



January 7, 2019

**Statement from the International Council of Nordic Walking (ICNW):**

## **Pole walking, Nordic Walking, Modern Nordic Walking: definitions, brief history, and development**

### **1. Pole walking: a general definition**

Any form of exercise that uses one or two handheld poles as support for walking can be considered pole walking. The practice of using poles to assist moving on foot is ancient: evidently they have been used as far back as prehistoric times for various purposes, including travelling in challenging terrains, or with an injury or illness. In some cases, poles could have served multiple purposes at once. Take shepherds for example: poles could have served as walking aids, herding instruments, and protection against predators.

### **2. Nordic Walking or "suomalainen sauvakävely" (Finnish pole walking): characteristics and a brief history**

#### **2.1. The roots of Nordic Walking, "suomalainen sauvakävely"**

The roots of Nordic Walking are in the summer practice methods of Finnish cross-country skiers, in which the use of ski poles was applied to walking, running, and leaping, especially uphill. Finnish competitive skiers have been using this method since at least the 1950s and perhaps even the 1930s and 40s.

Exactly when the term "sauvakävely" (pole walking) appeared in the Finnish language is unclear. The word "sauva" in this context refers to a ski pole, and so the term "sauvakävely" has been used in cross-country skiing circles since at least the 1970s. Mauri Repo, the head ski coach for TUL (a Finnish sports federation), described "sauvakävely" in the instructor training guide "Seuravalmentajan Perustiedot, Hiihdon lajiosa" (Basic Information for Club Coaches, Skiing) as follows, "Walking up a steep hill, mimicking skiing as much as possible, using poles for assistance as you would when skiing." (Repo 1979, 20). The guide included instructions on the use of "sauvakävely", "sauvajuoksu" (pole running), and swamp walking in addition to other training methods for skiers.

*(The purpose of this document is not to establish when, with what terms, and with what breadth "sauvakävely" and pole exercises were used in cross-country ski coaching and training, but to examine "suomalainen sauvakävely" and its development into its own, independent discipline.)*

#### **2.2. The birth of Nordic Walking, "suomalainen sauvakävely"**

The concept of Nordic Walking, "suomalainen sauvakävely" (Finnish pole walking) - or just "sauvakävely" (pole walking) in Finnish parlance - can be considered born at the time when the use of



poles, as in the summer training method of cross-country skiers, combined with normal walking began to be offered and taught to normal citizens, outside of competitive ski coaching and training.

According to all available information, Leena Jääskeläinen, a physical education teacher, was the first to publicly teach "sauvakävely" (pole walking), outside of ski coaching circles. This teaching occurred in physical education classes at the Viherlaakso school, in Espoo, in 1966.



*Leena Jääskeläinen with schoolgirls demonstrating "sauvakävely" at YLE TV1 program on Dec 13, 1987. (Screenshot from the TV program video, with the permission of YLE.)*

She used pole exercises and "sauvakävely" as warm-up or side exercises during her time as a lecturer in the Faculty of Sport and Health Sciences at the University of Jyväskylä from 1968 to 1971. In addition, Leena Jääskeläinen promoted "sauvakävely" and during her time as superintendent of girls' physical education in the Ministry of Education and Culture from 1973 to 1991: pole exercises were presented at many of the teacher training occasions she held, promoted under the theme "new ideas for physical education". (Jääskeläinen 2010).

On 13th December 1987, the television channel Yle TV1 broadcast an interview of Leena Jääskeläinen and her promotional work for "sauvakävely" in Finnish schools. The broadcast also presented video clips of a group of school girls practicing "sauvakävely" at the direction of Leena Jääskeläinen. (Yle TV1, 1987).

The first appearances of Nordic Walking are considered to be at two public sporting events in the 1980 s. In 1987, Leena Jääskeläinen became the world's first Nordic Walker to appear at a public sporting event when she caused astonishment and curiosity at the Finlandia Walk in Tampere by participating with ski poles. In 1988, Tuomo Jantunen, executive director of Suomen Latu (a national outdoor sports organization), had the idea to provide poles to those participating in the parade to the unveiling of the statue of Lauri "Tahko" Pihkala, an important figure and philosopher of Finnish sports. This drew great attention, and several TV programs and news outlets reported on this first-ever Nordic Walking group march.

**Nordic Walking began to develop into its own discipline towards the end of the 1990 s in Finland.** It was generally referred to as "sauvakävely", and this is the term under which it began to be taught and advertised, although without any cohesive or standard information or campaign for the discipline. "Sauvakävely" was, however, already a part of the national campaign "Puhtaan liikunnan puolesta" (For pure exercise) in 1994. The theme of the





campaign was "walking", and it even had the support of various ministries. The poles used were still ski poles, although they were considerably shorter. The advice of PE teacher Pekka Rindell, who had been teaching "sauvakävely" at the Varala sports institute for several years, was for the top of the pole to reach the lower edge of the sternum (Sällylä 1997, 19). (Active and competitive skiers often used longer, normal length ski poles, as their goal was to practice movement as similar to skiing as possible.)

