



The Nordic Way

I didn't pick up this calorie-burning workout by choice, but now I'd never give up my poles.

BY CHERYL EMBRETT

PHOTOGRAPHY BY EDWARD POND

It was one of my proudest moments as a longtime runner. I crossed the finish line at the Blue Nose Marathon in Halifax, my beloved hometown, with family, friends and my seven-year-old daughter cheering

me on. As we celebrated overlooking the harbour, I thought, It doesn't get any better than this. Fast-forward one year to my orthopedic surgeon's office in Toronto on a sunless afternoon. "Cheryl," he said, "your running »



Cheryl takes a breather after a workout in the park; after a bumpy start, Cheryl now has a solid grip on Nordic walking.

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days are over." Decades of pounding the pavement had taken its toll, as had a family history of osteoarthritis. I'd also suffered some nasty injuries along the way, including a meniscus tear in my knee that still makes me cringe. But I'd been an avid runner for as long as I could remember, I was only in my 40s and Boston still beckoned.

I spent the next six months brooding, while my weight soared and my energy tanked. I knew I had to find a substitute for running, but I'd never been much of a swimmer, biking was too seasonal and Pilates too expensive. Then my sister-in-law suggested Nordic walking. She'd taken it up a few years ago after a back injury, and now poles a half-hour to work and back every day across the Angus L. Macdonald Bridge in Halifax, cheerfully ignoring the drivers who roll down their windows to quip, "Hey, you forgot your skis." »

GEARING UP

Nordic walking poles come with an instruction video and cost about \$100 – considerably less expensive than that old treadmill gathering dust in your basement. To buy poles online, or to find a list of retail stores that sell them, as well as classes across the country where you can learn proper technique, check out Urban Poling (urbanpoling.com), a company based in Vancouver.

Take it easy at first, advises Pam Mazzuca Prebeg, an athletic therapist and personal trainer in Toronto, and make sure you invest in some good-quality walking shoes. Wear regular workout gear, stay hydrated and don't forget to stretch before and after your walk.

Nordic walking, also known as urban poling or exersstriding, does look a lot like cross-country skiing – without the skis and snow. Not surprisingly, it started in Europe as a way for Nordic athletes to train in the off-season and is now being touted as one of North America's fastest-growing fitness trends. "It's a fun full-body workout that's good for all age groups," says Pam Mazzuca Prebeg, an athletic therapist and personal trainer in Toronto.

Because you're using your upper and lower body, you're targeting more muscles than you do when just walking – and getting a better cardio workout. Studies show that Nordic walking burns 25 to 40 per cent more calories than regular walking, while helping to improve your posture, strengthen your core and tone your arms, legs and butt. It's also a great rehabilitation tool, especially for anyone with knee or hip issues, says Mazzuca Prebeg, because it helps relieve stress on the joints.

TEAM SPIRIT

Still, I remained skeptical. How could a stroll in the park with some poles in hand replace the adrenaline rush of running? Reluctantly, I decided to take a class to find out. At 8:30 a.m. on a chilly Sunday morning last January, I met up with urban poling instructor Barb Gormley and her Toronto High Park group. They were impressively upbeat considering the time and the temperature. Barb fitted me with a pair of jazzy pink poles, and after a couple of practice turns around the parking lot, we set off. I was too busy trying to coordinate my extra set of "legs" to feel envious of the groups of spandex-clad runners who zoomed past us. I couldn't seem to get the hang of that smooth, rhythmic motion that moved the others effortlessly along the trails.

"Don't worry," Barb reassured me, "it'll click." Halfway through the

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hour-long lesson it did, and the little rubber "boots" on the ends of my poles tap-tapped rhythmically along behind me. I started to relax and enjoy the wintertime beauty of the park and the lively conversation of my fellow polers. They're a diverse group of men and women, ranging in age from 30 to 70-plus. One of the members was shaping up for a bike excursion along the Danube in Germany, while another had just returned from Nordic walking in Costa Rica with her kids. By the end of that first hour-long session, I was hooked.

After four months of walking three or four times a week in all kinds of weather, I've lost almost 10 pounds, my arms are more toned, and I feel re-energized. I still miss running – and probably always will – but I no longer consider walking a wimpy substitute. With poles in hand, I feel pumped in a way I don't without them. As my sister-in-law says, they force you to focus so you're not spending more time talking than you are walking.

Meanwhile, my Sunday morning group continues to inspire me, even on days when it's mostly rain, mud and hills. We've celebrated Sue's 70th birthday, Josh's 30-pound weight loss and soon, I hope, the completion of our first half-marathon together. I can't wait to pole across the finish line with my now-10-year-old daughter cheering me on. ■