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Sisters heading in right direction

The Boston Globe

Samantha and Hillary Saeger beat a path in orienteering tourneys

By Monique Walker, Globe Staff | August 24, 2006

Catching up with Samantha and Hillary Saeger of Dedham can be difficult these days. From Massachusetts to Denmark to Wyoming, the Saeger sisters are being challenged in the sport of orienteering.

The Saegers began their journey representing the United States in the World Orienteering Championships July 29-Aug. 5 in Denmark. Samantha had the USA women's best finish in the sprint at 29th place with a time of 15 minutes, 53 seconds. Hillary was 42d in 18: 55.

The women have grown up competing in orienteering, a sport that challenges mind and body. Competitors are provided with a compass and a detailed map to navigate through a course. The challenge is to choose the best route to the end of the course quickly and efficiently, without skipping any checkpoints. The races can vary in distance and terrain. The times can be as short as 13 minutes or as long as an hour.

Samantha, 23, and Hillary, 21, learned about orienteering in their youth from their parents, Jeff Saeger and Judy Karpinski.

The years of training helped them as they continued on a more competitive track. Samantha set a goal to reach the finals in her second world championships berth. Hillary was competing at the championships for the first time, but has competed in three junior world championships.

One day after returning from the world competition, they left for Wyoming, where they joined their parents for another competition. Whether training or competing, Samantha and Hillary make time for orienteering. In high school, the sisters often had to explain what they

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were doing on weekends to their friends and the coaches of other sports. Now, when Samantha turns down her friends' invitations for dinner or a movie, they understand.

Hillary said she has had the same experience, and as she makes new friends she repeats the explanation.

"I think I've explained it 50 or more times to people," she said. "Sometimes they understand why I do all this running and looking at maps all the time. I tell them it's helping me to be a better orienteer."

Hillary is studying math at Marist College in Poughkeepsie, N.Y., and she said orienteering has helped her with problem solving. Samantha, who graduated from Colby College, said she also can relate orienteering to other aspects of her life. She often finds herself turning a map in the car the same way she would if she were competing.

"It really plays into real life because of the decision-making factor and you have to think on your feet," Samantha said.

She said it can be helpful for children to learn where they are and how to read maps to get themselves to safe destinations. The orienteering courses can take competitors through woods or amusement parks, Samantha said.

Hillary has learned not only from those challenging courses but also from practicing the sport with Samantha. The two were the only sisters on the US team at the recent world championships.

"She was able to show me the ropes and everything like that. I had someone I could rely on who understood," Hillary said.

Samantha said she will continue to set goals for herself and make adjustments to see how far she can go in the sport.

"I'm not the best in the world, but I'm still doing it. If I'm going to do it, I'm going to try do it well," Samantha said.

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