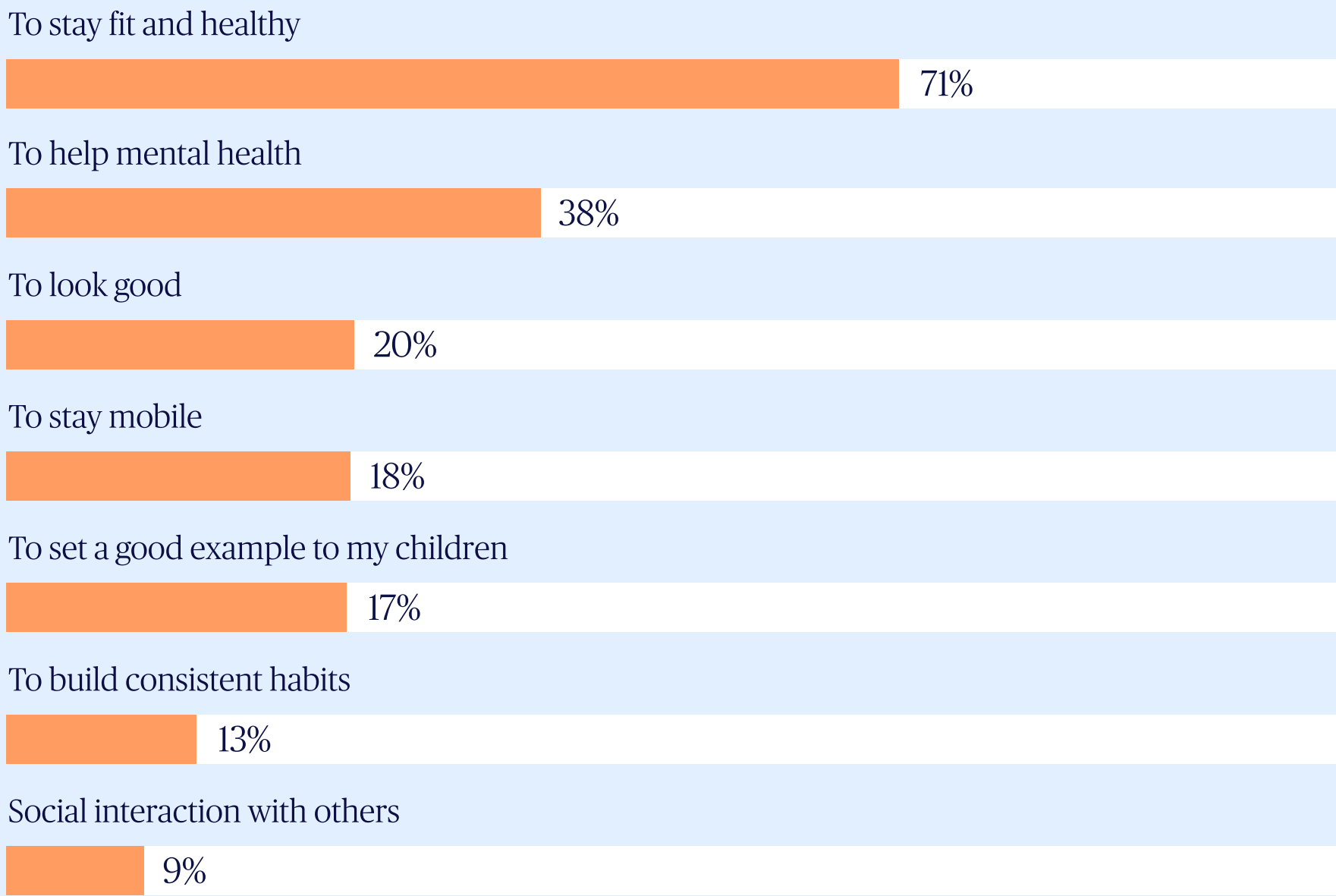
55% It helps improve physical fitness

46% It improves ability to work as part of a team

44% It’s an opportunity to play with friends

It’s great fun 59%

Main motivators for exercising



And it’s not only young people who appreciate the benefits of team sports. Almost all of those surveyed (95%) recognised the importance of continuing exercise and sport into later life to maintain fitness and health. Though recognising the benefits doesn’t always translate into action, with 77% of women who currently exercise saying they struggle to find time in their routine for exercise.

Football is the biggest sport in the world, so it’s unsurprising that the beautiful game topped the chart in our study as the most popular team sport. Three in five women (61%) would select football as their team sport of choice, followed by a third (35%) who would prefer to hit the court with a game of basketball.

