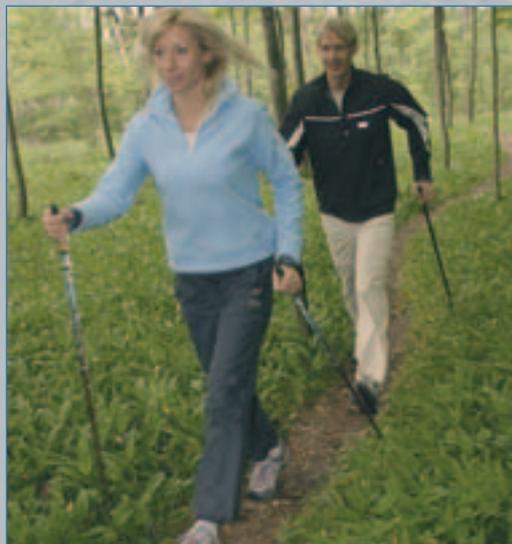


What's going on in German-speaking central Europe? Everyone is talking about Nordic sports and the less snow there is the more people seem to be enthusiastic about it. But it's not only the sports business that is interested. Health insurance agents, physiotherapists, tourist boards, travel agencies and the press just seem to have turned crazy. And so have a couple of hundred thousand people trailing along poles while they're walking their dogs. Surely this is a market that needs to be taken seriously.

## More than a craze

**A**s late as 1998, hiking with poles provoked mocking questions about missing snow or forgetting skis. And, if someone did use them, he or she was sure to be ascending or descending in the Alps. Seven years later, walking with poles along riversides or through urban parks doesn't arouse any attention. You'll meet a couple of hundred every morning in the English Garden in Munich. Walking with poles is called Nordic walking and since Nordic walking came up in early 2000, it has become increasingly more important for retailers and manufacturers every year. Currently, within the sports industry, Nordic walking is the only issue with a regular sales increase in high double-digit percentage points.

According to the Gesellschaft für Konsumforschung (GfK), the German market research centre in Nürnberg, two million Germans



Fischer



and nearly one million Austrians are supposed to be active Nordic walkers. That sounds comparatively few to the 6.5 million walkers or 17 million runners. But the annual rise is enormous and Nordic walking is advancing rapidly. In 2004, 80% of the population had heard about Nordic walking. Two years earlier it was just 44%. And curiosity is increasing too. 16% of Germans intend to testing Nordic walking. That would increase the number of active athletes by 10 million. Is anybody still surprised that the sports industry claims an end to related sales cannot be seen?

Between the North Sea and the Alps, you'll find news stands and kiosks offering no less than five Nordic Walking magazines (Nordic Sports, Fit mit Walking, Walking, Nordic Fitness and Nordic Walker). That's the same amount as running magazines, but the Nordic circulation reaches 340,000 copies which is twice as high.

### New Nordic

So far, Nordic sports had always been pure winter sports. The Nordic Combination included cross-country skiing and ski jumping. 'Old' Nordic meant snow. With 'new' Nordic snow doesn't matter. So what are the new Nordic sports?

The saying goes that Finnish cross-country skiers used their ski poles in summer to perfect their stride, doing the same movement walking as on skis: long strides, pushing the arms back and accelerating with the help of the sticks. Non-skiers adapted this summer training, because it loosened stiff muscles in the neck and torso areas, burnt calories and was good for the heart. Coming from Finland it was called 'Nordic' – but with just over five million inhabitants it is too small a country in which to grow the business. A bigger market was needed to show the potential of Nordic walking and increase sales and profits. The

*Summer Nordic Fitness Sports (NFS) include Nordic blading.*





## High and growing potential

Nordic walking is now in a category of its own! "Four years ago, 10,000 pairs of poles were sold, three years ago 120,000, two years ago there were already 600,000 and last year it reached 2.4 million pairs of Nordic walking poles," says Harald Bierbaumer, CEO of Exel Germany. The poles were and will continue to be the major sales item – to the great delight of Exel, Leki, Komperdell and three or four other producers of poles. But the industry expects footwear, accessories and apparel sales to boom too, in the wake of pole sales. Already last year, footwear companies noticed an increased interest in shoes suitable for Nordic walking – the next product Nordic walkers will focus sales attention on. And when people seriously take up Nordic walking, they will have a lot of catching up to do in the way of apparel, getting rid of their cotton T-shirt, sweatshirt and worn out jogging pants. "The general awareness that Nordic walking will be even more fun with the special shoes and adequate textile technology has not trickled down far but will manifest itself increasingly," is not only the opinion of Ralf Schön, Asics marketing manager, but is a generally held view among apparel brands. Odlo, too sees, the sales sequence of "poles, shoes, apparel, heart-rate monitors and hydration-packs". Even outdoor company Fjällräven forecasts an "enormous growth market" and Anne Stummer-Schwegmann, CEO Fjällräven Germany expects functional, quick wicking clothing to outstrip equipment due to the fact that one pair of poles is sufficient, but there is a bigger need for different clothing according to changing seasons.

