



Ros Ingleby and Vicky Welsh. Pictures: Dave Betts

NO WALK IN THE PARK

Health&Fitness People who like to keep very fit might be dismissive of ordinary walking. They should try Nordic walking, says Kate Edser, who joins a group in Bristol for a jaunt that's tougher than it looks.

It's one of those activities that, from a fitness perspective, you might not take seriously – until you try it. And after about ten minutes you'll realise, while puffing and sweating mildly, that Nordic walking is a very decent workout indeed. In fact, it involves more than 90 per cent of the skeletal muscle system and, once you get into the swing of it, you can apparently burn 46 per cent more calories than ordinary walking.

Judging from my own recent experience, that's entirely believable.

This is partly because the Nordic version

is generally faster than ordinary walking (perhaps 4.5mph) and partly because the purposeful use of poles to propel the body forward engages the upper body and core too. You'll notice how if you give it a try it with any old stick: hold it so your forearm is parallel to the ground, push down and feel those belly muscles tightening.

In our city, the only organised group sessions are run by Bristol Nordic Walking, whose directors, Vicky Welsh and Ros Ingleby, both have backgrounds as fitness instructors and personal trainers. So there's no dawdling. At all.

I join one of their regular groups on an hour's jaunt around beautiful Ashton Court Estate. We meet in the top car park, near the golf course and just beyond the Suspension Bridge, where a café provides pre-walk loo and post-walk tea and cake.

With the sun out and the city vista spread before us, we set off purposefully, and the chat starts straight away – there's no mistaking this is also a social occasion.

As we stride over the brow of a hill, a herd of red deer raise regal heads and ponder our existence before deigning to shift nonchalantly off the rough path. We drop

down into the valley (soft knees, leaning back into the poles) before turning upwards once more and circling back to the car park.

Brimming with enthusiasm and with an air of jolly, but friendly authority, Vicky and Ros mingle constantly, giving route markers and tips on technique.

Vicky says the basic principle is that the better your technique, the more your body works. "You'll pick up the technique within six sessions, but what happens after three months is that the body has processed the technique and it integrates it, so it becomes natural.

"The people who pick it up the quickest are not the very sporty types, but people who love walking and want to take walking to another level."

Though commonplace in Europe, where it has become a competitive sport, Nordic walking is relatively fresh into the UK, where it is still a leisure activity.

Vicky explains: "It started in Finland in the 1930s – the cross-country ski team wanted to do summer training. Nordic walking poles are lower, so you're not starting from such a high point, but the whole action comes from cross-country skiing and it is based entirely



FACTFILE

Bristol Nordic Walking started in September 2012 and runs one-hour walks Monday to Saturday, all year at Ashton Court Estate, Blaise Castle, The Downs in Clifton, and around the Lake Grounds at Portishead.

There are also occasional longer walks further afield, such as in the Chew Valley or the Mendips.

There are ten walks per week to choose from, including two evenings (6-7pm) and two Saturday morning walks. Each group is limited to 15 people.

From April 1, monthly membership fees range from £40 (two walks per week), £50 (three walks per week) to £65 (unlimited walks). Members are also entitled to discounts on longer walks.

Poles can be borrowed from Bristol Nordic Walking, but if you wish to buy your own, you'll pay between £60 and £130. Poles come with a handle that wraps around the wrist. At the bottom of each pole is a rubber "paw" which hides a metal spike for soft ground.

The only other equipment you need is a decent pair of walking boots and appropriate outdoor clothing.

For more information on Bristol Nordic Walking, call Vicky on 07958 581398, visit www.bristolnordicwalking.co.uk, or see www.facebook.com/BristolNordicWalking.



on your normal walking gait and that is why it naturally suits our bodies. And, if you've seen cross-country skiing you can see how vigorous it can be.

"We have a fitness group, a fast walking group and a mixed-ability group. Normal walking is about 3mph, with the mixed ability group I like to get to 4mph and with the fast walkers I like to get to 4.5mph.

"It's one of the few sports which keeps your chest open, because you plant the poles behind you and push back, which also means you engage your tummy muscles. So it's good for people with back problems, or tension in the neck."

Several people in the group tell me their previous back, neck or shoulder problems have lessened or disappeared altogether since they took up Nordic walking. Meanwhile, pilates instructor Faith has had so many enquiries from fellow Nordic walkers that she's devised a class specifically for them.

So we know it's great exercise, it's fun and sociable, but is it cool? At present, Bristol Nordic Walking is attracting a clientele comprising mostly women aged in their mid-thirties, and lots who are retired, though not necessarily in their sixties.

More men are joining, but a couple of ladies I speak to say their mostly grown-up children gently snigger at the thought of striding about the countryside with a pair of poles – until they try it and realise what hard work it can be.

Vicky is also keen to cite Nordic walking as a valuable form of rehab from sickness or injury, which is what drew her to the sport in the first place. She explains: "The mother of a child at my daughter's school was diagnosed with cancer. As a fitness instructor it bothered me and I felt I should be able to do something to help her because I knew that fitness was very important for cancer, both during treatment and after.

"I researched what I thought I could do with her and came up with Nordic walking. I got very excited when I found it – I thought 'this is amazing', so I trained to be a Nordic walking instructor and contacted her. Independently, she had already started Nordic walking and she still does today.

"There are also a couple of GPs who walk with us who refer patients to us."

Vicky also runs classes in Nordic walking at a Bristol-based cancer charity. "I work at Penny Brohn Cancer Care, so I'm working with people in a deconditioned, vulnerable state. If they've got two poles like walking sticks it gives support and confidence, and it holds your posture completely accurately, whether you're going uphill or downhill."