

HEALTHY LIVING

Hitting the right pace

Racewalking has benefits of running, but with fewer injuries

BY PAMELA LEBLANC
Cox News Service

Aging baby boomers with achy knees, listen up: Racewalking provides a good cardiovascular workout with about one-third the impact of running.

It's not just for slowpokes, either. Really good racewalkers can break a 6-minute-mile pace. That's faster than most folks run.

The hip-swiveling stride might look a little odd, but it could keep you exercising long after your running habit lands you on the sofa with a heating pad on your calf.

"I just wish more boomers with aging knees knew about and could appreciate racewalking," said Gary Davis, 63, a racewalker from Austin, Texas.

Davis discovered racewalking a year ago, after 25 years of running and a spate of foot and knee injuries.

"I had a heel injury, and try as I might, I couldn't run. My podiatrist said, 'You could always walk.'"

Now, Davis charges around the Lady Bird Lake trail in Austin, abiding by the only two rules of the sport — one foot on the ground at all times, and front leg straight from the moment the heel hits the ground until the body passes over it.

It's more complicated than it sounds. Racewalking doesn't exactly come naturally. It's a learned sport, like boxing or pole vaulting. It requires special shoes with no heel and lots of flex in the toe bed. It's also more popular in Latin America, Europe, China and Russia than in the United States.

Maybe most Americans are too self-conscious to try it. Not Davis.

"From my point of view, there is great appeal in an Olympic sport that provides all the workout values of running ... and is almost injury-free," Davis said. "Plus, once you get the technique down, rolling along the trail or track at racewalk pace just feels wonderful."

On a recent day, Davis was honing his form at a clinic led by Dave McGovern, a racewalking coach and former member of the U.S. National Racewalk Team from Mobile, Ala. In his 25-year competitive career, McGovern has collected 13 U.S. National Racewalking Championships and won the racewalking divisions of

marathons, including those in New York City, Los Angeles and Honolulu. He recently was selected to coach the U.S. team for the 2008 World Race Walking Cup in Russia.

"Your arms — that's where your power comes from," McGovern tells the group of a dozen or so who gathered on the track at Canyon Creek Elementary School in Austin to perfect their racewalking form. "That's your engine."

Skilled racewalkers pump their arms to propel their bodies forward. They take short, quick steps and rotate their hips forward to lengthen their stride. By keeping their front leg straight, they take the spring out of the gate and turn their leg into a sort of lever.

"I almost feel like I'm running down a hill, and I'm about to lose control," said Jeffi Anthony, 36, who marched across the parking lot under McGovern's watchful eye.

"That's exactly where you want to be," McGovern said. "You hit the ground and you're off, you're off — boom, boom, boom."

Many of the clinic participants share a common motivation for racewalking.

"I haven't run in 35 years. Running just beats your legs up terribly," said Fred Drewe, 60, who injured a knee playing football when he was 12 years old.

"I'm too old to run," said Susie Truxillo, 63, who taught herself to racewalk after watching the Olympics 20 years ago.

Instead of loping along roadways, going briefly airborne and then smashing down a full body's weight with each stride, these racewalkers never leave the ground. Their knees, they say, thank them.

"People think they can't get as much cardio work from racewalking. There's no truth to that," Drewe said.

"People who say that haven't tried racewalking," said Floyd Meredith, 62, another clinic participant.

Drewe once racewalked a marathon in 7 hours and 25 minutes. He passed a couple of runners along the way.

"That's a racewalker's dream, to pass a jogger," Meredith chuckled.

Is it funny looking? Maybe.

"But you get over that pretty quick," Meredith said.

The clinic participants aren't Austin's only speedy perambulators. The Texas city can claim some racewalking stars in its midst.

Vincent O'Sullivan, 50, an electrical engineer, placed 13th in the 1984 Olympics in the 50-kilometer racewalk. And John Knifton competed on the 1972 Olympic racewalk team.

O'Sullivan ran track in high school and college in New York. A teammate told him about racewalking, and at an indoor meet in 1975, he placed second in his first-ever event. He still believes in racewalking as a terrific way to stay in shape and spare your joints.

"It really is a great alternative for someone who doesn't want to run because of their knees," O'Sullivan said.

"You can go out the door and push hard and come back and feel like 'I've really done something, and I haven't hurt my knees.'" ■

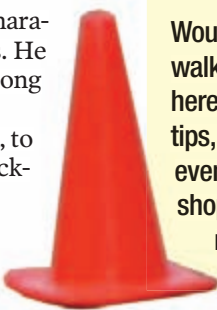


PHOTO BY LAURA NOEL / COX NEWS SERVICE

Skilled racewalkers pump their arms to propel their bodies forward. They take short, quick steps and rotate their hips forward to lengthen their stride. By keeping their front leg straight, they take the spring out of the gate and turn their leg into a sort of lever.

ONLINE

Would-be racewalkers can log on here for technique tips, training hints, event results and shopping: www.racewalk.com



Lee Kidney Center

Board Certified in Internal Medicine and Nephrology



Ganesh Shenoy, M.D.

Have you had your kidneys checked?

Diabetes and high blood pressure can lead to kidney disorders.

Call to reserve your appointment today!

We accept most insurance plans

Two Convenient Locations:

Fort Myers • 239.337.9177

Lehigh Acres • 239.303.2820



Tony Gulati, M.D.

ALLIED PROFIT & RECOVERY, INC.

Getting doctors and business owners their money quickly.



Physician Reimbursement Solutions

- Real-time Electronic Medical Claims Filing™
- Patient Payment Plan™
- Patient Well Care Plan™
- Profit Recovery Service
- Medical Equipment Financing
- Other Services

Call us or visit our website today.

5100 S. Cleveland Avenue • Fort Myers

888.553.4192 • www.AlliedProfits.com

