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Attention Nordic Walking Americans - It's not Soccer: The History of Nordic Walking

By David Downer

As a true Brit, I just don't understand why Americans are giving all the credit for being the 'originator' of our great activity to someone else other than one of their own. Nearly every American newspaper article I read on the subject of Nordic Walking credits the Finns or Scandinavia or a Finnish ski pole company, and so do most websites!

True to the British spirit of fairplay, I just had to write on this subject again. I just don't like injustice!

Surely by now people must know that it is an American who got there first, a decade before the Finns. So why aren't you Americans out there fiercely defending and giving credit to one of your own? It's seems a strangely un-American thing to do!

If you buy into this 'Finnish story' you are just buying into Nordic Walking pole manufacturer Exel's marketing bandwagon. Exel have re-written the history to suit their own convenience and everyone, including Americans have taken the bait, hook line and sinker!

"Exel weren't even first in Finland for goodness sake, let alone first in the world! So why are they being given all the credit all of the time?"

A History Lesson:

The pioneer of the sport in Finland was a private individual with a sports and fitness background by the name of Marko Kantaneva. Marko had been teaching it at the Finnish Sports Institute at Vierumaki from 1994 (3 years before Finnish ski pole manufacturers Exel launched their first Nordic Walking poles). Ok what Marko was doing wasn't called Nordic Walking at the time (that name was created by Exel's marketing department in 1997). Marko called it Sauvakevely (Pole Walking in English).

When Exel heard about Marko's work, they hired him to help them develop their own poles to break into what for them was a new market. The name created by Marko, Sauvakevely (Pole Walking) didn't fit the bill for Exel, so their marketing department came up with a new name 'Nordic Walking'. Nordic Walking was defined as "Fitness walking with specially designed poles".

Now how often do you see Marko given any credit or recognition for his pioneering work

in Finland? His name is mysteriously absent from the published history of our sport; he's been written out! When Exel created the International Nordic Walking Association (INWA) in 2000, it was Marko who was appointed as head trainer and it was Marko who developed the INWA instructor training program. Marko was instrumental in the success of both Exel and INWA when it comes to Nordic Walking.

However, it wasn't even Marko who was first in the world; as I started out by saying it was an American. It all began in 1988 in Wisconsin, USA, when Wisconsin resident Tom Rutlin launched the very first commercially available fitness walking poles. Tom created the name Exerstriding (Exercising all the body's major muscles while striding) to describe his new creation. This isn't hearsay or speculation, it is hard fact. I actually own an original 1988 copy of Tom's 'Exerstrider Manual & Instruction Guide' that he sent out with every new set of poles (and still does today).

So, why when the activity that is variously called, Nordic Walking, Pole Walking, Ski Walking that is defined as 'Fitness Walking with specially designed poles', is it that Americans fail to give Tom Rutlin the recognition he deserves, when he was clearly promoting this activity a decade before anyone else?

Ok some will argue – "Well, Tom didn't call his invention Nordic Walking, it was Exel who invented that name and also that Tom's poles and techniques are slightly different too" – That may be the case but it's still 100% 'fitness walking with specially designed poles'!

Interestingly, many Nordic Walkers and instructors including those from the Exel / INWA camp are today adopting original 'Tom Rutlin' Exerstrider techniques such as the 'pump handle', long arm Plant, keeping the arm long throughout the poling action. The Exel / INWA technique calls for the elbow to be bent to 90 degrees when you Plant your poles, with the elbow only straightening as you push down and back. Tom's technique is more efficient and activates more of your body's upper body musculature. Many Nordic Walkers are also experimenting with different pole placings eg a more upright plant as per the Tom Rutlin Exerstrider technique. So even the black and white dividing line between Tom's Exerstrider technique versus that promoted by Exel / INWA has been shaded grey.

Nordic Walking is simply one name, although granted the most widely used name for an activity that is also widely defined as 'Fitness Walking with specially designed poles'. Tom Rutlin invented that activity no question and it's proven. Exel simply repackaged what Tom had invented and promoted a decade earlier and called it Nordic Walking.

To say that Tom Rutlin is not the originator of the activity we know as Nordic Walking because he called his creation Exerstriding, is like saying that the English are not responsible for developing the modern game that Americans know as Soccer because the English called it football and not Soccer!

So, American Nordic Walking enthusiasts – I urge you to get behind Tom Rutlin and give him the credit and recognition that he deserves. By all means give Exel in Finland credit for creating the name Nordic Walking (they did) and for pouring in huge sums of money to get the wheels of their great marketing machine into motion (they did) and for being first in setting up an International Association to train instructors (they did) but for goodness sake don't give them the credit as being the originators because they were not, they were 10 years behind the times on that one!

- Tom Rutlin developed his original idea in 1985 and launched it commercially as Exerstriding in 1988 .
- Marko Kantaneva introduced Sauvakevely (Pole Walking) at the Finnish Sports Institute at Vierumaki in 1994
- Exel launched their version of Tom's original idea in Finland in 1997.

Tom Rutlin is a true Ambassador for Nordic Walking. He is a man of integrity who always puts Nordic Walking and the furthering of the Nordic Walking movement ahead of his own commercial gain. I wish there were many more Tom Rutlins in our Nordic Walking world because it would be a much better and nicer place...

Come on America (and everyone else around the world), Tom's is a wonderful story, get behind it and celebrate but above all get the 'true story' out there on your websites and into the media and don't forget to mention Marko too! There are people out there who are set on writing both Tom and Marko out of the 'official history' don't let them!