mountainous region of central Europe was considered perfect: hiking with poles in the Alps had a long tradition and Nordic walking used this to gain a foothold.

And it sure did. The furrow ploughed by Leki, Gabel and Komperdell selling telescopic trekking-poles for more than 20 years reduced the prejudice against Nordic walking poles enormously – even though Nordic walking remained a regular target for late night comedians and glib chat show hosts.

## Fitness revolution

Today, the wind has changed. Even prudent critique concerning medical aspects, equipment or footwear is difficult, unless you are prepared to be thought politically incorrect and in need of counselling. Magazines and newspapers readily quote stories of celebrities Nordic walking: former top sportsmen and women, authors, actresses, TV-commentators, doctors, even politicians. Gold medallists, sport medics, nutritionists and health consultants act as experts for magazines: Health insurance companies encourage people to take Nordic walking courses offering discounts on premiums. Nordic walking is simultaneously a popular sport and a health movement. It is this combination that guarantees success and an enormous potential for sales. "Many Nordic walkers are beginners or return after a long period of sport-inactivity," states Sonja Lidauer, responsible for PR for Fischer. "They want less emphasis on performance and more on physical health. And they lack the equipment, apparel and footwear needed."

## Players

Whether Nordic walking is more sports or more outdoor activity is disputable. Ispo positions Nordic walking as a link between running-ispo and outdoor-community to strengthen the latter, while listing sports companies as Nordic walking distributors – Asics, New Balance, Reebok, Löffler, Odlo or Salomon. The OutDoor in Friedrichshafen sees it as an outdoor activity and refers to outdoor companies with apparel suitable for Nordic walking: Fjällräven, Vaude, Salewa, Marmot, Columbia, Jack Wolfskin and Schöffel.

Most sports and outdoor companies lag behind regarding special apparel for Nordic walkers.



*Meindl's XO shoe is made with lightweight waterproof Gore-Tex.*

 Meindl



*Nordic winter activities include skiing and snowshoeing.*

[www.nordicfit.info](http://www.nordicfit.info)

Whilst sports companies draw on running or walking apparel and call it suitable, the outdoor brands pick their light and fast forward outdoor stuff and claim the same. 'Crossover' seems the word of the day. Sugo's "in any case, our products are ideal for this kind of walking too" sounds very similar to Salewa's "at the moment, Nordic is an interesting segment, which we include in our multipurpose line". Hardly anyone has a genuine Nordic walking apparel line and even some footwear companies mix walking and Nordic walking shoes – though differences are apparent. One of the companies to offer genuine equipment is Meindl which developed the first original Nordic walking shoe with overwhelming success, leaving others way behind. Another is Deuter which has a line of Nordic walking packs and bum bags. The greater percentage of companies, however, still need to adapt their collections to include special Nordic walking apparel.

Of course, athletic Nordic walkers may be willing to wear running tights, just as non-fashion Nordic walkers won't mind using the lightweight trekking or travel pants from their wardrobe. In the long term, the mass of 'new-to-sports-Nordic-walkers' will be looking for adequate and special Nordic walking clothing. The industry should bear in mind what many newcomers to the activity were before falling for Nordic walking: overweight, long-time sports absentees. Comfort is their buzzword. Lightweight, elastic, casual and big sizing is what the majority want. Nordic walkers are a new group of consumers and want to be pandered to. Companies who see Nordic walkers as low profile runners or outdoor light-activists will lose their share of the pie.

### 365-day Nordic fitness

Undoubtedly, Nordic walking has become a popular sport capable of addressing new consumers that up to now have largely not been

active sportsmen or women. Undoubtedly, too, Nordic walking has a positive health significance in society. It gets people active, exercises the heart, reduces obesity and improves general well being.

