

Racewalking Clubs:

Grab the Baby Boomer Opportunity

By Brent Bohlen

More than 75 million baby boomers are entering the stage of life where rickety joints can't take the pounding of jogging and running. These boomers are ripe for the picking by racewalking clubs. You need to aggressively recruit them into our low-impact, highly aerobic, competition-if-you-want-it sport.

I'm a baby boomer and, along with many of my cohorts, stayed fit all my life. Some of us started jogging and running during the 1960s and never stopped. Others went from fitness craze to fitness craze. We stayed active.

I played basketball. I joined the school team in fifth grade and played organized basketball in some form—scholastic, intramural, park district or church league—into my early 50s. By then my knees ached, and every time I tweaked something it took months to heal. My body said it was time to stop all this running and jumping.

After some 40 years I gave up basketball. I mourned the loss of activity, I missed the exercise and I longed for competition. Then I discovered racewalking, the perfect sport for aging baby boomers.

Racewalking is Not Widely Known

I discovered racewalking by accident in my mid 50s when I attended the Illinois Senior Olympics to observe track and field athletes do what I thought I could no longer do. I saw the racewalk, and I knew I found an event in which I could still compete. The following year I entered the race.

Racewalker Jean Brunnenkant of Overland Park, Kan., didn't hear of the sport until she was 75. She took up racewalking enthusiastically and used her new skill to win seven gold medals and one silver medal in the National Senior Games. Her two most recent gold medals were in 2007 in the 90 to 94 age group. What a tragedy it would be if she never heard of racewalking. It's up to racewalking clubs to ensure that tragedy doesn't befall other potential racewalkers.

Jeff Salvage estimated the number of racewalkers in the United States at fewer than 10,000. We can do better, but first people must be aware of racewalking.



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RACEWALKING CLUBS: Market racewalking aggressively so baby boomers know the sport exists.

Racewalking is Low Impact

Racewalkers carry their feet low and place the lead leg on the ground with little force. A good racewalker flies along, and the head doesn't bob. Contrast that with the up and down motion of a jogger's bouncing head. The body below the joggin' noggin is taking a beating.

I started racewalking 2 1/2 years ago, and the only time I took a day off for achy knees was after doing some yard work. My feet get sore sometimes, and I have a few minor pains now and then, but it's been relatively injury-free for me.

The data indicate my experience is typical. The Journal of Athletic Training reported a study of 400 racewalkers aged 12 to 88 that indicated the athletes sustained one injury every 6.2 years of activity. That figure included minor injuries with little effect on their racewalking. Injuries that caused "pain all the time, eliminating all exercise and affecting many daily activities" occurred at the rate of once every 51.7 racewalking years. The authors of the study pointed out that one-third of the participants took up racewalking because of injuries sustained in other sports.

Contrast this with studies that indicate a higher frequency of running injuries. A Sports Medicine survey of 10 different studies of running-injury incidence found rates of 24% to 65% per year, or an average of one injury every 1 1/2 years to every 4 years.

This evidence matches the anecdotal information I gathered from racewalkers around the country as I worked on a book to introduce baby boomers to racewalking. Bill Riley of Belleville, Ill., quit running because of knee problems. Now he racewalks five days a week, 3 or 4 miles at a time, and only experiences "minor aches and pains associated with strenuous exercise—nothing that Biofreeze, ice or a massage won't fix."

Charles Williams of Atlanta, Ga., hurt his knee running and now tries "to get older runners to switch over to racewalking before they disintegrate from running." Williams received only benefits—no injuries—from racewalking. I heard similar stories from many of the two dozen racewalkers I consulted while researching my book.

RACEWALKING CLUBS: Inform baby boomers racewalking is a low-impact alternative to running and jogging for their aging bodies.

Racewalking is Highly Aerobic

We all know we need to get our heart rates up on a regular basis if we want to be healthy and vigorous in our mature years. I changed my exercise regimen when, at about the same time I discovered racewalking, I read *Younger Next Year: A Guide to Living Like 50 Until You're 80 and Beyond*. The

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authors conclude that if you want to be strong and active well into your mature years you need to exercise six days a week for 45 min. at 60% to 65% of your maximum heart rate.

Racewalking is a great way to get your heart rate up. It takes more effort to racewalk at a given speed than it does to jog or run at the same speed. According to Jeff Salvage, world class racewalker and author of *Racewalk Like a Champion*, running uses about 70% of the body's muscles, while racewalking uses 95%.

Until I tried it, I had no idea how vigorous racewalking is. John McGinty of Indianapolis, Ind., started racewalking as he recovered from a running injury. He expected to stop racewalking when he could run again. "I discovered racewalking was a real sport and not just a courtesy to those who can't run," he said. He's still racewalking some 20 years after his running injury.

"The heart beats 60 to 80 times a minute when we're at rest," according to the American Heart Association's web site. "Resting heart rate usually rises with age, and **it's generally lower in physically fit people.**" (Emphasis added.) I'm 58 and my resting heart rate is below 50 beats per minute (BPM). Two of the racewalkers in my book

volunteered that their resting heart rates are at or below 50 BPM, and one of those is 70 years old.