Football and basketball were generally favoured by younger women, with 64% of 18-to-34-year-olds choosing football and 41% choosing basketball. In the 45+ age category, netball saw a spike in interest, with 45% choosing the sport.

Case Study: Steph Leese – Women’s Walking Football player



Liverpool mum Steph (49) says her mental and physical health have been transformed after taking up Women’s Walking Football in 2024.

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Making other female connections is life-changing, you realise you’re not the only one who’s faced the issues you’ve got.

“Every time I’ve tried to get fit in the past, I found an excuse to stop. I prioritised everything and everyone ahead of exercise. I carried a lot of extra weight at school, so no-one picked me for their team. When I joined the gym, it triggered those memories and I felt too self-conscious. I attempted ‘Couch to 5K’ but it was just too insular, I couldn’t do it on my own.

Women’s Walking Football has changed my life. I went along to the first session absolutely terrified and I haven’t looked back since. It’s been amazing.

I’ve always loved football – I’m a Liverpool season ticket holder – and I wanted to play at primary school but I wasn’t allowed to join the soccer skills programme because it was only for boys. How things have changed! I couldn’t even kick a ball when I started –

I now play three times a week and I’ve lost three stone.

There are as many benefits off the pitch as on. We have a Whatsapp group and support each other with all sorts of life issues. I thought I was happy enough before I started playing but I realised my thoughts never went outside my head and I tried to solve problems on my own. Making other female connections is life-changing, you realise you’re not the only one who’s faced the issues you’ve got.

I would recommend Women’s Walking Football to everyone, every age and ability. It has been transformative for me – I was stagnating before I took it up and now I can’t imagine life without it.”

Full-Time:

Women struggle to find the time to play team sports

Despite the benefits, many of the women who took part in our survey who play a team sport struggle to find the time to pursue their hobby. A resounding 84% wish they had more time in their schedules to play the sport they love, though other life commitments take focus.

However, a good number of those surveyed do manage to find the time for exercise. In a typical week, 55% are able to manage four or more exercise sessions, two sessions of which are dedicated to playing a team sport. This equates to an hour and a half of team sport-based exercise each week.

Work was the biggest reason, with 31% of our team players saying commitments in the workplace eat up time they would like to dedicate to sport and fitness, and 30% prioritise their responsibilities at home with their family.

Carving out time to focus on physical and mental health is a universal issue amongst the women we polled. Four in five (77%) women who currently exercise are battling to find the time for a gym session or other exercise.

84%

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Top commitments keeping women from playing more team sports



On The Bench:

Women name the factors keeping their sporting careers short compared to men

The ‘Keep on Kicking’ report set out to identify the key factors which prevent women from staying involved in team sports throughout their lives, compared to their male counterparts. Seven in 10 women polled believe they face additional challenges and that men have an easier time continuing to play the sports they enjoy as they get older.

Former Liverpool FC player Tash Dowie believes sport can play an important role in the lives of older women and has seen the benefits first-hand:

“I did an event the other day at Anfield where there were a lot of women who were probably 50 or 60 plus playing walking football. Some had experienced cancer or strokes and this was almost like their second life.

That was really nice to see because I was lucky that I was from a generation where I had the opportunity to be a professional football player.

I think it’s really powerful and important that the older generation get that opportunity to have a go now and to still play the game. They tell me how important it is for them mentally as well, it’s saved a lot of people’s lives being able to play the game, socially in that environment of being around people.”

The challenges cited include preparing for and going through pregnancy - 44% of women identified this as the key factor- and even post-pregnancy 38% feel the constraints on their time posed by arranging childcare and other commitments.

Equally, 44% of women who think men have an easier time continuing to play team sport point to issues relating to menstruation and menopause.

Tash Dowie said menstruation was a challenge even in the professional game:

“I played in the Legends game for Liverpool against Chelsea, I was the first ever female to play in the match in front of 58,000 and my period was due dead on that day at Anfield. Straight away you start thinking ‘am I going to get pains?’, ‘what kind of shorts are we going to be wearing?’. You can’t just fully relax to be honest. These are things that men don’t have to worry about.



The amount of conversations we had as a team, saying ‘what would you do if there were 30 seconds left in a game and it’s a cup final and you’re through on goal and you start bleeding, would you run off?’. These were the conversations that went on in changing rooms, it was people’s worst nightmare, the thought of that happening. It’s absolutely something that’s spoken about and a worry for a lot of females.”