*"This is the discipline of the future!", exclaimed Leena Jääskeläinen at the Finlandia Walk in Tampere in 1987. (Photo: Björn Holmberg).*

This discipline and use of poles had the following characteristics:

- The poles were ski poles (before discipline specific poles entered the market).
- The use of poles resembled the alternating technique of skiing: the opposite arm and leg moved forward simultaneously, the position of the pole was diagonal during the pole thrust, and the thrust continued backwards, even beyond the line of the body, utilising the strap of the pole.
- It aimed to intensify and accelerate normal walking with active pole thrusts.
- It aimed to make walking more versatile and effective by including the use of the muscles of the upper body with the poles.



Due to these characteristics, the discipline can be called "suomalainen sauvakävely" (Finnish pole walking), as it clearly has its own special features as mentioned above, and it was born and developed in Finland. An exact definition and description of the technique, however, was not made. The term "sauvakävely" took its place in Finnish parlance, although the terms "suomalainen sauvakävely" and "supisuomalainen sauvakävely" (genuine Finnish pole walking) did appear as well, especially in the press. **The correct term for the whole exercise genre is, however, suomalaisen sauvakävely**".

**Suomalainen sauvakävely**" obtained its own, clear, independent image as a discipline in 1997, when the Finnish company Exel brought the "Walker" poles especially designed for pole walking to the market. The product was part of a joint project with Suomen Latu to begin the comprehensive marketing of the discipline. The same year, Suomen Latu began the nationwide marketing and instruction of "sauvakävely", giving rise to the breakthrough of the



discipline, and the explosive rise of enthusiasts. A year later, in 1998, there were 160 000 regular pole walkers and over 500 000 had tried it (Suomen Gallup, 1998).

*Tuomo Jantunen is indisputably the key figure of the launch and development of Nordic Walking in Finland. He was the executive director of Suomen Latu for 30 years (1977-2007). (Photo: Suomen Latu / Markku Niukkanen)*

The reasons for the explosive popularity have been pondered in many contexts, also as a sports sociological phenomenon, and the following points have been brought up:

- **Preparation:** the groundwork for the discipline had been ongoing across the country for years, but people shied away from it and were even ashamed of walking with ski poles, even though the exercise form itself was seen in a positive light.
- **Poles:** The arrival of colourful poles designed especially for the discipline on the market was one of the main sparks that lead to the enthusiasm of the public.
- **Support of the media:** The interest, support, and publicity granted by the media contributed to the marketing of the discipline: for one, already in the autumn of 1997, Suomen Latu had the opportunity to present the discipline on national television.
- **Education:** The nationwide member associations of Suomen Latu enabled the quick and extensive training for "sauvakävely" instructors.
- **The open mindedness and confidence of Finnish middle-aged women:** they embraced the discipline first and in great number.

### 2.3. Suomalainen sauvakävely" = Nordic Walking

The discipline and its growing popularity in Finland drew immediate international attention as well, and the need for an international name arose. Exel came up with the name "Nordic Walking", which was generally accepted. The Exel poles were also renamed "Nordic Walker" in 1997.



Nordic Walking was then presented and marketed around the world with great success, and in 1998 Suomen Latu already organised the first seminar for the Nordic countries.



*Tiina Arrankoski and Tuomo Kettunen started the development of Modern Nordic Walking concept in 2005 and presented the idea of the three pillars” of the discipline: posture, walking technique, and pole technique. (Photo: Askel*

### 3. Modern Nordic Walking

Nordic Walking has developed as a discipline over the years. Different Nordic Walking organisations have also developed their own versions, techniques, and definitions of the discipline.

Due to the efforts of Finnish experts, Nordic Walking has been consciously developed to suit the fitness and health goals and challenges of a modern society. They have also taken into account the results of new studies on the human body and its movements. In 2005, professional coaches of the discipline Tiina Arrankoski and Tuomo Kettunen began the conceptualisation and development of Modern Nordic Walking. First they developed the basic idea of the concept and the conception of the three pillars” of the discipline: posture, walking technique, and pole technique.

The founding of the International Council of Nordic Walking (ICNW) and the work of its experts and advisory boards has further expanded and globalised the development of the Modern Nordic Walking concept.

The definition of Modern Nordic Walking provided by the ICNW is the Council’s stance on the contemporary characteristics, principles, and goals of the discipline. The definition in question also includes the ICNW’s recommendations of what the principles and goals of Modern Nordic Walking education and teaching should be.

#### 3.1. Modern Nordic Walking: Definition

##### 3.1.1. Modern Nordic Walking is a discipline where:

- The starting point is a normal, natural walk with good posture, as defined and portrayed in sports science, sports medicine, and contemporary physiotherapy
- The active use of poles specific for Modern Nordic Walking are added to normal walking in such a way that the basic characteristics of walking and good posture are maintained. As a result, the trajectory and the range of movement of the arms while Modern Nordic Walking are the same as when walking naturally without poles.

