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Nordic Walking for Total Fitness

Sample file

Contents

Preface	vi
Acknowledgments	viii

PART I

Better Fitness With the Nordic Approach

1	Walking Plus: The Gym to Go	2
2	Gearing Up: The Right Equipment for You	9
3	Taking the First Steps: Poling, Posture, and Stride	22
4	Stepping Up: Variations for Cardio, Strength, and Power	37
5	Changing Pace: Variations for Balance, Coordination, Agility, and Flexibility	72
6	Stepping Out: Adapting to Different Terrain	98
7	Starting Up: Identifying the Workout for You	108

PART II

Nordic Walking Workouts

8	Short and Easy	126
9	Medium and Steady	133
10	Medium and Quick	139
11	Short and Fast	145
12	Long and Steady	151
13	Outdoor Circuit Training	157

PART III

Programming for Long-Term Goals

14	Training for Cardio Health and Fitness	170
15	Targeting Total-Body Fitness	179
16	Cross-Training for Sports	186
17	Customizing Your Program	195
	Index	203
	About the Authors	207

Preface

As a lifelong skier, I've found that using poles for balance, stability, and rhythm is as natural as brushing my teeth. So, more than 10 years ago, I had no trouble adjusting to using walking poles for summer fitness. As an instructor, I'd seen miracle after miracle in folks who used poles to improve their walking. But it wasn't until I needed a total hip replacement that the real miracle happened.

I am a long-distance hiker; I can trek up and down Mt. Whitney (22 miles) in one day without poles. Just one experience with the poles made me realize what I had in my hands. Poles became part of the contents of my car trunk for use any time, any place. I used Nordic walking poles for fitness walks until my hip surgery. The poles turned out to be integral during recovery, allowing me to bear weight evenly on both legs much sooner than I would have if I'd used the archaic, spine-wrenching recovery tools currently recommended by doctors—the dreaded walker and cane.

As an athlete, I knew better than to hurry in recovery. So, I took my time, gradually increasing my walking speed. My first official walk 12 days postop was on a path that typically takes 20 minutes. I will always remember that walk because it took 2 hours!

My postsurgery objective was to trek Mt. Whitney again in a day hike. On July 7, 2004, two years to the day postop, I did it again, but this time with poles. After a wholesome mantra during the 11 miles up (“posture, level chin, relaxed traps, relaxed pace, endurance”), the mantra for the 11 miles back down (“cold beer, hot bath; cold beer, hot bath”) resonated through my body. But what didn't resonate this time was a stitch of pain. This was my miracle. And to this day, still no pain. Considering the times when I couldn't walk for a week after a hike because of a hip disability, this time the hike was nothing—except time, patience, and symmetrical movements thanks to the poles.

This book is a result of dedication to the functional activity of Nordic walking. The Nordic Walk Now team trainers also devoted their expertise, passion, and time to this work; my coauthor, Alexandra Jurasin, and I are greatly appreciative of that. Since March 2006 we have worked to mesh science, skills, and

innovation to bring our customers and readers the most updated information available about Nordic walking fitness.

The North American low-impact techniques described in this book are proprietary to Nordic Walk Now and fast becoming well known as the safest path to reaching the objectives of Nordic walking fitness. We believe that to prevent injuries, you must be aware of impact and how to avoid it with efficient technique and an attention to your own process of motor-skill development. The good news is that we walk you through it from point A to point Z. Our only goals for you are that you grasp Nordic walking in any way that fits into your regimen and choose it as one of your lifelong sports.

In this book, although similar principles and methods of athletic training are used, it is inappropriate to recommend longer pole lengths because we cannot assume that everyone is interested in training with the specificity or intensity of a professional athlete. Even more important is our conservative approach toward developing fitness proficiency. We won't assume you are at a certain fitness level. Instead, we provide the progressive path to "walk yourself into fitness" at any intensity that suits you. Furthermore, consider that pro athletes have trainers by their sides, have gone through extensive evaluation and testing, and have experience using poles. Finally, remember that you get out of Nordic walking what you put into it. This is the beauty of the sport. If you choose to walk slower, you will acquire strength, but with less resistance from the tips you will get a lower impact workout. If you choose to walk with speed and power, you'll acquire strength proportionate to your effort. In either case, you will walk stronger!