But it’s not just female health issues that prevent women from playing. Accessibility to teams is also vital, and two in five (39%) think men have an easier time finding a team to join as there are more available. This goes hand-in-hand with the 38% of women who feel that traditional gender roles direct men towards sport more overtly than women.

Case Study: Cat Burford



The ‘Molar Explorer’ who crossed the Antarctic solo, said opportunities to play team sports dried up when her education finished.

“For me, team sports were always something tied to school or university. After that, it felt like opportunities for women to keep playing just disappeared, unless you were competing at an elite level. Meanwhile, my husband was always in a five-a-side football team, whether through work or the local pub, and I couldn’t find anything comparable for myself.”

It wasn’t until I spent some time living in New Zealand that I reconnected with team sports. There, it was a huge part of community life. Every local business, from the butcher to the cinema, would form mixed netball teams and compete in friendly competitions. It was a great way to meet people and feel part of the community.”

Additional challenges women face when trying to pursue team sport throughout their lives

Women have to consider/ work around pregnancy	44%
They don’t experience issues such as menstruation and menopause	44%
There are more groups for men to join	39%
Traditional gender roles emphasise sport to men more than women	38%
Childcare concerns	38%
Safety concerns (e.g. scared about walking home alone in the dark)	36%
Men are more likely to play sport than women in the first place	36%
Women face stricter time constraints	36%
Better cultural acceptance of men playing team sports	33%
Societal pressures about how women are supposed to look	27%
Men had better access to youth sport programmes	23%
Men have more role models	18%

Pep-Talk:

More free time and a more inclusive environment would encourage women to play team sport

As explored earlier in our report, when asked to name the main barrier preventing them from participating in more team sport, 39% of women point to a lack of free time. But our research found confidence and self-consciousness also play a part.

More than a third (35%) agree that sport is more fun with friends and say they would be more likely to sign up with a team if they had pals to play alongside. And a quarter (25%) would be more likely to take the leap if the social benefits of team membership were more clearly promoted.

Three in five (60%) feel a lack of confidence in the team sport environment - something which could be improved with more inclusive, beginner-friendly options from teams such as the taster sessions offered by the Walking Football Association.

Taking a look at local facilities available, 24% would be more encouraged to join if the fields and courts open to them were more suitable, and 23% have been put off by the prospect of wet and cold sessions outside when there are no indoor alternatives.

60%

feel a lack of confidence in the team sport environment



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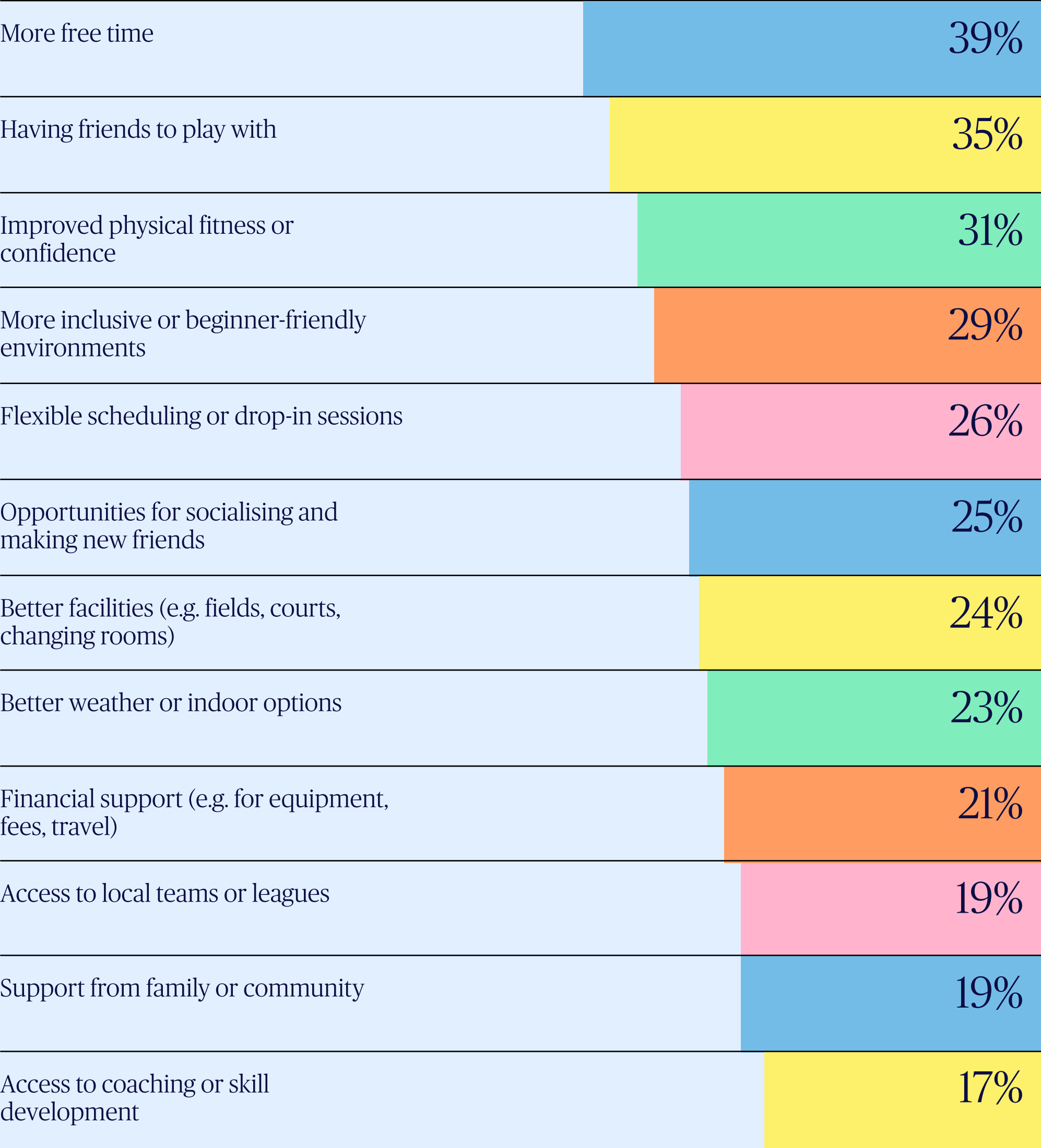
“At school, I sometimes didn’t take part in PE activities because I was in the girly group and was more interested in looking good and boyfriends. The lads were happy to get sweaty - they didn’t have to worry about their hair, they could just jump in the shower.

