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Say, Where's the Snow?

By YISHANE LEE
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Suzanne DeChillo/The New York Times

Dr. Andrew Feldman in Central Park.

NORDIC walking — a form of exercise that involves specially designed poles — is often described as cross-country skiing without the snow. “You burn more calories by using poles to help propel the body forward,” said Malin Svensson, the president of Nordic Walking North America, a trade association.



Photo Illustration by Suzanne DeChillo/The New York Times

Pushing off with the arms increases the number of calories burned by an average 20 percent and as much as 63 percent over regular walking, according to a small study by the Cooper Institute, an exercise research center in Dallas. But the right type of pole is critical. Nordic walking poles are sized to the athlete's height and have grips and wrist straps to help you push off in one fluid motion; they also have angled tips to ensure that the poles hit the ground diagonally, not vertically. Unlike the heavier mountain-trekking poles (with which they are often confused), Nordic walking poles are lightweight.

Dr. Andrew Feldman, above, an orthopedic surgeon in Manhattan who specializes in sports medicine and is the head team physician for the New York Rangers, recently tested five pairs of Nordic walking poles. Dr. Feldman, who also runs and surfs, was skeptical at first about the sport. "But as someone who understands physiology, I saw that the learning curve is quick," he said. "The poles definitely add value because they work the upper body and core."

Walking poles as pictured above, left to right:

SWIX VIP NORDIC WALKING \$69.95, amazon.com. Available in 14 fixed lengths, the aluminum poles weigh 7.5 ounces each and feel "light and durable," Dr. Feldman said. "They were simple, comfortable and easy to use," with a "good ergonomic" rubberized plastic grip. "Sturdy, reliable and straightforward, the poles are an all-around good pole, but nothing fancy."

EXERSTRIDER OS2 FITNESS TREKKER, \$89.95, walkingpoles.com. These adjustable poles use an angled grip to keep the hand and wrist relaxed. Weighing 10.9 ounces each, the poles telescope to 31 inches, making them “good for travel,” Dr. Feldman said. The aluminum shaft “dampened vibrations well,” he said, but the lack of straps was an issue. “It’s fine for a beginner, but to go fast you need them to push off.”

FITTREK ENDURO NORDIC WALKING POLES, \$49.95, fittrek.com. These aluminum poles are eight ounces each, come in seven lengths and offer three tip options for walking on various road and off-road surfaces. “The poles were comfortable and sturdy, but slightly ill-weighted,” Dr. Feldman said. “When swinging the poles, they felt more staccato compared with the others.” And the rubber grip “got slippery.”

LEKI INSTRUCTOR, \$149.99, leki.com. Made of a carbon and aluminum composite, these poles weigh 7.8 ounces each and feature cork grips. Dr. Feldman praised the turn-and-lock length adjustment and easily detachable wrist straps, which meant he could keep his hand in the strap but still grab a water bottle. “These were light years ahead in terms of design and cosmetics,” Dr. Feldman said, making them his top pick. “But for a beginner the technology might be intimidating.”

EXEL FORMULA CORK, \$119, alpinasports.com. Dr. Feldman said that these carbon poles, which weigh 6.4 ounces each and are available in seven lengths, were his second favorite. “They have an excellent strap-and-grip combination,” he said. “It wasn’t cumbersome to get your hand in and out.” The cork grip absorbed sweat, and the poles had an “effortless glide” when in motion. “But they didn’t appear as sturdy as some of the others,” he said.