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Nordic walking gains popularity in Lamorinda

By Elaine Borden Chandler



Parto Vossough, Regine Jarett, Patty Rippon, Helene Le Guinec, and Stephanie Schlegel, Surat Perez, and Mary Ann Walsh take a quick break from Nordic Walking at Lafayette Reservoir on May 28. Photo Elaine Borden Chandler

A new type of exercise has recently arrived in the Bay Area. At the Lafayette Reservoir, in Briones Regional Park, on the Iron Horse Trail, and in the suburbs of Moraga and Danville, there are people energetically walking with what looks like ski poles in their hands. "The thing about this sport is that not many people know about it," said an amused Surat Perez. "Whenever I go out for a walk with the poles people ask me, 'Are you okay? Are you injured?'" This new sport is Nordic walking, where specialized poles and movements are used to exercise the whole body, with greater emphasis on the arms and core than regular walking.

Nordic walking came into vogue in Finland in the 1990s. It started to spread to other countries and now has 10 million participants. Recently it has come to Lamorinda, with one person in particular responsible for its introduction. "This is a perfect place for Nordic Walking, a lot of outdoors, nice weather. When I arrived, I realized that it was not known, there were no instructors, nothing. I could not believe it," said Helene Le Guinec.

Before moving to Danville in 2018, Le Guinec had lived in Brussels, spending much of her time in the local birch forest where she saw people walking with poles. Intrigued, she enrolled in a class and eventually became a certified instructor. When her husband's job brought the family to the Bay Area, she decided to start teaching here. While she is flexible, most of her group sessions are at the Lafayette Reservoir.

"I work here because it's very central for people coming from different areas," she said, waiting for a group of six clients to arrive. "The lower path is not too long for some people, it's not a shock, but with a people with a good fitness here we can do the rim."

Because of Nordic Walking's relatively new status in the area, the group who came to the reservoir that day discovered it in different ways than the usual methods of cultural osmosis or television programs. Regine Jarett, who lives in Lafayette, has been friends with Le Guinec for a few years through the French community. After a shoulder injury stopped her from running, Jarett decided to take some classes and became an avid Nordic walker, not only walking at home but also taking poles with her on vacation in New Zealand.

Parto Vossough of San Ramon first heard of Nordic walking from her family in France. "Over there it's pretty popular," she explained. "My sister, my mother-in-law, and my sister-in-law all walk in the green areas."

Others discovered Nordic walking through research or news articles. Patty Rippon recently encountered it after searching for low impact exercise on the internet. "I looked into it and found Helen," she said, as the orange and black poles that all of them had rose up and down steadily in her hands. "It's harder than it looks. You have to get one thing down at a time, but I do overthink it."

Nordic walking being harder than it looks was generally agreed upon by the group. However, the gratifications were also widely agreed upon. During a photo stop under a rustling live oak, the group chatted about how much they liked that Nordic walking is a gentle full body exercise that doesn't push its participants to their limits, unlike so many other fitness trends. A general sound of disgust rose from the group when Perez sarcastically quoted, "No pain, no gain." Several people also mentioned how it could help with sickness and recovery. Mary Ann Walsh, who always walked swiftly at the front of the group, talked about how she had seen Le Guinec help a client with Parkinson's and was impressed by her patience and skill.

The beauty of the nature in the Lafayette Reservoir, as well as other local natural spaces, was a compelling and eternal attraction for the whole group. "You have everything here, the greenery and the fact you can choose between the concrete path or the rim trail. It's part of my family tradition here," said Schlegel. Le Guinec noted that in Lamorinda families stay for generations and are protective of it and its open spaces, which has contributed to her belief that Nordic walking is tailor made for this area. She is hopeful that more people will join Nordic walking and pass it on to future generations. Those interested in Nordic Walking can find more information from the American Nordic Walking Association at <https://americannordicwalking.com>.

walking.com.

Reach the reporter at: info@lamorindaweekly.com

[back](#)

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