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With orienteering, he's spinning his wheels no longer

By **Harry Jackson Jr.**
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Eric Buckley, 44, doesn't feel whole unless he's competing. He figures that's why he gained nearly 60 pounds in less than a year when he ended his professional bicycling career in 1992.



Eric Buckley practices orienteering in West Tyson County Park. He was introduced to the sport after competing in the 1996 Spirit of St. Louis Marathon and has lost more than 70 pounds after ending a pro cycling career in 1992.

(Sarah Conard)

"I retired. I was pushing 30. I didn't want to watch myself not go as fast as I used to, so I stepped back and did nothing," he said. "But when you're competing, do the math, I was burning up about a million calories a year. When you quit, you're supposed to change your eating habits."

He didn't, and four years later, he weighed more than 240 pounds, nearly 80 more than his competitive weight. A look at the puffy guy in the mirror prompted him in 1996 to get back into condition. On a brisk April evening, he visited an elementary school track near his home.

"I said I'd run an 8-minute mile to gauge my fitness," he recalled. "The first quarter I did in two minutes. By the third, I couldn't hold the pace at all. I sat down and almost cried. How could I have done this to my body?"

The medicine he chose was the 1996 Spirit of St. Louis Marathon, now called Go! St. Louis.

MEASURING YOUR EFFORT

He arrived at the starting line minus 40 pounds simply from training and watching what he ate. He attributes that to having been in top condition in the past.

He finished the race.

During the event, a veteran St. Louis orienteer invited Buckley to an orienteering meet sponsored by the St. Louis Orienteering Club. "That was it," he said. "I said, 'This is for me.'

"When you're out there running, it's all about measuring your effort. But when you're orienteering, you're thinking about terrain, about reading the map, everything but how hard you're working.

ERIC BUCKLEY

Age: 44

Home: West St. Louis County

Occupation: Computer programmer

What he did: Adopted orienteering as his favorite sport, lost a lot of weight doing so and uses the sport to stay in top condition.

Quotable: "I'd rather be the worst pro than the best amateur."

WHAT HE EATS

Breakfast: Whole wheat roll and cream cheese

Snack: Handful of peanuts

Lunch: A large salad

Dinner: Chicken breast and green vegetables

HOW HE EXERCISES

He bicycles to work every day. Two to three times a week, he works out in the woods running fast and slow intervals while practicing orienteering navigation.

KNOW A 'DID IT'?

If you know someone who would make a great subject for "How I Did It," we want to know, too. Please include the person's name, phone number and a bit about the accomplishment to Jackie Hutcherson, Healthy & Fit editor.

E-mail: jhutcherson@post-dispatch.com

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GOING DEEP INTO THE WOODS

Orienteering competitors meet in the midst of a deep forest. They get a terrain map that shows the location of several markers. Competitors find the markers then return to the finish line. Some races are to find all the markers and beat the other competitors back to the finish line. Other races may have 50 to 60 markers, and competitors find as many as they can in a specific period, sometimes up to 24 hours.

FUN WASN'T ENOUGH

About three years ago, Buckley decided he wanted to compete internationally for the U.S. Orienteering Federation. For that he'd need a national ranking in the top 10 in his age group or in open competition.

Buckley's weight had stayed around 200 pounds. He'd have to drop more weight to reach his peak. "I wanted to get down to the weight I was when I was riding professionally," he said. He watched his eating closely and reduced his carbohydrate intake to less than he burned. Today, he weighs 163 pounds.

He maintains his conditioning by riding his bicycle to work daily — about 17 miles to work and 25 to 30 miles home — and training two to three times a week in the field. Last year, he says, the national orienteering federation ranked him at 20th in the country in his age group.

He was ready this year to take his shot, but a hamstring disagreed. So he's using the down time to hone his skills.

"I'm still learning," he said. "The best orienteers are good at looking at the map and knowing what they're going to see before they see it.

"You build this three-dimensional model in your head from the map, you make adjustments and make sure you don't make a mistake."

St. Louis is an ideal practice ground, he says. "The terrain we have here is generally big features, fast moving terrain," he says, "ideal for people who are fit and like to run hard."

'I'M WIRED THAT WAY'

Buckley doesn't understand why he's driven to compete when he tackles a sport.

"I'd rather be the worst pro than the best amateur," he says. "I ask myself that, but I guess I'm wired that way. I'd much rather get beat by the best people than win against people I know I can beat." However, nowadays he maintains a link to reality. Their names are Kate, his wife, and Olivia, their 4-year-old daughter.

"I'm thinking, yeah this is fun, and it might be fun to look for more challenges," he says. "But I have to keep life in perspective." Olivia sometimes runs courses with him. "And when she gets tired, I just put her on my shoulders."

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