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PART

Better Fitness With the Nordic Approach

Sample file

Walking Plus: The Gym to Go

Get outside and move forward! Imagine finally shedding that extra few pounds that many fitness programs fail to help you lose, completing your first half marathon, or relishing fitness in the splendor of the outdoors, away from walls, electronics, and the sweat of other people. What if you could do all this while increasing back strength and bone density? Nordic walking is a modern and complete method of full-body training. Through the workouts and programs provided in this book, we've created a system we call "gym to go," and it's a new form of cardio training—workouts guaranteed to help you accomplish the results you desire.

Nordic walking is a fitness activity that uses specially designed poles to engage the upper body's musculature. It offers a variety of benefits regardless of your fitness level, age, or experience. You can practice Nordic walking at almost any place and time, and it's free. The potential to improve your health and fitness level is right in the palms of your hands. You can start today and do it for the rest of your life. Add poles to the trunk of your car, and your gym is ready to go just about anywhere!

Nordic walkers combine poles and physical strength to move their own body weight forward and over the ground. This is how it provides both a cardio and strength workout simultaneously. The combination of continuous, rhythmic motion and the resistance generated by the tips of the poles creates powerful momentum. When body mass meets speed in one direction (in this case, forward), your reaction to resistance in the pole tips propels you forward.

You can create even more resistance by nailing the sweet spot of the tips every time. This practice is rhythmic automation at its best!

Advantages of Nordic Walking

Many benefits are associated with Nordic walking, including cardiorespiratory fitness, heart health, postural development, bone density, injury rehabilitation, pain management, muscle strength and endurance, mobility, stability, balance, and body awareness. Many fans call Nordic walking a “moving meditation,” and say that it produces endorphins similar to those experienced in the runner’s high. The long-term benefits for back health and weight loss that can be achieved by practicing Nordic walking at a leisurely pace are compelling, not to mention the fitness and athletic benefits gained from a faster, harder pace.

The practice is ageless and limitless. A good pair of poles costs between \$59 and \$200 US. After the initial investment of time to learn and money for poles, there is no further cost. You are free to wander the earth with the intensity that suits your objectives! Nordic walking is an investment in an athletic future that will help you stay active and fit throughout your golden years.

Health Benefits

Workouts may vary in intensity from a slow, calculated walking to swift, heart-pumping paces, but every choice yields results. Everyone from grandmas to athletes can reap these benefits of Nordic walking, regardless of fitness level, ability, speed, or age.

Full-Body Fitness. Nordic walking uses poles to connect the entire body to the pull of gravity, creating comprehensive muscle activity and resistance. With proper use, the tips of the poles redistribute the physical effort of your lower extremities to include your core and upper body.

Healthier Heart. Nordic walking is a perfect cardiorespiratory activity for people at every fitness level. The benefits of Nordic walking are directly related to the amount of effort put forth; as your fitness level improves, you progressively reap greater benefits. As will be discussed, it is a perfect activity for enhancing cardiorespiratory stamina and strength.

Weight Loss. Nordic walking results in greater weight loss than traditional walking does because more muscles are active, therefore burning more calories. However, when you are learning a new sport, your heart rate is sometimes too high to burn fat. Once you master the new skills and adapt to the demands of the activity, you can establish a fat-burning heart rate that helps you literally walk your butt off!

Healthier Back and Improved Posture. Improving the health of your spine is a top reason for Nordic walking. Regardless of your knowledge and skill level, simply gripping the handles of the poles and touching their tips to the ground

activates key postural muscles of your torso and core. One of the most beneficial results of tip resistance is spine rotation, which physical therapists prescribe as one of four daily movements for a healthy back. Rotational movements create gentle resistance around the axis of the spine, activating all the core muscles. By incorporating the rotational element that many fitness programs miss, Nordic walking reenergizes postural awareness. Better posture results in greater coordination, stronger back muscles, and increased endurance.

