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From the serious to the casual, people are finding their way around

By **Harry Jackson Jr.**
ST. LOUIS POST-DISPATCH
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Anna Shafer-Skelton's parents met at an orienteering meet, which may explain why she came by the sport so naturally. At 19, the Washington University freshman is a nationally ranked orienteering competitor.



Gregg Kocher of Festus (left) and Pilar Williamson, of O'Fallon, Ill., near the finish of the orienteering course in Rockwood Range in Eureka at a regional meet last month organized by the St. Louis Orienteering Club. The sport involves hiking through the woods using a compass and map to reach checkpoints along the way.

(Sarah Conard)

"I started with my parents going to meets," she said. "How long do I plan to do it? Ages go up to 85."

FIND THE MARKER, FAST

What has hooked Shafer-Skelton?

Orienteering is a timed, cross-country competition in which competitors scurry around for hours in a forest looking for checkpoints called markers. Find the markers faster than other competitors and you win. Or just find them casually and get a day's outing in the woods.

Participants meet at a starting point deep in a forest, and each person gets a terrain map showing sites of markers hidden around the forest.

The sport attracts hard-core competitors such as Shafer-Skelton, of University City, and beginners who can take on the same courses without competing.

"Half of our membership is families," said Mark Geldmeier, 43, president of the St. Louis Orienteering Club. "All you need is to love being outdoors."

For Geldmeier, orienteering is like the Zen of running and walking. Walking beneath a canopy of oxygen-spewing trees is its own reward, he says.

"I've started to see in three dimensions," he said, showing how the terrain map works. "You look at this and pick out your route, then after the event you meet with others and talk about how you

LEARN MORE

St. Louis Orienteering Club

[sloc.us.orienteering.org](#)

Officers and contact information are on the site as well as the list of this year's meets.

U.S. Orienteering Federation

[www.us.orienteering.org](#)

The official organization for American orienteering

International Orienteering Federation

[www.orienteering.org](#)

The international sanctioning organization also sanctions mountain bike orienteering, ski orienteering and trail orienteering and includes disabled competitors.

WHAT YOU'LL NEED

- Good running shoes, thick socks, long pants, a hat and sunscreen. You can move between thick brush and sunshine. Competitors buy leg guards that help keep away brush and thorns.
- A good compass, which can cost under \$10. Competitors use thumb compasses that are small and take little effort to view.
- Water.
- A whistle so that if you get lost or hurt you can call for help.

WHY TRY IT?

- It's in pristine, wooded areas, some places hilly, some flat.
- It's excellent exercise. Running or walking on hills are good for your legs and heart.
- If everyone in your family can walk, this could make for great time together.
- You can start as a beginner and graduate to international competition.

Yesterday's most emailed

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2. Anheuser-Busch's roots run deep
3. As Cardinals chase the Cubs, both have issues
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7. Contractors wonder when the rain will go away
8. Some city police want more pistol firepower
9. Local pilot dies on crash of plane he built himself
10. Rain of runs douses Birds

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did."

While he's not aiming at big-time competitions, he says, that doesn't mean he loves the sport any less.

READ MORE: Eric Buckley takes orienteering to heart.

"We have events once a month," he said. "But if we had one every weekend, I'd be there."

Most meets for the St. Louis club are within a few miles of St. Louis.

"We have some great areas around here," Geldmeier says. The routes can range from rustic and difficult to flat. One meet for beginners was held at Carondelet Park in St. Louis, Geldmeier said.

Many St. Louis participants join to add another dimension to their jogging or walking. But experience at running doesn't mean you're ready to orienteer.

Shafer-Skelton said, "The biggest mistake is that runners think they can do the course fast. They say '5K, that's not so far.' But the distances on the maps are in straight lines. The distance is longer than that because of the (obstacles), and you really don't get to the (marker) in a straight line."

INTERNATIONAL MEETS

Shafer-Skelton hopes to reclaim her No. 1 national ranking in her age group soon. She suffered a foot injury in a cross-country event last year and was sidelined for 11 months. Her ranking slipped to No. 2.

But second was good enough to be picked for the U.S. Orienteering Federation team, which is heading to international meets this summer.

Shafer-Skelton says she's ready. She's able to memorize her route at the starting line. If she refers to the map, she does so while moving.

"It's like cross country except your course isn't marked," she says. But no one is perfect, she says. She recalls a competition where her calculations were off a few degrees. She overshot the marker, costing her 17 minutes. "You know you're in trouble when you start thinking your map and compass are wrong," she said with a laugh.

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