



walking the

walk

Let's start with the basics here: What the heck *is* Nordic walking? The question might be better if we asked what it is *not*: No, it's not walking in the winter. It's not something with snowshoes. It's not walking in the snow or even with skis. Not those alone. No, it's definitely *not* anything to do with Nordic skiing. Nordic walking is, very basically put, fitness walking with poles—an outdoor fitness activity blazing across Europe in the last couple of years—in parks, at health clubs, down streets and even on treadmills. And it's now heading to the United States. Or so hope the Big Three pole manufacturers, their gathering gaggle of instructors and master trainers, plus other accessory, apparel and shoe companies.

Let's also answer the next question we know is teetering on the tip of your tongue: Where did it *ever* get that name? De-

BY THERESE IKNOIAN



NORDIC WALKING IS QUITE THE FITNESS CRAZE IN EUROPE NOW, BUT CAN AMERICANS GET OVER THE "DORK FACTOR" OF WALKING AROUND WITH POLES?

veloped initially by pole manufacturer Exel of Finland in conjunction with the Finnish national sport institute and what we will loosely describe as that country's federal department of recreation, Nordic walking refers oh-so-simply to its birthplace in Scandinavia. For the geographically challenged, Scandinavian countries are one in the same as Nordic countries, usually defined as Norway, Sweden, Denmark, Iceland and, yes, Finland. So now we know what Nordic walking isn't and where that puzzling name came from. But what *is* it then?

Imagine cross-country skiing—without the skis. Oh, and without the snow. Voila, Nordic walking. Or, if you prefer: Walking the Nordic way.

"Nordic walking is now a category," said Greg Wozer, vice president of Leki USA, whose Germany-headquartered company showed up tentatively at a major outdoor show in August 2003 with Nordic walking poles and was bowled over by the response from retailers. "It's an instant category—with three companies promoting it rather than just one."

THE DORK FACTOR

But can Americans get over feeling geeky walking down the street with poles, fending



» Exel master trainer Mark Fenton (orange shirt) leads a Nordic walking training workshop.

off giggles and snide comments such as, “Hey, did you forget your skis?” or “Where’s the snow?”

“The first thing we want to overcome is making walking with poles not dorky,” said Tracy Ferland, product and marketing manager for the Exel brand at snowsports company Karhu, which is the distributor for Exel’s poles and program in North America. Exel also dropped the first true seeds on a national basis to the fitness industry when it introduced the activity at the July 2004 IDEA conference for fitness instructors, trainers and club managers. Europeans obviously don’t think it’s dorky: Since Exel rolled out the activity in 1997, statistics by the Finnish version of Gallup show that 520,000 people in Finland—a whopping 10 percent of the total population—participate in Nordic walking regularly, and 1.2 million have at least tried it. Nearly 1 million Germans stride with poles, and nearly a half million in Austria have hopped aboard the Nordic walking bandwagon. There are master trainers in 65 countries.

“It’s really booming in central Europe,” said Chris Griffin, Finland-based international sales manager for Exel. And of course, Exel, as well as pole specialists Leki and Swix, are all making sure they’re front and center with Nordic walking poles, programs, information, demos, instructors and training—even before most North Americans even know what it is and why they should care. Like wrestlers after the bell, pole suppliers are circling slowly, eyeing each other’s moves, and literally drooling at the revenue and sales possibilities—if indeed the North American market can get over that Dork Factor of striding city streets and sidewalks, urban parks and around the tennis courts and halls of health clubs. Steve Poulin, national sales manager for Swix, said if Nordic walking takes off here it could triple his company’s pole sales. In a year. *Triple!* And the retailers, clubs and instructors who pick up on the product and promote the activity stand to partake in that gain.

“Nobody,” Poulin said, “wants to miss out on this.”

WHAT COMES AROUND, GOES AROUND

Now com’ on, it’s not really as if training with poles, sans skis and snow, or even walking with poles is really a new thing. Nope. It’s not. Competitive cross-country



skiers have for decades cross-trained with poles in the off-season. Hikers, backpackers and adventure racers all know very well how poles can help with balance, reduce strain on knees, decrease effort, and aid in traversing difficult terrain. And you can’t negotiate an Alpine trail without passing hoards of hikers, all of whom carry trekking poles. Here in the United States, one man, Tom Rutlin of Madison, Wis., has been promoting walking with poles for fitness since 1988—something he calls Exerstriding and which he says is a little different than the Nordic walking technique. Other trainers have also tried to foray into the fitness field with pole programs but have had limited success. But that doesn’t stop the believers.

“This is so universal, potentially, that it dwarfs everything we do now,” said Joe Butler Sr., co-owner of Black Creek Outfitters in Jacksonville, Fla., which is an outdoor specialty store that is adopting a broader interpretation of what that means. Its new store slogan: “Your headquarters for travel, adventure and *life fitness.*”

For the wave to swell and crash over Europe and beyond, however, it took more than one man or a few retailers selling poles. It took an entire international company, Exel in this case, to get behind a program—but that decision only came after the company first tried to get retailers to sell the special poles without any specific education or training. HA! they said, laughing in Exel’s face, according to Griffin. So Exel went back to the Finnish national sports institute, which was looking for ways to get more people more active (sound familiar?), and worked with its trainers on a program that soon was all wrapped up with a catchy name and a technique that resembled cross-country skiing’s plant, push, glide, pole-off, release. Nordic walking was born.

