Internet Articles

Training Talk : Walking with Proper Technique by Jo Ann Taylor - The Walking Connection (20 Aug 2008) – *With acknowledgement – Newsletter Magnolia Road Runners*

You may hear many different terms to describe walking styles, such as: power walking, speed walking, aerobic walking, and race walking. Of those names, race walking is the only form of walking that has a clear-cut definition because it is governed by a specific set of rules. The other terms are often used simply to help validate walking as a real form of exercise in the minds of the participants, and the different names do not usually refer to a technique different than the one we describe here.

For the purposes of this Walk Training series, we will not distinguish one from the other; we will simply call it "walking."

By closely following the technique and form described here, you can significantly improve your performance. You will safely cover more ground in less time, with less effort, and with greater consistency.

This training can help enhance the benefits you receive from walking, including:
• Increased efficiency
• Better use of energy supplies
• Decreased risk of injury
• Increased comfort
• Faster times

With regards to your general fitness and overall health, there are some more great advantages:
• Increased calorie burn
• Increased muscle conditioning
• Body shaping

Practicing and becoming comfortable with your form should be your first objective. As you practice your technique, break each component down to an individual motion and focus on one at a time. Then put it all together.

It is up to you to select the portions of the walking stride that feel most comfortable and practice putting each piece into place to build the muscle memory that will help you achieve the consistency you will need.

Each of us are individuals, and not all of us can or will want to perfect this technique in its entirety. It will be most productive if you select the pieces that you are most comfortable with. Go at your own pace.

Stand tall, walk tall

The foundation of a good basic stride is posture. The spine should be elongated by standing straight -- not in a rigid military position, merely straight, tall, and relaxed. You should be able to draw a straight line from your ear down to your shoulder, to your hip, knee and ankle.

A common problem to look for here is an unnatural arch in the lower back. Commonly known as a "sway back," this incorrect posture can create great discomfort, especially when walking long distances. To eliminate this problem, practice tucking your buttocks under your body, putting the pelvis area in a more neutral position. To accomplish this, pull in your abdominal muscles, and at the same time squeeze your buns.

Heads up
The head should be level, eyes looking forward, and the chin parallel to the ground. A protruding chin or tilting the head down to look at the ground are common mistakes.

If the head is allowed to tilt forward, excess strain is put on the neck and shoulders, which can lead to undue fatigue.

Focus on looking forward to about 12 to 20 feet in front of you. If you need to look closer to where you are stepping, lower your eyes, not your whole head.

Arm swing
A walker's shoulders should be relaxed, not drawn up toward the ears. Arms should swing naturally with each step, and should be bent at the elbow at a 90-degree angle. This is important.

Straight arms on long walks lead to problems with swelling, tingling, and numbness of the fingers or hands. Bending them will not only eliminate this problem, it will also help you gain upper-body strength and tone your deltoids, biceps and triceps.

For many walkers, weight loss is a goal. By bending the arms, you will also burn 5% - 10% more calories. One more great reason to keep the arms bent and moving in an athletic motion is that you will immediately be able to pick up your pace for greater periods of time.

The bent arms should swing comfortable and naturally at about waist level. Your hands should be relaxed and loosely closed. Any excess tension in the arms or hands should be avoided -- it wastes energy.

The elbows should be close to the torso, with the hands going no higher than the center of the chest on the forward swing, or past the back of the hip on the back swing. Again, more motion than this is wasted energy. If you are new to this technique, you might initially find your arms getting fatigued. When practicing, keep your arms bent for 5 - 10 minutes, then lower them to recover. As soon as you feel rested, raise them again.

As part of your training, you might consider doing some upper-body weight work (not while you are walking) to increase your endurance. Specific exercises are suggested later.

Below the belt
Movement of the lower half of the body in this technique is the most difficult to describe, and for many walkers, the most difficult to achieve. This is usually due to the inflexibility of the hips. Flexibility can be improved by consistently stretching the hip flexors and lower back, and for most people, simply doing the technique will help them considerably.

People new to this should go slow and practice. The time spent in learning and becoming comfortable with it will be rewarded with more efficient movement.

In your lower body, the walking technique begins by using the abdominal muscles and hip flexors to rotate the hip forward and lead the leg in its forward motion. As the leg swings forward and straightens, the body will land on the heel.

The ankle should be flexed, with toes pointed upward at about a 45-degree angle from the ground. The foot placement should be in front of the body, as if almost walking along a straight line. Keep in mind that the shortest distance between two points is a straight line. As the body's weight passes over the leading leg, the foot should roll forward and push off from the toes to begin the next step. A strong push will give you more momentum and power.

That's the basic technique. As you practice it and increase your hip flexibility, you will naturally develop a slightly longer stride.

A word of caution: It is counterproductive and potentially harmful to your back if you try to increase the length of your stride by taking longer unnatural steps. Speed and efficiency in walking are generated by hip flexibility and quicker, not longer, steps.

THAT'S IT! At first, this technique may seem complicated; but actually it is a natural motion where the whole body works in unison. Because of its low-impact nature, the head does not bob up and down. When done correctly, it is a very fluid movement that is easier on the body. By using this time-tested and proven technique of walking, you can become more efficient in your stride and confident in your ability to achieve your goals.