Reduced Impact on Joints. Because poles distribute effort throughout the body and provide instant stability, Nordic walking places less strain on the knees and back. After only one trip uphill and downhill, you will appreciate the extent to which poles help you remain upright. Never again will you have to break at the waist or load your knees beyond a comfortable angle.

Greater Bone Density. Avid Nordic walkers report stronger bones in all parts of the body.

Reduced Stress. Nordic poles activate all the joints in the body, including the spine, causing the body to buzz with endorphins. Many Nordic walkers liken this feeling to the classic runner's high. Other benefits associated with increased endorphins include reduced stress, better pain management, and greater muscle endurance.



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Nordic walking can help reduce stress through its meditative qualities, but it can also be a great way to get a workout while visiting with friends.

Both Nordic walking and meditation draw the participant's awareness to rhythms, such as the heart's beat, the of breath, and the coordination of a symmetrical gait. Nordic walkers claim to lose track of time, letting the peaceful rush of rhythm and momentum occupy their minds throughout the workout. Others focus on one quality of their gait for several seconds at a time. Examples include noticing how their feet feel as each portion, from the heel to the toes, make contact with the ground, or concentrating on subtly coordinating the rotation of the upper and lower portions of the body.

Fitness and Athletic Benefits

Using Nordic walking poles requires coordinated movements for balance and stability, strength and endurance, varied cardiovascular efforts, agility and visual acuity. Added benefits include injury prevention, enhanced nervous system reactions to move quickly with precision, and the ability to learn and accomplish other sport skills in less time. The best health benefit is having a long, active life! To Nordic walk now is an investment in your athletic future to stay active into your golden years.

Cardiorespiratory Stamina. Aerobic and anaerobic conditioning are at the core of the Nordic walking workout. Aerobic exercise utilizes readily available oxygen, glycogen, and fat stores to sustain movement and pace, most often at a consistent moderate heart rate, and it is performed for longer durations of time. Aerobic conditioning is the backbone of your training program, not just because it is inherent in a Nordic walking experience, rather because it preps your body for more intense anaerobic conditioning later on. Anaerobic activity requires a quicker source for energy, therefore instead of using fat stores, the main source of fuel is what is stored in your muscles, and what you ate for breakfast. It takes your heart rate to a new level of intensity that is often difficult to sustain longer than seconds or minutes. Because it is a distance exercise, Nordic walking is an endurance activity, working many of the muscle groups used in running and cross-country skiing. It is an ideal activity for cardiorespiratory fitness because it can be performed at any intensity. Also, those who wish to burn fat will have no trouble. Those who wish to compete at a higher level have options for intensive training. Others who simply wish to build a healthier heart or participate in sports can find the appropriate pace to suit their fitness goals.

Anaerobic conditioning takes your aerobic training to the next level. We think of anaerobic conditioning as advanced cardio training. Advanced cardiorespiratory activity increases both strength and power. The more intense your cardiac output is, the less readily oxygen is available to metabolize the fat that sustains energetic movement. Your body taps into other stores of quick energy for muscle function, such as what you ate for breakfast in addition to what you ate the day before that is stored as glycogen in your muscles. Your muscles cannot sustain the intense demands of this advanced cardio training

for long. Instead, you should use interval training to progressively build your cardio machine.

Benefits of anaerobic conditioning or advanced cardio training include the following:

1. Healthier heart
2. Greater cardiorespiratory endurance
3. Increased fitness levels
4. Enhanced nerve response
5. Better dynamic balance
6. Faster recovery time
7. Greater speed
8. Improved performance in sports

Muscular Endurance. Muscular endurance is the ability to sustain movement or activity for a prolonged amount of time. With practice, skilled Nordic walkers acquire a more athletic gait that combines simultaneous physical reactions with a faster pace and speed. At this level of training, distance events become appealing and attainable. Muscular endurance allows you to settle into a comfortable yet productive pace.

