Walking in Balance

As the minutes of daylight increase, the rainfall lessens flowers and trees bloom, walkers eagerly pursue their exercise of choice with abundant optimism for the coming months and activities. Walking provides so many physical, mental, emotional and spiritual benefits. For most, walking provides a sense of self-confidence, a feeling of control over life, an opportunity to test & stretch personal limits, make new friends, and reach new goals. Brisk walking is one of the fastest growing activities in the United States.

The most important aspect of walk training or any training program is balance. In the spring, it is easy to exercise with exuberance, sometimes too much, too far, too fast too soon. Balance in training is one of the keys to success, whether a recreational walker, an avid fitness walker, or competitive racewalker. Balance is achieved by adhering to basic principles:

Warm-up and Cool-down: Always include a warm-up and cool-down in your walking sessions. The purpose of the **warm-up** is to slowly elevate the pulse and body temperature. This increases the muscle blood flow and thus improves delivery of nutrients, improve the mechanical efficiency and power of the moving muscles, improve coordination, help prevent injuries to the muscles tendons, ligaments, and other connective tissues, and allow the heart muscle to adequately prepare itself for aerobic exercise.

The **cool-down** is just as important as the warm-up. The purpose of the cool-down is to slowly reduce the pulse rate, lower the body temperature, and help the circulation in the removal of metabolic waste products. This promotes faster recovery from fatigue, prevents the pooling of blood reducing the possibility of delayed muscular stiffness, and reduces any tendency toward dizziness and fainting.

Stretching /Mobility: Recent media coverage has brought into question whether to stretch or not. The question isn't should one stretch or not, but does stretching prevent injury. Keep in mind the new CDC report suggests that there is not enough evidence to prove that stretching can prevent injury. "The current published research doesn't show that stretching helps to prevent injuries," said Dr. Stephen B. Thacker, who directs the CDC's epidemiology program office. "However, there is not sufficient evidence to either endorse or recommend discontinuing routine stretching," Thacker told Reuters Health. Thacker's group did conclude, however, that stretching improves flexibility. He also says researchers should try to identify the best stretching routine and whether is should be performed before or after exercise. (Source: Medicine & Science in Sports and Medicine, March 2004; Reuters March 30, 2004.) Each year at the NW Regional Racewalk Retreat, guest Olympians share their training routines, which include abundant stretching and mobility drills to improve performance.

The American College of Sports Medicine recommends that an active warm-up of 5-15 minutes precede stretching exercises. Flexibility is an important factor in improving performance, and is an important component of overall physical fitness. Stretching exercises lengthen muscles; increased flexibility allows us to maintain the range of motion in our joints. Do not bounce, but hold steady for 15 - 20 seconds after warm-up and 20 - 30 seconds after cool-down. Do not use any stretch that causes unusual pain or discomfort. Stretching a cold / tight muscle can do more harm than good.

Aerobic Session: Aerobic refers to in the presence of oxygen. An aerobic activity is defined as: uses large muscle groups at moderate intensities that permit the body to use oxygen to supply energy and to maintain a steady state for more than a few minutes. Walk training or exercise sessions should follow two basic principals to maximize health and fitness benefits while minimizing set backs such as injury. These principles are Overload and Progression. Overload is making your body physically work at a level beyond what it is accustomed to doing. Three factors to determine Overload are know as the F.I.T. Principle
Each of these components will vary with what your race walking / walking goals are.
Frequency (How often should I train?) refers to the number of exercise / walking sessions per week. The recommendation is 3 – 4 times per week to improve aerobic fitness.
Intensity (How hard should I train?) reflects the energy requirements of the exercise, the amount of oxygen consumed, and the calories expended. Examples of increasing intensity are walking faster, or walking hills. It is a good idea to monitor heart rate during training. This can tell you whether you are training too easy or too hard. It is recommended to train between 65% and 80% to achieve benefit from your exercise. A general formula for determining heart rate is to subtract your age from 220; this gives you your Maximum Heart Rate +/- 15%.

Multiply your MHR by desired % to determine your training heart rate. Count your pulse for 10 seconds and multiply by 6 to find your heart rate. It is important to mix it up, to not always walk at the same intensity or heart rate.

Time (How long should I train for?) of walking refers to the duration in minutes that the proper level of intensity is maintained. Exercise that brings cardio respiratory endurance improvement is a function of both time and intensity. The amount of time depends on the intensity of the exercise; the more intense the exercise, the shorter the time can be. American Council of Sports Medicine recommends exercise 30 minutes most days of the week at moderate intensity for general fitness. Training time varies with the goal.

Variation: Failure to include variety leads to boredom, staleness, and poor performance. You can achieve variation by changing your training routine: alter your time, distance and/or intensity. Think in terms of hard/easy and work/rest. Follow a long walk with a short one or an intense walk with a relaxed one. Rest is as important as the workout. The body uses rest to repair and recover.

Specificity: Exercise is specific. When you walk you recruit certain muscle fibers, energy pathways, and energy sources. If you walk daily, you are training, and the adaptations will take place in the muscle fibers used during the activity. The type of training you undertake must relate to your desired results. Work on elements that are specific to your walk goal(s). i.e., racewalk to train for racewalk events; walk training for a half marathon is different than for a walk relay or weight management or fat-loss. It is a good idea to do some cross training to train other muscles to avoid muscle imbalances that could lead to injuries.

Fun: Whatever your reasons for walking, FUN is a vital component of Balance.

Much is being written of exercise with mindfulness. What does this mean for a walker? Mindfulness refers to being in the moment or associated with, rather than disassociated, from your body, your thoughts, your neurological impulses.

As you venture forth, whether you are beginning or continuing with a walking program or taking the next step to competitive racewalking, remember to balance your walk training, within itself, and with the other aspects of your life. Walking with balance can add quality to the days of your life.