Here I Go Again on My Own

If you're not careful (and skilled), the sport of orienteering can leave you lost in the trees.

GOT IT! I'VE JUST SPOTTED the elusive control No. 3, a 12-pack-size, orange and white box that marks the third checkpoint on my course. I scurry over to it, mark my scorecard with the control's unique punch to prove I've been there, and check my map. Another competitor comes crashing through the brush—I've got to get moving. I dart away through the pine forest, but then it slowly dawns on me that I must be off-course—I'm supposed to be headed due south, yet the sun is at my back. In my rush to shake my fellow competitor I've made a rookie mistake and failed to check my compass. I've run 180 degrees in the wrong direction.

Welcome to the confounding but seductive sport of orienteering.

Orienteering is a blend of cross-country running and navigation, with brains counting more than brawn. Course setters hide a series of controls in the woods, and you're given a topo map marked with the control locations. The maps are extremely detailed, showing every rock bigger than an armchair, all the willow patches, aspen groves, and clearings, and the contours of the land in 5-meter (16-foot) intervals. A clue sheet describes the controls' hiding places (the base of a small cliff, a rocky knoll), and you carry a compass to orient your map. (At least that's what you're supposed to do.) The goal is to find the controls in consecutive order as quickly as you can. Or, if you're like me, you hope to find them all and return to the finish line before the sun goes down.

Each year the Rocky Mountain Orienteering Club puts on more than a dozen weekend meets on city, state park, and national forest lands from Colorado Springs to Laramie. The club hosts a national-level meet each August that draws hundreds of orienteers for a week or more of competition. But most of the meets are low-key affairs. Course setters plan at least five different routes, color-coded by difficulty—there's a course suitable for everyone from rank beginners to experts. Most races are run (or walked) on foot, but the variations are endless: Bike-O, Ski-O, Night-O, Snowshoe-O, sprint meets (there's an annual mad dash around the CU-Boulder campus), and rogaine, a sort of orienteering meet on steroids that can last 24 hours.

Orienteering is wildly popular in Scandinavia, where the top racers are highly regarded athletes featured on national TV. Here, the cerebral, offbeat sport is heavily populated by—how shall I put this politely—nerds. Many of the participants seem to make their living with computers, and the sport is concentrated in high-tech centers like D.C., Boston, the Bay Area, Los Alamos, and, yes, Denver-Boulder. Some serious competitors outfit themselves with magnifier eyeglasses, thumb

ILLUSTRATION: MIKE AUSTIN

compasses, and garish, multicolored nylon tracksuits that look like they were stitched together from those pennants fluttering over used-car lots.

Their fashion sense leaves something to be desired, but these athletes have serious skills. The best orienteers sprint through thick woods and brush, counting paces and constantly checking their maps and compasses as they run, yet somehow avoid trees and drop-offs. They count their navigational errors in seconds ("I lost 5 seconds at No. 4—what a bonehead!"), while the rest of us count our mistakes in minutes—as in 10 to 15 minutes of head-scratching and wandering in circles. Typical orienteering courses are 1 to 5 miles long, but that's as the crow flies; my meandering journey through the woods often resembles the path of a dog in search of a lost tennis ball.

Fortunately for the less hardcore, the secret to successful orienteering often is slowing down to focus on navigation. It's also wise to ignore the other competitors, who might not even be competing on your course. (Cheating by following another racer also backfires: One orienteer I know chased a fast, confident-looking racer for several minutes until the fellow in the lead suddenly pulled up and shouted, "I'm such a $#@#% idiot!") An RMOC volunteer at the meets instructs newcomers in the basics of using a map and compass. Many people walk the courses, and families and friends often join forces as a team; my wife and I do orienteering races together with our dog, opting for navigational challenge over aerobic exertion. You learn to observe the lay of the land, the way the vegetation differs on each side of a hill, and how the old trails and wagon roads contour around the topography. And no matter how slowly you get there, it's a rush to find a control hidden exactly where you expect it will be.

After recognizing my 180-degree misturn, I quickly get reoriented. The map shows a trail about 300 yards to the south of the hill that rises to my left, but I'll have to maneuver around a swamp to get to it. That trail should lead past the head of a gully, and control No. 4 should be at the bottom. I start running again and then, remembering my earlier mistake, slow down to a steady walk. This time I'll keep an eye on my compass.

For more info about the Rocky Mountain Orienteering Club, visit www.fortnet.org/RMOC/. Meets cost $5 to $10 per person, maximum of $15 per family; compasses may be rented for a nominal fee. ▲▲