

# WALKING ON A NORDIC MISSION



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Swedish-born fitness trainer Malin Svensson has been on a simple mission for 20 years, first in Sweden and now in the U.S.: motivating people to move. And she thinks she has the solution: Nordic walking.

"Here in the USA, people tend to separate exercise from moving. A gym with valet parking is a perfect example of this," she says. "I'd like to help people realize that you can change your lifestyle and add more activity to your daily life."

Scandinavians are brought up to consider physical activity a natural part of life. So lesson one from the California-based Svensson is this: Instead of driving 100 yards to pick up a carton of milk, walk to the store. And if you want your walking to be even more effective, do it the Nordic way – with poles.

Nordic walking was introduced in Finland in the early 1930s as an off-season training method for the cross-country skiers. But it's only in the last 10 years that the sport has taken off internationally. Preliminary research and testing on the physical effects of Nordic walking were done in Finland in 1996. That same year, Nordic walking was established in its present form, when Suomen Latu (an organization

focused on improving physical fitness among Finns), the Finnish Sports Institute and the Finnish polemaker Exel joined forces.

Exel introduced the first carbon fiber Nordic walker poles in 1997, and the International Nordic walking Association (INWA) was established in 2000.

"I learned about Nordic walking while I was in Sweden in Christmas of 2001. I got in touch with Exel, and that's how it all got started for me," Svensson says.

The following year she became the first INWA-certified Master Trainer in Nordic walking in the U.S. She also put together the Nordic walking Instructor Manual.

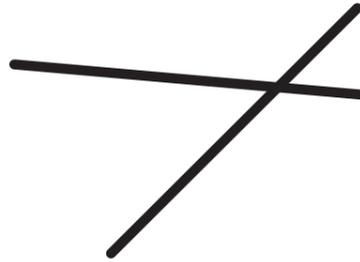
"I'm a personal trainer, but I also teach Nordic walking, among other things. I have a class every Saturday morning on Santa Monica Beach. In the beginning, it was more promoting Nordic walking, but now it's more about the lifestyle, how to add activity to your daily life. It's about changing the way of thinking."

Svensson also does a lot of work with physical therapists, who have found Nordic walking to be an excellent form of rehabilitation.

PHOTOGRAPHY: HENRIK OLUND



*"I was Nordic walking in Florida, and a couple of young men in their pick-up truck noticed me. They were wondering out loud if I was lost, because I was skiing in Southern Florida."*



#### STUDY SHOWS MULTIPLE BENEFITS

When promoting Nordic walking, Svensson refers to a scientific study conducted by The Cooper Aerobics Institute in Dallas that found that the sport increases caloric expenditure and energy consumption by an average of 20 percent, and burns up to 46 percent more calories than regular walking.

"There is less stress on the joints, and it reduces the load on the knees. Nordic walking is also an effective way to release shoulder and neck tension, and it stretches the muscles that haven't been stretched. There are so many benefits at the same time. It's a whole body workout, and your heart gets stronger."

Svensson adds that people spend way too much time indoors, and Nordic walking is a great way to exercise and be outside at the same time. In short, a solution to many problems.

"You can go Nordic walking anywhere. It's not limited to any surface, and buying a pair of poles is a one-time investment for a long-term use. And don't forget the social aspect. You can walk alone, but a workout in a group can also be fun."

#### POCKETS OF POPULARITY

Well-developed European markets such as Germany, Switzerland, Denmark and Finland have made an impact in North America, where the number of Nordic walking participants is on the rise.

Exel has 20 Nordic walking Master Trainers in the U.S., and so far the sport is most popular in New England, Illinois, Minnesota, Oregon, Florida, Arizona and Utah.

"It's still far from a household name, but I'm certain Nordic walking will become a trend in the U.S. The growth has been steady. Nordic walking became popular in Canada pretty fast, because Canada is more European, and their lifestyle is more active," Svensson says.

"I've seen the popularity of Nordic walking grow in my classes. The first year nobody had heard about it, but in the second and third year about half knew what it is."

She emphasizes that you can't just watch to decide if you like Nordic walking or not. You have to try it, no matter how silly it looks.

"You don't realize how much more of a workout the poles give you. And always learn the basics and build from there."

Svensson adds that men seem to be more hesitant about Nordic walking than women.

"On an average winter Saturday there are 10 people in my class,

and about 75 percent of them are women. Men usually don't come alone but with their wives, but once they've tried Nordic walking, they are hooked."

#### A REAL LIFESAVER

After major surgeries to her neck and back, Amy Gordon learned that she couldn't run again. She tried walking, riding a stationary bike and an elliptical trainer, but nothing gave her the same kind of satisfaction as her hobby of 20 years, running. Until she tried Nordic walking.

"Nordic walking is a lifesaver for me," she says.

Gordon, now 64, had the neck surgery a few years ago because of the arthritis in her spine. Her doctors told her that she had to stop running, so she tried other activities. But she was miserable about not having a satisfying substitute for running, especially on a beautiful day.

"We moved from Ohio to Chicago, right to the lakefront. When the weather was nice, I just wanted to be outside and join all those runners on the lakefront path. And I did. In fact, I jogged myself into a ruptured disc."

Gordon had another surgery, this time on her back. That definitely ended her running days, but did not kill her desire to be out on the lakefront path.

Then one day Gordon happened to see an article about Nordic walking and got in touch with Karen McFarland, Exel's Nordic Walker Master Trainer in the Chicago area.

"I tried Nordic walking, and the more I did it the more I liked it. I was able to be outside, and I felt I was getting a real workout. It was perfect," Gordon says.

She asked her doctor whether Nordic walking was safe for her and was given the green light.

"My doctor said it's fine for me to walk with the poles. They stabilize the walking and support my back."

Gordon says she now talks about Nordic walking with any doctor she visits, and she wants them to spread the word.

"There are a lot of people of my age with the same kinds of problems, and there will be more soon, as the baby boomers age. Nordic walking is an excellent choice for people who can't run."

#### CURIOUS LOOKS AND COMMENTS

From early spring till the snowy and cold winter months, Gordon walks 3.5 miles in an hour every day. She likes the fact that the rubber pads and the carbon fiber shafts of the poles absorb the shock, so she doesn't need a special surface for Nordic walking; she can start walking straight from her front door. The poles go everywhere with her, including a recent trip to Florida to visit the in-laws.

"I was Nordic walking in Florida, and a couple of young men in their pick-up truck noticed me. They were wondering out loud if I was lost, because I was skiing in Southern Florida."

The comments, not uncommon for Nordic walkers, may be curious, funny or anything between. Gordon says women stop her, wanting to know what she is doing, whereas men try to find something funny or witty to say.

"I meet this one man pretty much every day, and he always says the same thing: 'The snow will be here, ho-ho-ho.' And I get a lot of funny looks. People can't figure out what this woman is doing." ✕

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For more info on Nordic walking, see: [www.nordicwalker.com](http://www.nordicwalker.com), or [www.nordicwalking.com](http://www.nordicwalking.com)



"Pappa" / Helsinki-based Eva Persson photographed her father while on a summer break in Sweden's south. Persson, who lives and works in Finland, reached international acclaim with her book on "Life in Death" – Life in a village named death in Finland, ISBN 952-9851-67-7. For more info, see: [www.evapersson.com](http://www.evapersson.com)