“In the past when we had said, ‘Here’s Nordic walking poles,’ retailers laughed,” Griffin said. “Then people started going into stores and asking for Nordic walking poles and the retailers came running back to us.”

The biggest international coming-out party was at the ispo sporting goods show in January 2003 in Munich, Germany. By this time, heart rate monitor manufacturer Polar—coincidentally, also a Finnish company—had gotten behind the activity. So ispo dedicated a section of a hall as a Nordic walking arena. There was a walking demo circuit, speakers from fitness and ski companies, a stage for presentations, and classes scheduled every hour for which participants checked out equipment and then marched in groups around the sprawling halls with Exel instructors.

“No ispo attendee could miss the Nordic walking promotion,” Leki’s Wozer said. His company was the first to do a similar promotion, albeit on a small scale, at the summer 2003 Outdoor Retailer show, inviting attendees each morning to take a demo class on the streets of staid Salt Lake City. Leki plans the same coming-out party with morning classes and product demos at the Health & Fitness Business show in Denver in August 2004, where it is an exhibitor.

FOLLOW THE LEADER

Meanwhile, Europe is 10 steps ahead of North America on this fitness activity. Swiss activewear manufacturer Odlo last year launched a line of Nordic walking apparel, as are now the likes of everyone from New Balance to Reebok. Shoe manufacturers are also unveiling special Nordic walking shoes. European fitness equipment manufacturer Hammer also just rolled out a Nordic walking treadmill with a narrow belt on each side where the side rails usually are for a user to plant the poles. Reebok even has its own Reebok-branded poles. And all the poles aren’t just hiking poles with a new label. These are generally lighter, with a grip and strap that resemble those of Nordic skiing. Leki touts adjustable poles as a key feature but is introducing fixed-length models, while Exel and Swix stick to fixed lengths and focus on other features. Depending on the company, model and materials, prices range from about \$60 to \$150 a pair.

cret method, formula or process as a trade secret rather than disclose it to the world via the patent system, which could then open the door for knockoffs. A trade secret can be as simple as a developed company customer list or as complicated as a complex chemical coating process. To be a trade secret, the formula, process or other factor must have economic value to the company or its competitors because it is kept secret—like a hamburger joint’s “secret sauce” or some unique marketing plan. There must also be a reasonable attempt to maintain the information as a trade secret.

For legal action to take place for stealing a trade secret there has to be an “act of misappropriation,” such as hacking into computers, searching through file cabinets by the dark of night or breaching a non-disclosure agreement. Legitimate “reverse engineering”—who hasn’t made their own attempt at the “secret sauce”?—isn’t illegal.


Too often companies make the mistake of claiming a trade secret, but the information can be found in media stories

or other public-accessible places. I was actually involved in a trial with a company that claimed that a particular type of plastic used in a manufactured test kit was a trade secret. Too bad for the company that the very plastic it claimed was secret was listed on its website! Big oops there! Plan and manage internal and external precautions to preserve a trade secret both through company employee confidentiality agreements as well as with third-party non-disclosure agreements. Documents relating to the trade secret should be marked “confidential and proprietary,” and access to them should be limited.

SO SHOULD YOU CARE?

The fretful marketing manager at The Super Show earlier this year did, and he immediately launched an offensive campaign to protect his intellectual property right on the floor of the exhibit hall with our help. He’s now on his way to eliminating the knock-off from the market.

Don’t wait until you run into my law firm at your next trade show—even if we

do hand out funny and colorful squeeze-toy fish—to protect your valuable intangible assets. Take stock of your company’s designs, brand names, logos, products, and competitive secrets. Decide whether it makes sense to your business to patent your inventions or whether trade secrets offer you a better solution. Determine whether the trademarks you have chosen are strong, and which of your trademarks and slogans you want to register. Look at the agreements you use with consultants and outsource partners and be sure that you own the work they produce. Good planning and a proactive approach can avoid lots of hand-wringing, fretting, gray hairs and expense—and might even help you identify new sources of licensing revenue for your company. 

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GO WEST, NORDIC WALKERS

Although many fitness trends and activities seem to birth in the United States then slowly spread around the world, this one took the opposite route. Odd, in a way, since walking for fitness until recently was a joke to many Europeans. Now, the European-based pole suppliers are eyeing the gargantuan fitness walking population in the United States as their pool—anywhere from about 36 million to 80 million regular fitness walkers, depending on whose numbers you believe.

“We know there is a large population that walks for fitness,” Wozer said. “We just want to tap into that group. We just want them to add poles.”

