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The Sunday Times

July 16, 2006

Orient your way out of the gym

A fun way to enjoy the outdoors, orienteering also helps to boost fitness. But Claire Prentice finds that fast movement is not as important as quick thinking

As outdoor sports go, it has everything you could want. Red cagoules, compasses, smirry rain, sloping Scottish hillsides and Thermos flasks.

Well, maybe not everything. But forget the old image, orienteering, the navigation sport beloved of sadistic gym and geography teachers, has undergone a transformation over the past few years and its popularity among a new generation of enthusiasts suggests the sport is on the way up.

"As people get more health-conscious, the image is changing and people are seeing it as a fun way to enjoy the outdoors and get fit," says Donald Petrie of the Scottish Orienteering Association, who champions orienteering as a healthy alternative to sweating it out in the gym.

"The biggest growth has been in informal orienteering, people who don't belong to a club but might come six times a year and walk around the course rather than run, or who might come regularly and really enjoy it but choose not to compete seriously."

Perhaps you know how it works from school. Using a map and compass, competitors must navigate between control points marked on a specially drawn map. Although usually associated with remote forests and countryside, orienteering events are now also held in urban parks and school playgrounds in a bid to attract city dwellers.

Brad Connor, 36, a company director who started orienteering at university, believes the sport's growing popularity is due to our increasing

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enthusiasm for the outdoors. But there's more. "It's a lot more interesting and challenging than running, and you can compete whatever your age or level of fitness," says Connor.

According to Petrie, 9,500 people take part in orienteering events in Scotland, a rise of more than 20% in the past two years. Many get their first taste at school or university — Edinburgh, Glasgow, Aberdeen and St Andrews universities all have clubs.

When I pull up on a weekday evening at Gartmorn Dam, outside Alloa, for the Forth Valley Orienteers' weekly meeting, the car park is a hive of activity. People are limbering up and doing stretches while peering at maps. Over at the starting line there are people of all ages, from young children to a couple in their sixties. Some are kitted out in professional running gear, but many are wearing old jogging bottoms and battered trainers.

Before letting me loose in the woods, the outdoor trainer Fran Loots presents me with a compass and gets me to do an exercise using CDs laid out in the ground in four rows of four. She also gives me a series of cards showing different routes that I have to follow using the CDs as landmarks.

The key thing to remember, is to "set" or "align" the map by matching it to the ground features, says Loots. She adds: "If you're on a path at the start and there's a wall on your left and a pond on your right, turn the map so that as you look at it, the wall is to the left of the path and the pond to the right."

Just as this becomes clear, Loots produces a proper orienteering map. It's a mass of contour lines, black boxes, dotted paths, squiggles and blue splodges. And I haven't a clue where we are on it.

After my fourth attempt, Loots patiently points to a spot between a row of brown boxes, which represent the buildings behind us, and a large blue teardrop, which indicates the dam in front of us. She then gets me to spend a few minutes memorising the index of symbols before quizzing me to make sure I can distinguish between a tree and an electricity pylon.

We have to navigate our way around a series of controls, marked by orange and white flags, on our 5km starter route. It would be hard to miss the first control, which is at the intersection of two pathways. I stop to punch my card before continuing along the path, up a hill and along the side of a field towards the second control. This is easy. I chat to Loots as I stride over the landscape, scanning the horizon.

It's a beautiful day. Loots seems to have developed a cough, though. Hay fever? Apparently not. She coughs again and points. Another participant emerges from behind a tree and I have missed the second control.

After collecting my second punch mark, I study the

map intently, working out how best to avoid the burn between us and control three. As I look for the tiny blue line on the map I stand on the bottom of a dry ditch. I might not be able to read a map, but global warming wants me to win.

Loots explains that although speed is important, it is not enough to simply be able to move faster than other orienteers. You must also out-think them by picking the fastest route between controls. It's this combination of map reading, quick decision-making and athletic ability that, for some aficionados, suggests that orienteering is a "thinking sport".

"You really do get everyone, from superfit types who dash around the course, take it all very seriously and talk of nothing else, to people who come out and amble round slowly, collecting flowers and pine cones," says Loots. As if to prove her point, a man in running leggings flies down the hill past us, while a couple dressed in their civvies stop to admire an enormous sycamore tree before punching their score cards. Their genteel approach to the sport is indicated by their lack of bramble bashers — the shin pads that enable you to plough through just about anything nature throws in your path.

As I approach the end of my route, I meet a red-faced Victoria Longhurst, 16, from Dunblane. She has been orienteering since she was nine with her father and younger sister, Abigail. "It's a really sociable hobby," she enthuses. "A lot of my social life revolves around orienteering."

She has competed in Poland and is orienteering in Sweden with her sister this summer. Minutes later we are joined by 14-year-old Abigail, who adds: "I love it. It's a great way to meet people and it keeps you really healthy and fit."

As I saunter down to the finishing line clutching my card, I feel proud at the discovery of my inner map-geek, until the course controller informs me that I was away so long she didn't bother timing me.

Consoling myself with a hamburger from the barbecue, I get chatting to Danielle Cawley, 26, who works for the Canadian lottery and is in Scotland on holiday.

"The beauty of orienteering is that it is an international sport, so wherever you go in the world, you can always look up a local club," she says. "People have this idea of orienteering as being very geeky, and some of them are, but in general we are a really friendly, normal group of people — honest."

Show me the way

What do I need? A map and compass

And that's it? Stout shoes and sensible clothes

How can I get involved? The Scottish Orienteering Association (www.scottish-orienteering.org) lists

more than 20 local clubs

Any other tips? Keep a song in your heart while you compete. But not (Is This the Way to) Amarillo. Because if it is, you're probably lost



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