

RACEWALKING



MAX WALKER, WINNER OF MANY NATIONAL RACEWALKING TITLES INCLUDING TWO GOLD MEDALS IN THE 60-64 AGE GROUP AT THE 2007 NATIONAL SENIOR GAMES. (PHOTO BY MICHAEL SMELTZER.)

BY BRENT BOHLEN

If you are a baby boomer, you probably remember when joggers first appeared in the 1960s. They looked strange, bouncing down the street not going anywhere fast. But in a few years joggers were everywhere. The “tipping point” had been reached, and joggers no longer seemed odd.

Racewalking, which may look a bit strange to the unaccustomed eye, can be for today’s baby boomers what jogging and running were for them in their younger years. The exercise will open up a whole new era of fitness at a time when aging joints complain about other types of vigorous activity. An Olympic sport for 100 years, racewalking is incredibly aerobic, yet kind to older bodies. Perhaps you can join other health-conscious baby boomers to take this sport to the tipping point, so you won’t draw a second glance when racewalking in the park.

HIGHLY AEROBIC

Everyone knows regular aerobic exercise is essential for good cardiovascular health. Racewalking is definitely aerobic. According to Jeff Salvage, a former world-class racewalker and author on the subject, running uses 70 percent of the muscles in the body. Racewalking uses 95 percent.

“Aerobically, the benefits are the same as running,” says Pedro Santoni, 52, of Redlands. Santoni, chair of the history department at CSU San Bernardino, trains with the Southern Cal Walkers in Pasadena. He gets the same endorphin release from racewalking that he used to get from running. “It’s a good psychological boost,” he says, noting that he has more energy and less stress when he exercises.

Fifty-something William Riley Jr. of Belleville, Illinois has physical proof of the aerobic benefits of racewalking. “I’m at my highest fitness level ever,” he says. After a few years of racewalking his resting pulse is 46 to 50 beats per minute. He even had to buy a new wardrobe for his trimmed-down physique.

LOW IMPACT

In running and jogging the joints take a pounding. Most running shoes have thick heels to absorb the shock.

Racewalkers use shoes with thinner heels. The protection isn’t needed, and lower heels help with racewalking technique.

Like many racewalkers, septuagenarian Charles Williams of Atlanta, Georgia got into the sport because of injuries he received while running. “I’m trying to get older runners to switch over to racewalking before they disintegrate,” he said. “I tend to pass my old teammates on half marathons these days.”

FITNESS OR COMPETITION

Many, if not most, racewalkers pursue the sport for fitness and don’t enter any judged racewalks. It’s a great way to get in shape and even lose some weight, if that’s your goal. Others become avid racewalkers because of the opportunity for athletic competition.

In addition to races sponsored by clubs, California and most other states include racewalking events in

their annual senior Olympic games for people age 50 and over. In even-numbered years the state Olympics serve as qualifying venues for the biennial National Senior Games held in odd-numbered years. The racewalking events for this year’s NSG will be at Stanford University on August 8 and 10.

THE RULES

Racewalkers participating in judged races are disqualified if three judges observe them violate either of the two rules of racewalking. The first rule is that it must appear to the naked eye that the racewalker always has at least one foot in contact with the ground. No visible “in flight” period is allowed.

The second rule requires the lead leg to be straightened at the knee from the time the heel makes contact with the ground until the leg is vertical underneath the body. A racewalker bends the knee on the trailing leg as it

swings forward but must straighten it again before heel strike in front of the body.

Everyone finds compliance with this rule awkward at first, but practice gradually makes it feel more natural. “About the fourth or fifth evening I began to feel comfortable keeping my knee straight,” said Joyce Ludwig of Springfield, Illinois, who learned to racewalk in 2008 and won a gold medal in the 60-64 age group at the Illinois Senior Olympics last September. “Then I started working on keeping my shoulders down and moving my arms. Once I became comfortable with my form, my entire body started to relax. It all fell into place.”

Even world-class racewalkers get caught violating the rules. Several were disqualified during races at the 2008 Beijing Olympics.

TECHNIQUE

The website www.eracewalk.com provides an excellent primer on racewalking technique. The site’s Racewalking 101 tutorial uses an animated stick figure to illustrate proper form.

“Perfect your technique first,” advised aptly named Max Walker, 62, of Greenwood, Indiana, winner of about 20 national age-group racewalking titles. Speed can come later. It’s beneficial for beginners to have experienced racewalkers help with technique. California is blessed with nearly 20 racewalking clubs where newcomers to the sport can get advice. The Web Links section of www.eracewalk.com has contact information for many of the clubs.

GET STARTED

Don’t worry if your form isn’t perfect from the beginning. You’ve got a lifetime to work on your technique. Check with your physician to make sure you are healthy enough to racewalk, and then get out there and start putting one foot in front of the other. ♦

Brent Bohlen is the author of BOOMERWALK, a book that encourages health-conscious baby boomers to take up racewalking as a highly aerobic, low-impact alternative to running and jogging. His Web site is www.boomerwalk.com.