##### 3.1.2. Based on the above, training in Modern Nordic Walking focuses on the following areas:

- Correct posture and good body control



- Correct walking technique



- Correct pole technique

**3.1.3.** These three areas of Modern Nordic Walking are closely interconnected and follow a clear principle: the use of poles should not change the body's natural way of moving, nor disturb the movement pattern of normal walking, its coordination or rhythm. The use of poles should support and aid the improvement of walking technique and posture. The concept of Modern Nordic Walking applies the latest knowledge and results of studies on human fascial system and on the activation of spiral muscle chains during movement.

*In Modern Nordic Walking the use of poles should not change the body's natural way of moving, nor disturb the movement pattern of normal walking, its coordination or rhythm – from afar they should look the same. (Photo: Askel)*

**3.1.4.** The correct use of poles offers a natural and efficient way to involve the upper body and its muscles while walking and propelling the body forward. With correct Modern Nordic Walking technique, muscle work and muscle strain are distributed comprehensively, evenly, and appropriately to all of the various muscle groups in the body.

**3.1.5.** The pole technique (basic technique) of Modern Nordic Walking still has some characteristics that resemble cross-country skiing, such as:

- The slanted position of the pole during the pole thrust
- The use and control of the pole by the handle and strap. This is in part due to the fact that the handle and strap of Modern Nordic Walking/Nordic Walking poles and cross-country ski poles are very similar, if not identical, depending on the manufacturer
- The active, rhythmic, and dynamic use of the poles.

**3.1.6.** The Modern Nordic Walking technique can be adapted to widely varying circumstances and purposes as long as the natural principles of movement are followed. These circumstances include uphill and downhill techniques on slopes of different inclines, and walking on slippery surfaces, or surfaces with obstacles (e.g. leaves, rocks, roots etc.). As a method of therapy, Modern Nordic Walking can be used to prevent and treat many health risk factors, illnesses, and mental or physical handicaps, and even promote exercise among senior citizens. This is possible in part due to the support provided by the poles.

**3.1.7.** Modern Nordic Walking poles have their own specific features that make learning the correct technique and use of the poles possible. These basic characteristics are:

- Appropriate weight (about 150-170 g per pole)
- Sufficient rigidity and durability



- Ergonomic and comfortable handle
- Comfortable and adjustable strap, through which the force of the thrust of the upper body and arm are transferred to the pole. The strap must allow the hand to open at the end of the thrust phase, while simultaneously ensuring an effective thrust and control of the pole at all times
- Pleasant to use, does not vibrate, and does not produce extra noise
- Removable asphalt paws are included in the pole equipment
- The correct length: the elbow is bent at a 90° angle with the hand through the handle and the pole completely vertical. (The calculation formula  $0.68-0,70 \times \text{own height}$  gives you an estimation of the correct pole length.) The 90° angle rule suits most of the population: however, for athletic Modern Nordic Walking the pole can be 5, 10 or 15 cm longer.

The best Nordic Walking poles have these characteristics.

**3.1.8.** The correct use of poles enables walking with a higher intensity by increasing the involvement of the muscles of the upper and middle body when propelling the body forward.

However, it is worth noting that increasing the intensity is not always appropriate to every goal. For example, the goal when walking up a steep slope could be to distribute the force more evenly amongst the body's muscle groups to avoid premature fatigue of certain single muscles and this way to decrease the general feeling of fatigue of the body. This would be helpful on a long hike.



**3.1.9.** Modern Nordic Walking is a versatile discipline that activates the entire body and is suitable for everyone regardless of age, gender, or physical fitness. It is safe, dynamic, effective, and exercises the body holistically and symmetrically.

**3.1.10.** Modern Nordic Walking is about more than just walking. It also includes various exercises to improve muscle strength, mobility, and coordination using the poles – and even short sprints, jumps and leaps. When referring to actual running using Modern Nordic Walking/Nordic Walking poles (or other appropriate poles), the ICNW recommends the term "Nordic Running".

**3.1.11.** Modern Nordic Walking is a functional form of exercise. It is based on holistic and natural movements that benefit the body; learning the correct technique will allow you to move better and



*The concept of Modern Nordic Walking applies the latest knowledge and results of studies on human fascial system and on the activation of spiral muscle chains during movement. (Photo: Askel International Oy).*

with more control in everyday life. The effect is direct and immediate. Modern Nordic Walking also specifically improves two basic skills of the human body: gait and control of posture in the upright position.

**3.1.12.** Modern Nordic Walking is an outdoor discipline that can be practiced throughout the year. Its technique is easily adapted to suit various conditions and terrains: basically anywhere you can walk

works, as long as the path is wide enough and the ground is suitable for poles. Modern Nordic Walking can also be practiced indoors in appropriate places, such as on a treadmill, as long as it is wide enough. When necessary, and depending on the conditions and terrain, you can use the removable asphalt paws to protect the tips of the poles.

**3.1.13. Modern Nordic Walking is not a competitive sport.** Playful competitions for fun, however, are often a part of outdoor group activities and are therefore well suited to Modern Nordic Walking as well.

**3.1.14.** The ultimate goal of Modern Nordic Walking is physical and psychological wellness. Maintaining and improving one's wellness and health is the basic goal of this discipline.

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**ICNW - International Council of Nordic Walking ry**

Executive Committee

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