With this in mind, Exel, Salomon and Polar, along with Tubbs and Odlo as associate members, brought a whole new Nordic Fitness Sports (NFS) Concept into being. During summer the concept consists of Nordic walking, Nordic blading and Nordic hill walking. In winter the counterparts are Nordic skiing and Nordic snowshoeing. Under Exel's lead, the companies presented sports that "consist of activities greatly resembling one another in terms of the movements involved" and "are safe fitness sports that can be enjoyed by anyone" with a "very promising and extensive marketing potential".

While one can argue that Nordic walking does, to a certain extent, have its origin in a Nordic country, the majority of the new Nordic sports are by no means 'Nordic', neither is the idea of using poles in the course of exercising. For hill walking, snow shoeing and skiing, poles have always been used and the benefits of using poles were well known. Competitors consider the NFS as a mere marketing initiative that is supposed to give Exel access to markets in which it traditionally had no particular competence. "From our point of view,

*The Nordic 400, part of Deuter's range of walking packs and bum bags.*

[www.deuter.com](http://www.deuter.com)



'Nordic' is a clever marketing term," says Karoline Halmos, Löfflers' advertising manager. But "since it is a positive term it is more a help than a hindrance. Nonetheless, our major product – cross country apparel and equipment – finds more support through our commitment to top sport sponsorship or press reports about World Championships, even through heavy snow in winter."

Whatever the drive, the NFS concept shows that there are other options alongside Nordic walking and easily accessible sports don't have to end when snow falls or the terrain gets steep. Snow shoeing will be the most likely alternative for the winter. It's just as simple to learn and equally ideal for all people regardless of their physical constitution.

Both Exel and Salomon see more movement within the snow shoe, inline and cross-country ski business – which could indeed be true from their point of view. But it is also certain that turnover is unlikely to rocket. For one thing, the 'new' Nordic sports already existed and sales don't start at zero. For another, Exel & co. will not get the same general support Nordic walking has received for its specific marketing programme. Trickle-down has limits and one has to be careful not to overstep the mark. In the German

alpine club magazine DAV-Panorama, readers have already asked, with a strong sense of sarcasm, how long it will be before the sport they do is called Nordic rock climbing.

### International awakening

So far, Nordic walking has been successful in two markets – the Finnish home market with some 10% of the population regularly Nordic walking, and the considerably larger central European markets (Austria, Switzerland, Southern Germany). Here too Nordic walking is successful though Germany is already showing a big South-North divide with the North lagging behind. Nevertheless, analysis has shown that Nordic walking has the appeal to convince millions. Both testing fields picked on advantages: Finland being the home market and the alpine area with probably the highest density of people already using telescopic poles for hiking. Even though, initially Germans found Nordic walking embarrassing.

Next, markets will follow in Europe. Excellent potential is seen for the Netherlands and the United Kingdom, and generally for all Western countries. But the ultimate goal is the US market. The giant walking and fitness population

in the United States – analysts estimate anything between 40 to 80 million regular fitness walkers – could easily multiply sales by a factor of three to five. And even higher, if Nordic walking can attract as many non-sportsmen and women as in German-speaking countries.

### A need for fitness

The need for more fitness sports can be found in all industrialised nations: lack of exercise, obesity, a general laziness with increasing numbers suffering from diabetes and cardiac-circulatory associated illnesses or disc problems. The 'Nordic movement' is seen as a possibility to counteract this for the benefit of the individual as well as for the whole of society. A positive attitude towards fitness sports will help. But, as with all markets, the main problem to tackle is what Americans call the 'Dork Factor': to overcome the sense of feeling foolish or self-conscious about the activity or have others thinking it's foolish.

Giggles at the sight of someone striding off with poles may not necessarily help ones self-esteem but, on current trends, the detractors and gigglers will eventually get the fitness message and late night comedians had better get the message, too, or risk losing their audience. 

# stretch it

## Flexibility in sewing!

More things are possible! The seam that moves with you: flexible and elastic. It has proved its worth countless times.

A revolution where it is especially important for clothing to follow your movements: swimwear, sportswear, underwear, ...

exclusive by AMANN  
**saba**FLEX

Maximum seam elasticity in stretch fabrics  
 Minimised risk of broken stitches  
 New highly elastic raw material

Further information: [nt@amann.com](mailto:nt@amann.com)  
 Tel. +49 7143 277-250, [www.amann.com](http://www.amann.com)

**AMANN**  
 GROUP