RACEWALKING CLUBS: Educate baby boomers that racewalking is a vigorous, healthy, aerobic activity.

Racewalking is a Technical Skill

When I stepped up to the starting line in my first racewalk and received the pre-race instructions, the judges surprised me with their expectation that I keep my knee straight from the time of heel strike until my leg was vertical. No one taught me to racewalk before that day. I carried a vague notion that I shouldn't have both feet simultaneously airborne, but that was it.

After that experience, I talked to other racewalkers. I visited racewalking web sites, read books by Jeff Salvage and Dave McGovern, took McGovern's clinic and subscribed to **WALK! Magazine**. I'm getting better, but it is not easy to improve your racewalking technique without regular supervision.

My hometown doesn't have a racewalking club; the nearest is 100 miles away. I'm beginning to train some racewalkers in my area. Their learning curve will be lots steeper than mine because I'll be able to explain the technique, observe them and give them feed-

back on their form. Once they understand the technique, they should be able to help me just as I help them.

Racewalking clubs all across the country have members with years of expertise. The clubs can improve the lives of baby boomers with better health and vigor if their members share their knowledge with new recruits. Racewalkers always seem willing to help new walkers when asked. Baby boomers need to know whom to ask.

RACEWALKING CLUBS: Sell your club as the place

where baby boomers can learn to racewalk and enjoy the long-time benefits of this low-impact, aerobic sport.

How Many Baby Boomers Can You Recruit?

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, more than 300 baby boomers are turning 60 every hour. These people should be racewalking.

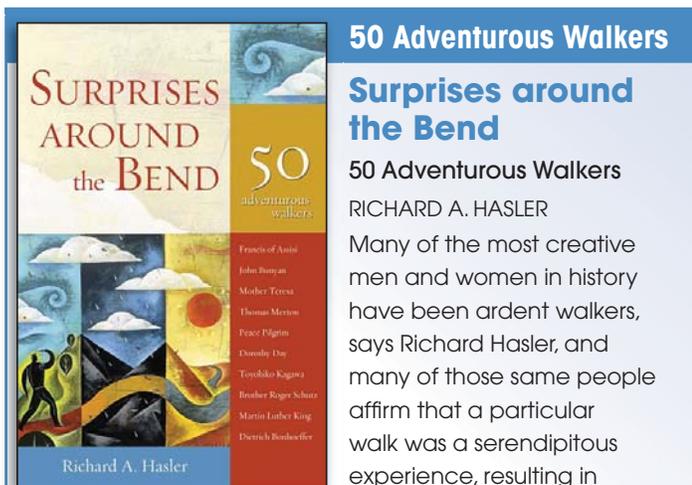
If we could get just one in 1,000 of the more than 75 million baby boomers to racewalk, we'd add 75,000 new racewalkers. Think of the impact that would have on the health and happiness of those 75,000 people. And why should we limit our sights to one in 1,000? This isn't something that should be hard to sell. It's as good for you as jogging and running and is easier on your body. Look how popular those things are. People just don't know about racewalking. We've got to get enough people started to reach the "tipping point" where the popularity takes off with a life of its own.

I remember when jogging started in the 1960s. It seemed strange to see people bouncing along at an odd gait. But it caught on, and soon it didn't seem strange at all. It can be the same with racewalking, a better alternative to jogging. We need to get a critical mass of people up and walking. Thousands show up for major road races and marathons. If we do our part, in a few years racewalking events could do the same.

This is a win-win situation. On one hand, baby boomers who take up racewalking will enjoy the benefits of the sport. On the other, racewalking clubs will get an infusion of enthusiasm from new members—members who are at a stage in their lives where they have time to train and time to contribute to a club's organizational needs. In addition to more walkers, a club will get more timers, more judges, more newsletter contributors and more of whatever volunteers a club needs to make a vibrant contribution to the community.

RACEWALKING CLUBS: Grab racewalking's great opportunity. The baby boomers are waiting to respond to your recruitment effort—they just don't know it yet. Don't miss this chance. The future of the baby boomer generation—and the future of your club—will be brightened by your efforts.

Brent Bohlen is a retired attorney from Springfield, IL. He has written newspaper feature articles, guest editorials, newsletters and several editions of a book on property taxation. He is a racewalker, and is currently working on a book to encourage baby boomers to take up racewalking as a low-impact, aerobic activity that can continue into old age.



50 Adventurous Walkers

Surprises around the Bend

50 Adventurous Walkers

RICHARD A. HASLER

Many of the most creative men and women in history have been ardent walkers, says Richard Hasler, and many of those same people affirm that a particular walk was a serendipitous experience, resulting in personal transformation.

Share the stories of 50 of these adventurous walkers, whose stories encourage young and old to create their own walking programs with the quiet expectation of meeting surprises around the bend—and experiencing physical, mental, and spiritual renewal.

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