



BILL LANKHOF

# The Last Word

## First there was Yoga, then came Pilates, now it's a curious-looking new fitness craze called Nordic walking that is about to take off

Mandy Shintani and Barb Gormley don't look or sound much like the stereotypical rough-hewn pioneer of Canadian lore.

But, someday, they could well be right up there alongside the Jacques Cartiers of the fitness world with Richard Simmons and Suzanne Sommers.

Move over Pilates. Here come Shintani, Gormley and Nordic walking.

Never heard of it? Don't worry. Just give it a few weeks, maybe months, but someday soon Shintani and Gormley will not just be a couple of women walking around with big sticks getting weird looks. They'll be at the vanguard of the newest fitness craze, one that has already touched on Canada's west coast.

"We see it as being the next yoga," Shintani said. "If you look at how yoga started out, it seemed like a very foreign concept, too."

The sport — there are competitions in Europe — consists basically of walking with two poles; think cross-country skiing in cross-training shoes. It turns walking from a lower-body workout into a full-body exercise.

### 'Sense of humour'

It just looks a bit curious to the uninitiated.

"You have to bring your sense of humour," said Shintani, a 42-year-old mother of two from Vancouver, whose company Urban Poling, started promoting Nordic walking two years ago.

People used to ask her where the snow was ... in July. And, no, Nordic walking doesn't involve climbing some Norwegian peak or traversing a fiord.

Today there are 33 fitness and community centres in the Vancouver area that have clubs. Gormley has started the first club in Toronto's Rosedale area.

"Nordic walking came from Sweden and Finland where it is huge. In Finland almost 28% of older adults participate once a week and it's close to that percentage for baby boomers," Gormley said. "They're doing it for weight loss. It's a convenient low-impact sport."

In Germany, Nordic walking is now practiced by 4.4 million people compared to



ERNEST DOROSZUK/SUN

Barb Gormley (left) leads a group of women in what should become the newest fitness craze — Nordic walking — at Craighigh Gardens in Rosedale.

just 10,000 four years ago.

"We're just a small Canadian company but a lot of the bigger European companies are planning to move into Canada this year and believe it will get as big here as it is there," Shintani said.

Disciples such as Shintani and Gormley are effusive over its benefits.

"Research shows the two poles reduce the stress by 20% on your knees and ankles," Shintani said, so it's appealing to joggers.

"For weight loss, you burn between 20 to 46% more calories than normal walking (according to research done at the Cooper Clinic in Texas). You get about a 25% more cardio vascular workout."

Not to mention, carrying

those sticks through Toronto parks could come in darn handy warding off the muggers. But, that's a whole other story.

Gormley says many of her initial 36 class members are middle-aged women and moms in a hurry. Nordic walking addresses the barriers associated with a lot of other fitness activities: It's not an extreme sport, it's not complicated, or expensive. You don't need a lot of equipment or need to drive anywhere to participate.

"The problem with just walking, even the athletic type of walking that I teach, is that even though you're going extremely fast your upper body doesn't get a workout," Gormley says. "Your arms do

virtually nothing. When you add the poles and use them properly they give you this amazing upper body and core workout.

"What it means is when you finish your walk you don't have to hit the weight room. You don't have to get down and do ab crunches. You've got it all done in one nice package. With everyone so time crunched these days that's really appealing."

Shintani admits they have a vested interest in seeing the exercise technique get mass appeal.

She and Gormley, as well as teaching the technique, also sell the poles (\$99 to \$139 a pair). Actually, becoming an equipment distributor was all Shintani figured on doing,

initially, after a Scandinavian neighbour in Vancouver introduced her to Nordic walking.

"The poles are sold in the U.S. with an instructional DVD and we thought that's how we'd do it in Canada," Shintani said. "But we found Canadians wanted demonstrations. So we did that. Then people asked us for courses. Next thing I knew people were saying, well: 'Are you going to start a club, now?' It's the Canadian mentality towards exercise. We want to know that we're doing it right."

Gormley, Urban Poling's only master trainer in Ontario, has scheduled a free demonstration Saturday at Earl Bales Park from 10:30 to

noon. People can try poles and there'll be information on classes. She also has a website: [barbgormley.com](http://barbgormley.com).

Of course, you could just grab a couple of your kid's old toothpick hockey sticks and wing it.

Shintani giggles.

"Yeah, it's the same principle," she said, "when we originally brought it out people would ask: 'Why do I need specialized equipment?' But the poles provide stability, minimize vibration and noise. If you're an avid Nordic walker you get it why these things are important. It's the same concept than when you're jogging — you wouldn't do it in your dress shoes."

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