Five quick steps to quicker steps

It has often been said--ok, by *me* it has often been saidÑthat if you want to walk faster the first thing you need to do is walk faster. What I mean by that profound statement is that if you ever hope to walk a fast 5k or 10k (or marathon, for that matter) you must first be able to walk fast for forty or fifty meters.

A little basic algebra: Walking speed is a function of stride length times stride rate. So stride length certainly canÕt be ignored, but you wonÕt get anywhere in a hurry without a high stride rate. You simply canÕt walk very fast without taking a lot of steps per minute, no matter how long your strides are.

Maintaining a high cadence rate for race distances requires a great deal of fitness. But before you can even think about maintaining a high cadence rate for your chosen race distance you need to be able to achieve a high cadence rate for short distances. This trainable skill--being able to walk fast for short distances--is largely a matter of technique and neuromuscular conditioning. The following suggestions will help you to rev up your cadence rate.

Step One: Work on your walking technique

Racewalk technique allows athletes to achieve very high cadence ratesÑas high as 240 steps per minute for some Olympic racewalkers. Top racewalkers spend years perfecting their form, but even if you donÕt want ever to racewalk adopting some elements of the distinctive racewalking gait will allow you to take much quicker steps and achieve faster paces in your daily walks. Racewalkers bend their elbows at 90-degree angles, which shortens the pendulum action of the limb, allowing the arms to swing much more quickly. And what the arms do the feet will surely follow. Speaking of feet (we were speaking of feet, werenÕt we?) racewalkers propel themselves forward with their feet much more than more pedestrian walkers do. The act of pushing off the rear toes helps to initiate a strong forward knee drive. And just like the elbows, if the knees are bent at 90-degrees the leg drives forward much more quickly.

To push off the rear toes better donÕt think about rolling off the tip of the toes. Trying to consciously roll off the tip of the toes will cause most people to drag the rear foot rather than pushing off forcefully with it. Instead, think about keeping your heel on the ground as long as possible behind your body before lifting the back foot. After a bit of practice, this will cause you to push off the back toes explosively at the very end of your stride rather than dragging the foot. Using your feet to push off will add to your *effective* stride length

behind the body, and will also push your body forward, causing a shorter, faster stride in front of the body.

Winter is a good time to work on technique. DonÕt just slog through easy miles every day. Try to think about these elements of fast technique during your long and easy days, and occasionally try some of the following workouts to help add more spring to your step.

Step two: Practice walking fast for short distances

As I mentioned above, walking short distances with a fast cadence is the first step in being able to maintain that fast cadence for longer distances. The neuromuscular system responds very well to repetition. The neuromuscular system responds very well to repetition. (See how I did that? You feel faster already, donÕt you?!) Doing frequent workouts where you walk or racewalk fast for short distances with very quick steps will teach you to lock these higher cadences into your muscle memory. Try repetitions of fast walking or racewalking in the 15- to 45-second range with one- to two-minute rest breaks. Start out with no more than six repetitions at first, since such high-speed walking could be hard on your hamstrings.

Step three: Head for the hills

Many walkers know that walking up hills can help improve technique by forcing a shorter faster stride and by building strength in the feet, calves and hip-flexors. But the same walkers donÕt take advantage of the same hills to do *downhill* workouts. Walking downhillÑwith good technique, of courseÑallows you to take quicker steps in training than your current fitness will allow you to achieve on level ground.

Step four: Practice foot speed drills

Exaggerating a particular action is often a good way to learn a new skill, and learning to walk with a faster cadence is no exception. I often rely on quick-step drills at my clinics to teach beginning racewalkers to adapt to the faster cadence of the racewalking gait. Quick-step drills are exactly what they sound like: Walking or racewalking with extremely short, fast steps, with one foot landing almost on top of the other in rapid succession.

Ladder drills, where an athlete walks or runs quickly across a rope ladder laid out on the track, and rope skipping, are other exercises used to develop foot speed.

Step five: Jump into plyometric drills

Plyometric drills are dynamic exercises that build explosive speed. Very thick books have been written on plyometrics, and I have a fair number of bounding and skipping exercises in my own arsenal. But you can go a long way towards improving foot speed by adding a few simple exercises to your program. Perhaps the best and easiest exercises are variants of skipping. The first exercise I use is a modified skipping exercise where I focus on getting as much height as possible with each skip. I exaggerate the arm swing, knee drive, and push of the back leg (while keeping the back leg straight) to get as much of a vertical leap as possible with each skip. After about 50 yards of skipping for height, I take a short break then try to send myself further forward to skip for distance, again for about 50 meters.

Within a few weeks of adding these training methods to your regimen you should notice a marked increase in your high-end foot speed. After that itÕs a matter of trainingÑgetting out the door and walkingÑto build the endurance that allows you to sustain your faster walking pace for longer distances. So in short, if you want to walk faster you have to walk faster!

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