Balance. Balance comes from bodily responses that maintain equilibrium. It is just as beneficial for mobility and body awareness as cardiovascular, strength, and flexibility. Everyone is born with balance, but savvy athletes know how to train to cultivate it. Some prefer a less strenuous approach to stability training, such as with the single-side balance exercise described in chapter 5. However, Nordic walking challenges you to achieve more dynamic balance because you are working the upper body to move forward while recovering small imbalances in the feet, ankles, legs, and pelvis. Poles challenge the upper and lower body simultaneously, resulting in better balance. Training for balance and becoming aware of the body's balance centers will help you attain superior motor efficiency and athletic ability. Remember that stability, mobility, and balance dance together at any intensity.

Range of Motion. Traditionally, power walkers use a shorter stride and an arm swing that often barely involves the upper body. These movements require less effort and use fewer muscles. Nordic walking techniques elicit a greater range of movement and a longer stride that activates more muscles and propels the body forward with strength. The pole action is an enhancement of the opposing arm swing used when walking normally. The increased range of motion allows you to literally cover more ground. Likewise, flexibility and other fitness qualities improve.

Agility. Agility relates to quickness and maneuverability. Starting or stopping suddenly, pivoting, dodging, jumping, and other types of fast footwork are skills that require muscle control. A variety of fun agility drills relate to

Nordic walking. Some involve the creative use of poles; others utilize the natural environment. Agility and balance work together to help you effortlessly adjust to stimulus that acts on your body to throw it off its axis. Examples include impulsive direction changes or when you reach the top of a hill or run into a headwind. The body reacts to deflection to stabilize itself naturally. These athletic components are the prerequisites for coordination.

Coordination. Coordination involves a complimentary relationship of movements—a smooth flow from one slight movement to the next to accomplish an efficient stride. You must move the upper and lower body both independently and in opposition. Rhythm and coordination determine pace, which can eventually equal speed. Although power may not always be required for Nordic walking, coordination is the most obvious athletic component. Your Nordic walking skills will be efficient when your movements are so subtle and well memorized that your brain is able to communicate instructions for movement with ease, developing physical and mental sequential reactions without wasting energy. Coordination training combines balance, agility, and visual skills. It can also include power training. Other activities like group exercise classes, sports, and eye-foot or eye-hand drills are also effective for developing coordination.

Efficiency of Movement. Nordic walkers often comment that their practice helps them walk with greater grace and ease, even without poles. Nordic walking enhances both posture and coordination. Nordic walking poles lengthen the body's levers (the arms and legs as they swing in opposition) and its stride length (the distance between the feet). Efficiency of movement, or using as little energy as possible to accomplish skills, is both the result and objective of skilled Nordic walkers. Additional benefits include fewer injuries, better reaction time, quicker and more precise movement, and greater mastery of sport skills.

Visual Skills. Balance and its recovery depend on visual cues. You need superior visual skills to hit a baseball, kick a soccer ball, and stay upright when your lightweight poles accidentally tangle in your legs during a high cross wind! Nordic walkers are fortunate because the stability created by the pole tips lets them focus their vision ahead instead of down at the ground. The practice of gazing ahead with a soft focus, taking in the entire landscape, is much healthier for the spine. If you continually look down at the ground, the placement of your head can injure your spine, pulling your shoulders and upper torso away from the center of the pelvis and the axis of efficiency. Over time, your bones may grow out of alignment. The visual skills gained during Nordic walking assist postural integrity by helping you appropriately balance your head's weight, improving poor posture and eliminating back strain. Adept vision also helps prevent needless injuries on crowded bike paths and on busy sidewalks.

Strength and Power. Training for strength and power develops muscles that are controlled and responsive. Strength is the prerequisite for intense power training and injury prevention. Furthermore, it produces positive adaptations that improve balance, agility, and more. Coordinating simultaneous movements,