

## Why Racewalk?

By Dave McGovern

Racewalking has a long and varied history, both as a sport and as a recreational activity. Of course the same could be said for cliff diving, elephant polo and competitive hot-dog eating, but I wouldn't necessarily recommend that you engage in any of those pursuits. I would, however, suggest you give racewalking a try, especially if you're already walking for fitness. Why? Because racewalking can give you a much better workout than "regular" walking. Not exactly fast walking, and certainly not just slow running, racewalking offers some of the best elements of both activities.

Like running, racewalking can give you a great heart-pounding cardiovascular workout — probably much better than you could ever hope to achieve through regular walking. Don't get me wrong, walking is a great calorie burning exercise that almost anyone can do. But to burn a lot of calories, you need to walk for a long time. (And who has a lot of time to exercise?!) The low intensity of regular walking makes it a great activity for beginning exercisers, but not for people who are looking for a higher-intensity cardio workout. It's almost impossible for most walkers to get their heart rates up beyond a very light aerobic effort no matter how hard they pump their arms and stomp their feet. Walking is a terrific way to go long distances at a relatively pedestrian pace, but the technique puts a real damper on your high-end speed. If you've ever tried to fitness walk really fast you know what I'm talking about. You've probably discovered that normal walking technique breaks down and becomes pretty awkward once you get beyond about a 12-minute mile pace. In fact, most people can't walk any faster than that 12-minute mile pace no matter how hard they try.

Racewalking removes the technique barrier and allows you to spin your wheels much faster. With racewalking you can achieve much higher heart rates and burn many more calories per hour than you can with regular walking. In fact, racewalkers burn as many calories as runners and achieve comparable working heart rates.

Where racewalking differs from running is in the greatly reduced risk of injury. Because the rules of the sport require that racewalkers keep one foot on the ground at all times, they impact the ground with one-third the force of runners who leap into the air with each stride. Since racewalkers stay so low to the ground, they're much less likely to suffer the

high-impact injuries so common in other fitness activities. The other rule to racewalking says that walkers must keep their knees straight from the moment the heel of the advancing leg hits the ground until that leg passes directly under the body. That may sound a little strange, but the straight leg not only provides the leverage that propels racewalkers forward so quickly, it also keeps the knee safe from many of the injuries that befall so many runners.

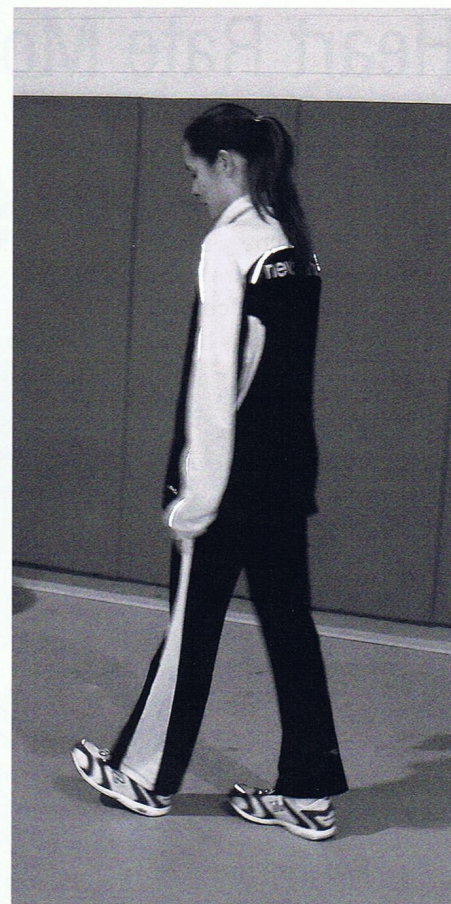
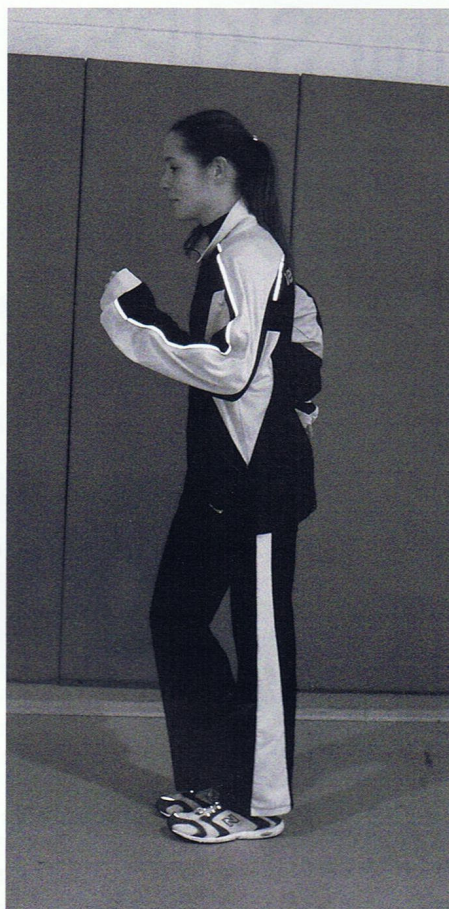
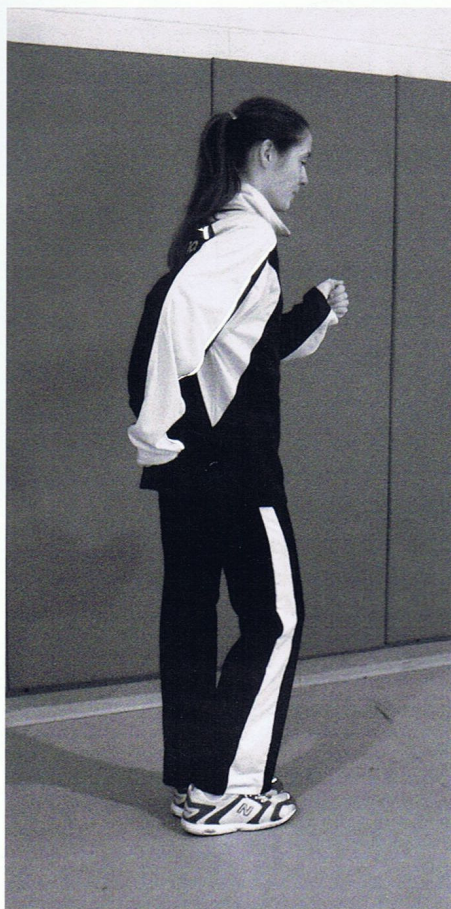
To get an idea of what racewalking feels like, simply stand in place with your feet together and your arms held by your sides with the elbows bent at 90 degrees. Now pump your knees forward and back while keeping your weight on your heels and your feet flat on the ground. Each time you pull your knee back, your leg will straighten under your body just as it will when you're racewalking. (See photos at right.) Now all you need to do is add some stride length by stepping forward a bit each time you pump your knee forward. Just be sure to land on your heels. If you land too flat-footed your knees will probably bend when your foot hits the ground. Concentrate on taking short, quick steps rather than long, slow strides. If you do that, you'll have an easier time keeping your knees straight, and you'll expend much less energy. As you get stronger, your stride should get longer. Try to make sure the extra stride length is behind your body; keep it short in front.