But I also had the challenge of not being allowed to play football, which was frustrating, so I had to find other things to fill my time. I think girls still face the same challenges - probably even more so with social media - and a lot comes down to the perception of what a girl should look like, which is terrible.

But thankfully things have moved on and football is played at school by both boys and girls now so I hope players like me who led the way can inspire the next generation of female England stars.”

Tash Dowie, former Liverpool and England international

Factors which would encourage more women to take up a team sport



Case Study: Amy Conroy, England Paralympic basketball player



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After losing a leg to cancer, I didn’t just think sport was just no longer an option –I believed life would always feel a bit smaller and harder. I became pretty insecure, so when I was first introduced to wheelchair basketball, I was nervous and reluctant to try. But as cheesy as it sounds, the sport truly transformed my life.

Being surrounded by strong, determined people who refused to be held back helped me see myself, and disability, in a completely new light. Fast forward 15 years and I’m now a 4x Paralympian. Beyond the physical benefits, team sport offers a powerful sense of connection, purpose and worst case just a great opportunity to practice some trash talk.

If anyone is even slightly considering giving it a go, I’d really encourage them to just go for it and show yourself what you're capable of.

Grassroots support: How we’re helping

To support women of all ages to engage in team sport, AXA has partnered the Walking Football Association to sponsor women’s teams across the country.

Walking football is suitable for women of all ages and abilities and taster sessions are being offered throughout England and Wales, which have proved hugely popular.

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"AXA UK’s partnership with Liverpool FC and support for Women’s Walking Football shows our dedication to helping women get active to improve their physical and mental health. It’s inspiring to see how walking football brings women of all ages together and fosters a sense of camaraderie. This inclusive sport is for everyone, regardless of skill level or fitness, and we’re excited to see it continue to grow and develop in the coming years."

———— Nathan Ashfield,
AXA UK Brand & Sponsorship Lead



Conclusion

While our research shows that only seven per cent of women in the UK play team sports, it’s encouraging that 84% of those polled wish they had more time to pursue the sports they love.

Childcare commitments, lack of confidence and female health concerns are holding women back from re-engaging with team sports but initiatives like Women’s Walking Football have the potential to offer inclusive and enjoyable options for all ages.

With women’s team sport firmly on the agenda this summer in the shape of the UEFA Women’s EURO 2025 in Switzerland, we hope more women will be inspired to pull on a jersey and get back on the pitch or court in whatever team sport they choose.