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## Penfield teen setting a course for success

Gary Fallesen  
Staff writer

(May 29, 2006) — Nate Lyons' memory of learning how to read a map and compass for orienteering in the fifth grade is not fond.

"I didn't do very well," said the eighth-grader at Spry Middle School in Webster.

But Nate, 13, isn't a slow learner. Less than two years after taking up the sport with his father, Mike, the Penfield resident rose to the No. 1 ranking in the United States among boys ages 14 and younger.

"I'm pretty good with maps," admitted the soft-spoken Nate, who also has been on the high honor roll for two of the three quarters this year at Spry.

Nate is pretty good on his feet, too. He plays travel-league soccer, is on his school's lacrosse team, plays travel hockey and runs cross country.

"He's a strong overall athlete — the kid can run," said Eric Barbehenn, a 34-year-old orienteer from Penfield who has watched Nate grow into his sport. "That gives him a big advantage right there."

Orienteering is called the thinking sport because participants must read a map and make decisions while running or walking on and off trails.

They are timed while completing a course with a series of "controls" (orange-and-white flags placed on distinctive features — perhaps a trail junction or a knoll — by the course setter).

The courses Nate competes on are 1½ to 2 miles long. While a course follows trails, competitors can look for shortcuts through the woods and thick undergrowth and over hills and fallen trees.

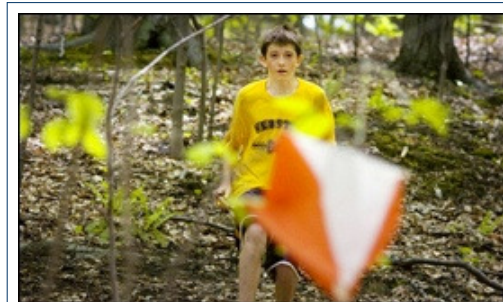
But orienteers must be careful to not get lost in the woods.

Nate has little or no trouble keeping up with his lanky 43-year-old dad, who has been a runner since he represented East Aurora High School in cross country. Mike Lyons' dad was his coach. Grandpa Walt Lyons introduced the family to orienteering.

"My dad and his wife did some of the permanent courses in the Buffalo area," Mike said. "I did one with them in 2002. Then I found out there was a club here in Rochester."

Mike started attending Rochester Orienteering Club meets in 2003. There are about 200 members in the Rochester club, which holds an average of two events each month.

In 2004, Nate joined his dad for runs through area parks, trying to find their way from one checkpoint to the next



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WILL YURMAN staff photographer  
Nate Lyons approaches a control during a Rochester Orienteering Club event at Irondequoit Bay Park West.  
**Day in Photos**

### What is it?

Orienteering is the sport of navigation with map and compass. The object is to run, walk, ski, canoe or mountain bike to a series of points on a map.

Participants must choose a route — on and off trails — to find all of the points and get back to the finish line in the shortest amount of time. The points on the course are marked with orange-and-white flags, and punches are used to prove that competitors found them. These are called "controls."

Each control is located on a distinct feature, such as a stream junction or the top of a hill.

The Rochester Orienteering Club holds nearly two dozen events a year. Instruction and beginner courses are offered at all meets. The cost to participate is \$6 for a color orienteering map.

For more information on the club, call (585) 377-5650 or go to <http://roc.us.orienteering.org>.

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using a map and a compass.

Since orienteers don't want to get lost, it's also known as a game of staying found.

Competitive orienteers do this on the run. Reading a map, deciding which way to go and dodging trees poses a challenge that takes some getting used to.

Nate admitted he is still trying to learn how to read on the run. The only time he doesn't run is when he needs to check his map.

Orienteering is not the same as just going for a jog. "I have to think a lot more," he said.

Especially since he started going out alone.

"What you find with orienteering is that you have to have a bit more maturity than with many other sports," said Barbehenn. "You have to make decisions on your own, which teen-agers often don't do well. They are often hesitant to go out alone and think, decide, act completely on their own."

Nate seems to be at home in this setting.

Last year, he made his solo debut in a Rochester Orienteering Club meet at Irondequoit Bay Park West. He doesn't remember much about it, but his father recalls the paternal instinct he was feeling.

"I remember I was nervous," Mike Lyons said. "I was going out at the same time on a different course. I was worried I was going to get back and he would still be out in the woods.

"As it turned out, he was done a half an hour before me."

Courses are set to skill levels. White is the beginner course, yellow the advanced beginner, orange intermediate, and brown, green, red and blue are advanced levels.

Nate — and any boy or girl age 13 or 14 — competes on a yellow course at national "A" meets. Yellow courses are between 1¼ and 2 miles long. Mike Lyons is currently doing orange courses, which generally do not stay on trails.

Father and son have gone head-to-head on orange courses twice, with Mike winning one and Nate winning one.

Another member of the Lyons family, Nate's younger brother Zach, also competes on occasion.

In fact, both boys won their age groups (9-year-old Zach is in the 10-and-younger division) at the U.S. Long and Short Course Championships last month in Albany.

A third Lyons boy, 4-year-old Luke, already can read a map but hasn't started competing. Nate's mom, Chris, is not an orienteer.

"One of the best things about orienteering, from a family perspective, is you can all go and do something together," said Mike, an information systems manager at Xerox Corp. "If I was playing in a softball league, I'd just go and do it by myself."

Rick Worner, an experienced orienteer from Greece and the husband and father of past national age-group champions, says: "The Lyons' family story is pretty typical for our club and for other clubs in the U.S. We really emphasize the family aspects of the sport.

"Kids like Nate and Zach have many sports to choose from in their school and in the community. They are more likely to stick with orienteering if they do it with their family."

Orienteering has given Mike and Nate a common sport to pursue. Together they run on the permanent orienteering courses found at Durand-Eastman, Mendon Ponds, Webster and Letchworth parks.

"We try to get off the trail and do some terrain running," Mike said.

Father and son also travel to many "A" meets on the national schedule. Recently, they competed at the 27th annual West Point "A" Meet, hosted by the U.S. Military Academy Orienteering Club.

They will participate in the North American Rogaine Championships at Allegany State Park on June 10 and 11. The Lyonses are entering the 24-hour orienteering event, which they've done once before.

They're also gearing up for the U.S. Classic Championships in August at Laramie, Wyo., and Buena Vista, Colo.

"We're relatively new to orienteering," Mike said. "There are some very knowledgeable orienteers here."

A few of Nate's classmates and teammates in other sports also might give orienteering a try.

"Most of them remember it from fifth grade," Nate said.

Nate would rather forget that experience and focus on staying found as one of the best young orienteers in the country.

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