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WHERE TO? Next to a flag, Ann and Espen Gjersten plot a course to another one in a Minnesota rogaine race.

By STEPHEN REGENOLD
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TOPOGRAPHIC lines lay tight on the map in my hand. My feet pound the forest floor. I'm running at full speed through the woods, leaping logs, ducking downed trees, swimming through a sea of vines and thick thorny brush.

It's late August in the North Woods of [Minnesota](#), and I'm lost deep in the boreal jungle of Pillsbury State Forest. It's three hours into a six-hour-long orienteering race, and my teammate — my wife, Tara — is beginning to question my judgment.

"This doesn't seem right," she says, pausing to look around, a hand on her brow to block

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the sun. We've stumbled into a vast open mire, all tan grass and muddy smells. Birds flitter off from a bush nearby.

"Let me look at the map," she says.

Orienteering, a Nordic sport that stresses aerobic capacity along with navigation and map-reading skills, puts competitors on backcountry courses in search of hidden flags, each equipped with a small punch that stamps a unique pattern on a card. Competitors carry a punch card to imprint at each flag and prove they were there. A compass and a topographical map are an orienteer's sole guides through the wilderness.

Our race in Pillsbury State Forest — the Minnesota Orienteering Club's annual rogaine event — has 21 teams of two or more competitors searching an 18-square-mile area for a couple dozen hidden flags. The rogaine race format — an Australian offshoot of orienteering invented in the 1970's — has no set route; teams chart their own courses and search the shotgun spread of flags in any order.

Each flag has a point value, the more difficult or remote locations garnering higher marks. Rogaine events are timed, lasting 2 to 24 hours; the team that gets the most points in the set duration wins.

Rogaining's cryptic name, which baffles many first-time competitors, has no connection to Rogaine, the anti-baldness drug made by Pfizer. The sport's moniker is a combination of Rod, Gail and Neil, three orienteers credited with popularizing rogaine 30 years ago in [Australia](#).

In the [United States](#), despite its lack of hair-growth qualities, rogaining has spread roots over the last five years. This year, more than 20 rogaines were organized in states including [Arizona](#), [Ohio](#), [Oregon](#), [Missouri](#), [Michigan](#), Minnesota, [California](#), Georgia and [Pennsylvania](#). In June, the North American Rogaine Championships, in Allegany State Park in western [New York State](#), attracted more than 100 teams to search for hidden flags in a 30-square-mile forest.

"I got hooked on the treasure-hunting aspect of just going out and finding things in woods," said Eric Smith, a 63-year-old physicist at [Cornell University](#) and a member of the United States Orienteering Federation's rogaining committee.

Mr. Smith competes in a half-dozen rogaines a year with his wife, Mary. They traveled this week to the Warrumbungle Mountains in New South [Wales](#), Australia, to compete today and Saturday in the seventh World Rogaining Championships, a 24-hour race expected to attract more than 500 competitors.

"We're hoping to cover about 50 miles at the Worlds in 24 hours," Mr. Smith said.

This will be the Smiths' fifth world-championship event in five years, including visits to

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DEEP in the woods of Pillsbury State Forest, a few minutes past noon, Tara and I are still lost. I stare at the map, reorienting the top of the page to north. The elusive flag is nearby on the south shore of a small pond.

The underbrush gets thick as we walk uphill. My map shows a vegetation boundary — a puffy green form on the page. The pond is a tiny blue flea on a map whorled with lines, clogged with symbols and shapes amorphous, esoteric and vague.

I follow a bearing due north with a myopic concentration. Leaves in my face, I heed the small orange arrow on my compass dial, faithful to an instrument, an airline pilot landing in low fog.

“Should be right up here,” I yell back to Tara, lagging a few paces behind. Thorns prick through my nylon pants. An elaborate bramble, stringy and green with tiny rough clinging balls, has wrapped around my thigh. I yell out, “I think there’s an opening ahead.”

Bingo! Orange flag. My heart palpitates in a manner disturbingly abrupt, Pavlovian. The flag — signifying control No. 146 on my map — is 100 feet farther ahead and right on the south shore of that little blue flea. “Got it,” I yell back to Tara, who is at my side already, siphoning some water off my hydration pack.

We’re still alone in the woods, no other competitors in sight. With large courses and no prescribed direction of travel, rogaining can be a solitary sport.

A crisp little punch of the card and we’re off again. The route to the next checkpoint — a kilometer away through the woods and at the end of a small ridgeline spur — prompts quick thinking as we start off to the east.

Reality shifts for me during an orienteering race. One world view is of the woods; the other is on the map, bouncing as I run and read tiny details. It’s a strange interdependency: a glimpse at the land ahead, a quick study of the map. Then a look back up to reconfirm. And again the map. Back and forth until the two planes mesh, one reality no less certain than the other.

My thumb stays on the face of the map at all times, moving to mark position as we run, keeping Tara and me — most of the time — on track. We make intricate route choices on our way east from the flag at the little blue flea: the first hill climbs to a marsh; which leads to a second hill and a bit of thick forest; which leads to a ravine heading north and east; which peters to open, fast-running forest; which leads uphill to a trail; which we cross, noting a lake to the southeast to reconfirm our position on the map.

We’re huffing and breathing fast. We’ve been on our feet for four hours without a break. My thumb moves a quarter inch on the page.

Back into the woods. Leaves crunching underfoot. We run over a short hill to a trail. Run the trail fast to an intersection, and cut back west. Crash through a wall of green. Jump a stump. Duck a branch. Follow the ridgeline. Check the compass. Orient the map. Climb a final little hill. Scoot over the top, and — bam! — orange flag ahead. Quick and dirty.

“That’s how it should work,” Tara says, breathing hard.

I pull a draft of water from my drink hose.

“Exactly,” I wheeze. “Now, let’s go.”

If You Go

ROGAINE, a team-based backcountry sport popularized by Australian orienteering clubs in the 1970’s, has gained a small but passionate following in the [United States](#), with [Boy Scouts](#), adventure racers, hikers and European expatriates among the most passionate participants.

The United States Orienteering Federation (www.us.orienteering.org) listed 21 rogaine events for 2006 in the United States and [Canada](#), from 2 to 24 hours in length.

October is a big month for the sport of rogaing. Today in [Australia](#), the Seventh World Rogaining Championships (www.rogaine2006.com.au) kick off in the Warrumbungle Mountains of New South [Wales](#), running for 24 hours. More than 500 competitors from all over the globe were expected.

The Ottawa Orienteering Club (www.ottawaoc.ca) is the host of the Gatineau Park Rogaine on Oct. 21. The race, in Gatineau Park, which is 25 minutes north of Ottawa in [Quebec](#), has course options up to eight hours in length.

Oct. 22 brings the Astrogaine at Joseph D. Grant County Park, east of San Jose, Calif., where the Bay Area Orienteering Club has four- and seven-hour-long rogaine courses for nine classes specific to age and gender (www.baoc.org).

On Oct. 28, Orienteering Louisville holds its eighth annual Lewis & Clark Cup rogaine, a 12-hour event (with a four-hour division) in the Jefferson Memorial Forest, 20 minutes south of Louisville (www.olou.org).

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