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New Exercise Targets The Less-Than-Fit

By **JOSEPH PEREIRA**
February 1, 2007; Page B1

Donna Mirabile says she gets puzzled looks from her students whenever she leads a fitness class. And she says she knows exactly what they're thinking: "You're going to teach me about fitness? Yeah, right!"

Ms. Mirabile weighs 340 pounds.

- **The News:** Sporting goods equipment and footwear makers, mostly European, are trying to get nonathletes to take up a form of walking using poles.
- **What's at Stake:** The European companies hope to gain a foothold in the lucrative U.S. sporting-goods market.
- **Why Consumers Should Care:** The exercise is less stressful, but burns more calories than regular walking.

She's part of a

marketing experiment involving an exercise called "Nordic walking." Unlike exercise routines like spinning, Pilates and Tae Bo, Nordic walking isn't specifically aimed at health-club aficionados, who pride themselves on being fit-and-trim types. The companies behind Nordic walking are giving their outreach efforts a twist: They're targeting couch potatoes and other nonathletic types, including the overweight and feeble.

"We're not trying to get marathoners to take up Nordic walking," says Greg Woser, the U.S. head of Leki GmbH, a Germany-based maker of walking sticks and other outdoors equipment. "Our customers are the people on the roadside watching the marathoners."

Using instructors like Ms. Mirabile, Nordic-walking promoters -- which include the companies that make the equipment like Leki, SpringBoost and Fittrek Inc. -- hope to make the activity more appealing to those for whom regular exercise has always been a challenge. "We want people to think, if big fat Donna can do it, so can they," says Ms. Mirabile. She co-teaches her Salt Lake City class with Elizabeth

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Foote, who suffers from Type II diabetes and osteoarthritis in both knees -- and says she is herself about 50 pounds overweight.

Leki trained Ms. Mirabile and Ms. Foote as class instructors free of charge; the women charge groups or individuals a fee to participate in the class, and the company sells their students equipment.

Nordic walkers use poles similar to those used by cross-country skiers to propel themselves forward on streets or sidewalks even when there's no snow. The poles add stability for some old or obese people that use walking canes. Instead of skis, walkers usually wear special sneakers with lower heels that claim to make striding easier. The sport has taken off in northern Europe where some experts, including ones at the International Nordic Walking Association, estimate that about seven million Scandinavians, Germans and Austrians have taken up the sport.

Estimates of U.S. Nordic walkers currently range from 50,000 to several hundred thousand. But many sports companies are betting the exercise routine will become much more popular here. "We believe it's just a matter of time before Nordic walking takes off," says Andy Silvestri, a former executive at [Adidas AG's](#) Reebok who now heads up Swiss-based SpringBoost. Last year, the company set up a U.S. unit in Boston in part to jump on the trend.

Dr. Cedric Bryant, chief science officer for the American Council on Exercise, a San Diego-based health-and-fitness organization, says "there are certain elements that could make it big in the U.S. It's so low impact and joint friendly, and it's a relatively simple way of taking what many people are already doing -- walking -- and boosting it up a notch to burn extra calories."



Sandi Phillips, left, and Beth Hardman, right, in a Nordic walking class.

About 20 European and U.S. companies now make poles and shoes for the activity. In addition to Germany's Leki, Finland's Excel Oyj and Norway's Swix Sport AS, which pioneered the activity in Europe, two U.S. firms - - Miami-based Fittrek and Exerstrider Products Inc. of Madison, Wis. -- are rolling out poles and accessories. Poles retail for between \$35 and \$200 depending on weight, adjustability and other features.

Meanwhile, shoe companies including Adidas, Reebok, Asics, New Balance and Timberland, are making Nordic walking sneakers for the European market. The sneakers cost about \$100 a pair.

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"We're really happy with our European sales of the shoe," says New Balance Chief Executive Jim Davis. He says the company eventually plans to sell the shoe in the U.S. once the sport becomes more popular. Reebok, SpringBoost and Timberland already have plans to introduce Nordic walking shoes in the U.S. this year, as early as this spring.

Marketers are hoping to tap into the giant walking market, which represent the single largest sporting-goods category in the U.S. An estimated 86 million Americans walk for exercise, according to the National Sporting Goods Association, a Chicago-based sports-activity tracker. In comparison, 54 million exercise with equipment and 34.7 million work out in a gym. Nordic walkers burn at least 20% more calories than normal walkers -- 420 versus 350 in an hour -- because of the use of upper-body muscles, according to an independent study by the Cooper Institute in Dallas.

Walking with poles for exercise was pioneered by American Tom Rutlin, the CEO of Exerstrider, in the 1980s. Nordic walking, which is basically the same thing but with slightly different poles and a different name, was started by the Finnish cross-country ski team in the 1990s to stay in shape during the summer months. The snow poles' metal tips were replaced with removable rubber studs for use on asphalt. About 10 years ago, a handful of Northern European pole manufacturers began promoting the exercise form to the masses in their respective countries.

The activity didn't catch on right away. One deterrent is what some call "the silly factor." Many people felt embarrassed swinging their ski poles in the middle of a city on a hot summer day. Comments from passersby like "Expecting snow?" or "Forgot your skis?" didn't help.

Undeterred, manufacturers dispatched an army of instructors to lead group walks. "You may feel self-conscious when you're doing it alone, but not in a group," says Fittrek President Daniel Barrett.

It wasn't until 2002, after the network of Nordic-walking instructors had grown to more than 10,000, that the activity started to gain traction in Europe. "At some point a critical mass was reached and you don't feel silly any more," recalls Leki's Mr. Woser.

Last year, Leki USA trained about 150 instructors, and it hopes to add an additional 600 to its roster this year. Ms. Mirabile and Ms. Foote were among last year's trainees. They were flown to Florida for a one-day training session. Both women were picked partly because of their weight and other health problems, says Suzanne Nottingham, a Leki recruiter.

Fittrek and Exel together have trained more than 850 instructors, who generally aren't paid to learn the sport but can later charge fees to lead walks. Prospective trainers are taught the correct use of the poles, the various upper- and lower-body muscles used during a walk, how to adjust poles to increase the level of difficulty and the amount of calories burned during various workouts. Instructors also must be certified to administer CPR.

Nordic walking is something entirely different than NordicTrack, a stationary contraption that allows users to simulate skiing indoors. The brand, once owned by Massachusetts-based CML Group Inc., fell out of favor as consumers found other home-exercise equipment easier to use. CML Group filed for bankruptcy in 1998 and was liquidated the following year.

During their class presentations, Ms. Mirabile and Ms. Foote talk in class about how Nordic walking improved their health. Ms. Mirabile, who is 46, has shed about 25 pounds in about six months and brought her resting pulse rate down to 54 beats per minute -- which is considered excellent even for top athletes. She used to run out of breath on a treadmill after five minutes. Now she says she Nordic walks just over three miles in about an hour.

The 42-year-old Ms. Foote, a diabetic, says Nordic walking has helped bring her fasting blood-

sugar level down by more than 20 points and that "strangely" when she uses the poles her "arthritic knees don't hurt at all." Ms. Foote has lost about 15 pounds in the last six months. Since last summer, the women instructors have introduced about 300 people -- many suffering from weight and other various ailments -- to Nordic walking. They say they found them through doctors and community events like charity walks.

"Elizabeth and I still cackle," says Ms. Mirabile, "we're in the fitness industry."

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