

# Go Take a Walk

Fad-tastic Los Angeles is just the place to feel the burn of Nordic walking

~ By ANDREW GUMBEL ~



Illustration by Johnny Ryan



You might think only an optimist or a fool would show up on Santa Monica beach with a pair of ski poles and expect any use out of them. That, though, is what people have been doing in growing numbers over the past few months. Often they get strange looks, or thumbs jerking inland, as if to say, “Big Bear is that way, you moron.” More charitable passers by will ask them if they are training for the Olympics.

They are, of course, doing nothing of the kind. Since we’re talking about Southern California, we have to be talking about a new exercise fad. It’s a little bit unusual, as fads go, because it does not take place safely behind closed doors. It’s also a little bit unusual because it did not originate here in the Southland, does not particularly appeal to the young and beautiful set – in fact, many of its practitioners are either old, or plump, or both – and involves next to no special equipment or knowledge other than the poles themselves and about 10-15 minutes to grasp the basics.

It’s called Nordic walking, and judging by its track record it stands a very good chance of becoming huge. It was invented in Finland several decades ago as something for cross-country skiers to do in the off-season, then came into its own 10 years ago when a Finnish company developed a specialized pole with a unique strap system designed for walkers rather than skiers. From Finland, it quickly spread across Scandinavia and the rest of Europe, where it developed a reputation as a kinder, gentler response to the joint-grinding rigors of jogging – not to mention a great workout for the upper as well as the lower body.

It first came to the United States in 2002, when an expatriate Swede named Malin Svensson started offering it as a recreational course through the City of Santa Monica. It started capturing people's imaginations, though, only when Svensson started holding free clinics and evangelizing. By now, there are literally hundreds of Nordic walking trainers and classes, spread in places as improbable (and un-Nordic) as New Mexico.

As a Brit living in Los Angeles, I've found endless amusement in the manic energy that goes into finding new, ever more inventive ways of exercising. My mind is still utterly boggled over the popularity of pole-dancing – people crazy enough to want to emulate two of the worst movie performances of recorded time, Elizabeth Berkley in *Showgirls* and Demi Moore in *Striptease*. Ditto a particularly vigorous form of butt-muscle toning called the Bar Method, which appears designed to let women dream they, too, can have a rear end like Jennifer Lopez.

Sometimes, I've written about the new fads, which of course means having a go myself, all the better to describe them with bemused detachment for the benefit of my readers back in Britain. Just a few months ago, I was in a dance studio in Santa Monica trying out something called laughter yoga, which turned out to have nothing to do with yoga and didn't really involve laughing so much as forcing your belly to heave in fake merriment for 45 minutes at a stretch in a state of complete (and deliberate) humorlessness.

So when I heard about Nordic walking – and learned that Malin Svensson lives less than a block away from me – I knew I had to see, and experience, it for myself. It started promisingly enough: Malin is an athletic Swedish blonde, and she waited for me on the street corner, looking utterly un-self-conscious with her two sets of poles in the late afternoon sunshine.

We headed down to the beach parking lot at the end of Ocean Park Boulevard, and she invited me to try to walk with the poles on a patch of grass just behind the bike path. Without any guidance, I plunged my left pole into the grass as my left leg was landing to take its step, then repeated the action on my right. Turns out I was plum wrong – the technique is to plant the pole on the opposite side from the moving foot. But she was too polite to laugh.

Svensson started me off again, this time encouraging me to swing my arms as though I was walking normally. I swung my arms slightly higher with each step, until they were high enough to plant a pole in the ground. It wasn't exactly difficult, but I was yet to see the point. Then Svensson, who has a master's degree in physical education and 20 years' experience as a personal trainer, started working on my posture (“Don't lean back!”) and helping me feel how my stomach, chest, and arm muscles worked in synchrony if I got into the right rhythm.

I didn't know it, but my five-minute warm-up had taught me almost everything I needed. Svensson couldn't devote any more time to me, because the other members of her Monday night walking group had arrived. We did some muscle-stretching warm-ups, and then talked about taking to the hills. I vaguely assumed Svensson was thinking of marching up the Santa Monica Mountains, but actually she was referring to the gentle inclines of Ocean Park west of Lincoln Boulevard. Again, I was having trouble shaking my natural skepticism.

Then we were off, and the whole thing took me entirely by surprise. My heart started pumping and my arms and legs got into the groove, and suddenly I felt like I was being propelled into a whole new physical state. The poles pushed my body a little faster than I would normally walk, while at the same time forcing me to observe a bodily rhythm of almost clockwork precision. The best way I can describe it is to liken it to a musician who has been working a little lackadaisically on a piece, then sets a metronome 5-10 beats per minute faster than he's used to and keeps to the time as strictly as possible. Going uphill was the equivalent of hitting the difficult passages and the musician forcing himself to keep going at the same pace anyway. Going downhill was all about control – Svensson suggested a slightly bent-knee stance a bit like a Groucho Marx walk. We went up and down, up and down, all around Joslyn Park, and I began to envisage feeling sore when it was all over.

From there it was back to the beach, and when we hit a traffic light on Main Street I caught myself thinking that it didn't feel right to stop. The sand was much tougher terrain, of course, but that rhythm was completely engrained by then and I didn't care how deep my feet sank with every step.

Physiologically, it's no mystery why Nordic walking feels so good. It exercises the arms and upper body as well as the legs, and burns as much as 46 percent more calories than conventional walking without placing any more stress on the body. It's also a deeply democratic sport, allowing everyone to go at their own pace.

Svensson said she'd managed to surprise her boyfriend, a serious bike-rider, with how vigorous her pursuit was. Her Santa Monica class attracts all sorts – older people looking for ways to stay physically active, fat people looking for a way to get slimmer, and athletes looking for ways to stay in shape. They do tend to walk in packs, even outside of class – there is still something pretty strange about those poles. Next time you stroll down to the beach, there's a good chance you'll run into them. ★