Shouldn't be an issue with the pole companies planting seeds—and product—at retailers, health clubs and instructor conferences. Although the planting began last year, plans are now sprouting fully. Exel held its special workshop at the IDEA show for fitness professionals in July and is building a pyramid of instructors to fan out across the United States; Leki runs a grassroots training program for retailers who also invite local fitness professionals, plus its training master instructors; Swix's “Nordic Walking Academy” which trains trainers will move into the United States in late 2004. Getting over that Dork Factor can be solved if, as representatives from all three companies told GearTrends®, the activity is introduced in groups so people can get the feel of it without embarrassment.

“People forget it was only 30 years ago that it was a novelty to see someone running on the streets in shorts,” said walking author and Exel trainer Mark Fenton. “The ‘dork factor’ can turn into the ‘cool factor.’”

Spokane, Wash., retailer Fitness Fanatics owner Robin Ruwe didn't waste time before jumping on the trend with no worries of funny looks. Her customers do everything from skiing and snowshoeing to working out in clubs, fitness walking, running and triathlons. She's even been doing evening in-store Nordic walking workshops that are attracting about 20 people and has plans to approach area clubs to plot a partnership for a class series.

Rayne Herzog, owner of Shelburne Athletic Club near Burlington, Vt., said he believes that education and new programs are partly key to a club's continued success. “People recognize this as another service and amenity,” Herzog said. “Clubs are looking for a niche, and this is one of those programs. First of all, everybody knows how to walk. Second, there's a short

learning curve. Third, it's very social. Fourth, there are many fitness benefits, you feel the results and burn some serious calories and, lastly, it's just fun.”

Butler of Black Creek Outfitters in Jacksonville, Fla., sees the activity as one that will take time to build, but one he's willing to stick with because he is not a doubting Thomas about its benefits; he Nordic walks for fitness several times a week himself with his wife.

“We've got to be looking at this thing multi-year,” Butler said. “We've got to be looking at multiple types of outlets to promote this: healthcare, fitness, specialty outdoor... We have to reach out and grab it.”

His store also hosted a training program by Leki to which he invited a few area trainers and club owners. One personal trainer ran—or, Nordic walked, shall we say—straight back to her club, Epping Forest Yacht Club, and began plotting three-hour workshops for members. “We are moving this forward,” said trainer Ayn Peters. “I love it. I get all the weird comments like, ‘Where's the snow?’ I'm just marketing it by doing it. And I just send them down to (retailer) Black Creek. If people see me doing it, they'll think, ‘There must be something to it.’”

Having a scientific peer-reviewed study verifying the fitness and health benefits by a group as reputable as The Cooper Institute doesn't hurt either. Published in September 2002, the study compared walking with and without poles on two successive 1,600-meter (nearly a mile) trials with subjects coached to move at the same speed during both (average 16:15-16:40 miles) while having their heart rates monitored, their oxygen use measured to calculate effort and calorie burn, and their “perceived exertion” taken to see how they felt. Long story short, on average, participants walking with poles used about 20 percent more calories than when they walked without poles. And they said their effort felt about the same. More calories, same exercise time, same feeling of effort. Who can't sell that? One note for the scientifically inclined is that the group was already relatively fit (raising the question, could less fit have the same results?), and although the average increase was 20 percent, the range was huge—about 8 percent to nearly 48 percent in women and about 5 percent to nearly 63 percent in men. As the researchers said, “There is a potential for considerably more or less benefit depending on the selection of poling-off intensity.” Either way, don't believe the pro-

motors who claim everyone will experience at least 50 percent more calorie use or some such tall tale.

NORDIC WALKING GANGSTA WARS?

They may not wear color-coded bandannas, but watch out. The lines are being drawn as the activity spreads. Initially only overseen by the International Nordic Walking Association (INWA—www.nordicwalking.com), which was actually started by and remains an arm of Exel, national governing and educating bodies have begun in countries around the world. But all is not well in the ranks, it seems. Last fall, a group called INFO (International Nordic Fitness Organization—www.nordicfitnessworld.info—now also partly in English, but be prepared for some goofy translations) rather publicly splintered off from INWA, taking with it the German and Austrian federations, and saying it also now oversees the Swiss, Australian and still-in-the-works U.S. federation. In a four-page press release issued (in German), INFO founders stated they unanimously decided to distance themselves from INWA. In addition, it said its goals are not only to reunite the splintered, politically charged activity, but also to come up with measurable quality-control standards for continuing education and instructor training under a strict INFO code of ethics.

When queried further about the differences, INFO representatives declined more detail.

Griffin of Exel only said he didn't think it was “healthy” for dirty laundry to be aired in public and that financial factors may be playing a role as Nordic walking grows. Pretty back-alley stuff for a fitness activity, for goodness sake.

Politics aside, growing the activity in the United States will be a different matter than in Europe, manufacturers admit, as they scramble to figure it all out quickly. But they are still confident there is a future here.

“Our crystal ball says, the market is going to get this, and this will dwarf what we do now because it's a market that already exists with everybody walking,” said Wozer. “The benefits and ease of doing this are so clear; the biggest hurdle is the self-conscious factor.”

If a few million Europeans don't care about The Dork Factor, why should we? ▶

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