In Praise of Pole Hiking

From specializing in Giant Slalom during his time Alpine skiing, to teaching whitewater canoeing, high-energy and adrenaline-fueled sports have always been on the menu for Chris Young. In the ‘90s, shortly before he started working at New Moon, he fell in love with cross country skiing and mountain and road biking—always the one to take on in a road sprint and never shying away from a sketchy downhill. But due to a sports injury to the spine as a child, for many years Chris was sidelined from doing most of the activities he loved, including not being able to ski the Birkie since 2004.

Last September, Chris had major back surgery, fusing 3 vertebrae, and enduring a long but amazingly successful recovery—(and after another neck surgery in March) he’s skiing, mountain biking, hiking, and plans on doing the Birkie once again in 2018.

He’s now a year out, and looking back, he credits pole hiking with the majority of his gains in balance, strength, mobility, and fitness after his surgery. Can something as unassuming as walking side view of Chris's lower back hardware.
with poles really have that much of an impact on recovery or even during your everyday workout?

After Chris’ operations, the surgeon said the most important thing Chris could do to recover was walk. He knew that many elite athletes recommend training with poles, so he thought that using his ski poles could help him not only aerobically, but also with his balance which was not the greatest post-surgery. At first, he could only go a few hundred yards twice a day on flat pavement. In a month, he moved onto gravel trails and the Birkie Trail, and by 3 months he was hiking at a good pace on hilly terrain 3-4 miles and sometimes up to 7 miles a day. The poles were the key to Chris getting out there, feeling safe, getting his heart rate up, and improving his endurance.

A friend to come along never hurts, either.

With the help of poles, only 8 days after surgery, Chris was able to get to the Short and Fat finish to see his sister take first place. (Left to right) Egan Young, Rebecca Ireland, Chris, Paulette Smith.

—Photo courtesy of Crystal Kovacs
For those who aren’t recovering from injuries, let’s look at how pole hiking can be beneficial to your workout and your fitness goals.

**Ease-of-Use**
This one’s a no-brainer. You have ski poles. All you need to do is walk out the door. There are different techniques you can learn, different pole lengths and tips, different terrain you can explore, but at it’s simplest, all you need to do is go.

**Balance**
It’s pretty obvious that poles can be helpful in increasing one’s balance significantly reduce the risk of falling or injury. Using poles improve posture, and balance as well. But, along with that, two more points of contact can help you body relax into your workout, especially if the terrain is inconsistent. Feeling secure and balanced can also allow you to increase your stride length and use your whole body instead of focusing on what your feet are doing. Poles enable you to maintain forward momentum, particularly on tricky terrain.

**Stress Relief**
Poles prevent pain and damage associated with repetitive motions by recruiting other muscles to take on more of the work, especially on moderate to steep uphills. When you spread out the workload and absorb some of the impact, you alleviate the stress on your legs, knees, ankles, and feet.

**Strength and Endurance**
Here’s where poles can really make a difference for even the elite athlete. Using poles engages muscle groups that ordinary walking does not, including those in your arms and core. Add to that the swinging motion of your arms and you have a full body workout. They help propel you forward and upward, helping you increase your speed. Poles can also allow you to better your posture, which improves your breathing and lung capacity, increasing cardiopulmonary function and endurance.

For skiers in our neck of the woods, as well as the world over, the American Birkebeiner® is the Holy Grail. But training for any xc ski race can be tricky in the off-season—a lot of workouts can keep you in shape, but many don’t really cross over specifically to nordic skiing. The one key for skiers at every level has got to be pole hiking, walking, or bounding. Ben Popp, executive director of the American Birkebeiner® explains, “Using poles for hiking and bounding during the summer is fantastic training to get you ready for ski season. Not only are you working on specific
movements that relate to skiing, you are burning more calories, improving muscle memory and coordination as well as providing extra stability in situations that can be slippery or uneven. If you are training to go fast, poles are an excellent way to work on upper body fitness and muscle memory. For beginning skiers, they help with coordination, balance and upper body/core muscle development."

Even if you are not a skier—if you are recovering or not as fit as you would like, using poles is an easy way to see results that can have a profound effect on your life. That extra ease-of-use and support can help someone get out in nature that may be a bit fearful of rougher terrain. That increased balance can help someone overcoming injury get back on track. And that full body workout can get the elite athlete ready for their best season ever.

Don’t be afraid to get back to basics. A pair of ski poles and a walk in the woods can do wonders—Chris is living proof of that. You can see him back on the snow this winter bombing down the hills like it was 15 years ago—some things never change.