

Racewalking for Runners: Cross-Training that Works

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In a former life I was a runner. I did all the running stuff: I bought the shoes, read the magazines, ran the races, and even trained about 45 miles per week. For my dedication I ran times in the mid-17s for 5 km, and just under 5:00 for the mile.

These days I'm perfectly content zipping through life as a racewalker, but occasionally I get a wild hair and jump into a local running race--just to see what'll happen. What usually happens is I run in the mid-17s for 5 km, and just under 5:00 for the mile. No better or worse than in high school, but at least now I don't waste my time with that 45 miles per week of running training.

Now don't get me wrong; I treat the race just as seriously as everyone else toeing the line. I'll wear my favorite shorts and racing singlet. I'll lace up my best racing flats and partake in the same pre-race rituals as the other runners. I just don't bother doing any more than about 2 1/2 miles of easy jogging per week--about 500 meters at a time--as part of my daily pre-racewalking warm-up.

How, then, can I run times that will put me in the top ten of most local "fun runs?" "Natural" ability? Hardly. Youthful energy? Please. I'm 32, for crying out loud. What then? I know you don't want to hear it, but it's the walking, folks. And I'm not alone. Michelle Rohl, American record-holder in the 10 km racewalk, not only made the '92 and '96 Olympic teams as a racewalker, she also qualified for the 1996 Olympic *marathon* trials. Michelle never qualified for the Olympic Trials as a runner when she was solely focusing on her running training, yet she managed to do it while devoting most of her weekly miles to her racewalk training.

Seems worthy of a little investigating, doesn't it? The empirical evidence was enough for me, but the slide rule jockeys at the U.S. Olympic Training Center in Colorado Springs were curious enough to want some hard data. So we gave it to them: Jay Kearney, a physiologist at the Training Center, compared VO₂ max values for 15 U.S. National Racewalk Team members, and 10 Mexican National Team members both while racewalking and running. The study concluded that "*These athletes are capable of achieving similar VO₂ max values for racewalking and running, which indicates a potential cross-training effect.*"

At the time of the study I didn't do any running training, and I've spent plenty of time at the CDOM--the Mexican Olympic Training Center--and found that the Mexicans don't do any running training either. Yet, some of us had VO₂ max values in the high 70s. That is, *racewalkers* were able to take in and process nearly 80 milliliters of oxygen per kilogram of body mass per minute both while racewalking, *and* while running--even though most of us did no running training before the treadmill tests. For comparison, Frank Shorter had a VO₂ max of "only" 71.3 in 1972 when he won the Olympic Marathon. He shouldn't feel bad though, poor Frank never learned to racewalk....

Clearly, racewalking is an unparalleled aerobic conditioner, yet it's much easier on the body than running. By cutting back on their running mileage--and making up for the difference with quality racewalking workouts--many runners have remained injury-free and improved their running times dramatically. Over the years I've taught dozens of injured runners to racewalk so they could train through their running injuries. Many of them have come back to me with stories of big PRs after weeks, or even months of sharply reduced running training. I've also taught several ultra-marathoners to racewalk so they would have an advantage over their unenlightened competitors who inevitably must walk for long stretches during their six-day runs. Again, huge

PRs.

It wouldn't be a stretch to say that racewalking is by far the best substitute activity for injured runners. But why wait for an injury? It's more than just very good *cross-training*, racewalking is unparalleled *cross-over* training. The two are similar enough so that training for one will give very good results in the other. This isn't the case with most other sports. Triathletes don't just bike--they need to swim and run because the individual events are so different there is very little cross-over between them.

Racewalking appears unique in that runners don't seem to have to do much "re-wiring" to convert their racewalking fitness to running fitness. Add to that the reduced chance of injury, and you have the "holy grail" that runners have been searching for--a supplemental, "injury-free" exercise that can directly improve their running performances.

If by now you **still** aren't planning on adding a little racewalking to your training schedule, don't worry--someone else in your age group probably is. (You didn't really want that medal anyway, did you?)

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