Most people can pick up the technique the way I just outlined it, but if you feel that you're not getting the hang of the straight knee, you may have to try "Frankenstein walking" until you get your knees sorted out. (See photo at right.)

Start out by walking on your heels with your toes held up. Take short steps and maintain good posture. (Full disclosure: You will look like a dork.) After you get the hang of that, allow your foot to flatten out as your body passes over it, but keep your legs stiff. Continue landing on the heels and keep your weight on your heels throughout the stride. Now just take quicker and quicker steps. Your knees will start to bend as you step forward, but that's OK. Just make sure you keep landing on your heels so the knee stays straight. Once you've got the feel of Frankenstein walking with straight knees, you can gradually make it feel more like racewalking by bending the advancing knee more and more as it drives forward.

Doing either the knee pumps or the Frankenstein walk on a very gradual (3% to 5%) hill will make it even easier to pick up the technique. And once you have it, you can get faster by





**KNEE PUMPS**

**Above and Center:** To get an idea of what racewalking feels like, simply stand in place with your feet together and your arms held by your sides with elbows bent at 90 degrees. Pump your

knees forward and back while keeping your weight on your heels and your feet flat on the ground. Each time you pull your knee back, your leg will straighten under your body just as it will when you're racewalking.

**FRANKENSTEIN WALKING**

Start out by walking on your heels with your toes held up. Take short steps and maintain good posture. After you get the hang of that, allow your foot to flatten out as your body passes over it, but keep your legs stiff.

pumping your arms and driving your knees more vigorously to give yourself a longer, more powerful stride.

Once you've mastered the technique, you can move beyond using racewalking to pump up your walking workouts. Not just a great form of exercise, racewalking is also a competitive sport that has been in the Olympics since 1904. Elite racewalkers can walk a 5-kilometer (3.1 miles) race in less than 20 minutes and a 26.2-mile marathon in just over 3 hours. It may take a while for you to get up to those speeds, but if you're ready to mix it up with some local racewalkers, many running races include competitive walk divisions. To find out about races in your area, call your local running store or running club.

To find out more about racewalking go to [www.racewalking.org](http://www.racewalking.org), or to find other racewalkers in your area, go to [www.racewalk.com/contacts.asp](http://www.racewalk.com/contacts.asp).

**NEXT ISSUE: More on racewalking technique.**

**Dave McGovern** is a member of the U.S. National Racewalking Team and the author of **The Complete Guide to Racewalking** and **The Complete Guide to Marathon Walking**. Visit his web site at [www.racewalking.org](http://www.racewalking.org). Photographs by Dave McGovern.

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