

outdoor extremes

Compass points to orienteering

Sport teaches hikers important ability of navigating outdoors

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Frisco - Missing for four days in a rugged section of the Roosevelt National Forest, Terry and Marion Jones emerged unharmed at the Big South Trailhead to the applause of family and friends last Thursday afternoon.

It wasn't until Friday that the suffering began in earnest for the Fort Collins couple.

By then, the commotion on various Web forums had escalated to a full-fledged fury as anonymous online analysts questioned Terry Jones' experience as an outdoorsman and the couple's decision to hunker down for several days on a hillside away from the trail and only two miles from their intended destination.

"We weren't lost," Terry Jones told reporters afterward. "We were stranded."

But by many accounts, they were neither. The couple carried a map, compass and GPS in a well-stocked backpack. Although tired, they were uninjured and

moved freely to and from a nearby stream to collect drinking water. They did everything except ford the fork of the Poudre River to pick up the trail that had petered out underfoot where a bridge had washed away years before.

Instead, they stood confused, looking for a sign.

"'Experienced' hikers can be ones who only hike on trails and they haven't a clue if they have to leave it for some reason," said Sharon Crawford of Frisco. "A lot of friends that I hike with can read a trail on a map, but that's about it. If they get off the trail or they get on the wrong trail - which I guess is what happened to those people from Fort Collins - then they're lost. You have to see the trails in context with the ridges, the contours, the drainages and everything else. I'm just glad they're safe."

Far be it for Crawford to act as a Monday morning quarterback in the outdoor world. As a senior member of the Rocky Mountain Orienteering Club (RMOC) and multiple age-group world champion in the activity that has turned navigation into a sport, Crawford is of the belief anyone and everyone who ventures into the outdoors should know how to navigate. And if they don't, she and her club members want to teach them.

The RMOC is hosting its annual National Orienteering Days event this weekend with orienteering competition for all ages and all ability levels in Colorado Springs on Saturday and at Bear Creek Lake Park in Lakewood on Sunday (the club's website is www.rmoc.org).

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It's a sport

Orienteering is an organized competition using a map and compass to locate a series of checkpoints shown on a specialized topographic map. Competitors choose their routes - on or off trail - to the checkpoints and get to the finish line in the shortest amount of time. Each flagged checkpoint is a distinct mapped feature such as a trail junction or boulder.

"The thing that the sport of orienteering teaches you is how to navigate, how to read a map, how to control not being lost. It appeals to people who like figuring things out," said Crawford, who has competed in some 20 countries since taking up the sport in 1973. "I'm confident that if I were dropped anywhere in Colorado with a map of the area, I could navigate out. Even if I didn't know where I was to start with, if someone just dropped me from a helicopter in the middle of Colorado and said, 'Here's a map. You're on this map. You figure out where you are and you navigate through something,' I really believe I could do it."

Orienteering is sometimes called "the thinking sport" because it requires map reading, problem solving and quick decision-making skills in addition to athletic ability and general physical fitness. Imagine the chess club going on a cross country run.

"We're sort of geeks, really," said Jari Kirkland, an orienteering fan who doubles as the navigator for the top-ranked Salomon/Crested Butte adventure racing team. "But it's an awesome way to prepare for a genuine wilderness experience. I have this map and I have these points that I'm trying to find on it. My goal

is to know where I am at all times on the map."

Outdoor Extremes Blog



Post reporter Jason Blevins posts entries on this blog devoted to adventure sports. [Visit it here](#) .

The reality is that navigation doesn't come naturally to most people.

"I had never held a compass in my hand until my first adventure race - the Primal Quest Tahoe, four years ago," Kirkland said. "I was clueless pretty much the whole time, but we would get to an orienteering section on the course and I would just watch what the navigator was doing, how he used the compass with the map and what he was looking at. Now I can just look at a map and it makes sense to me."

The maps Kirkland and Crawford are studying, however, aren't like the ones in your glove box.

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They're complex topographic maps with hundreds of contour lines serving as a sort of two-dimensional relief map that symbolizes elevations of peaks and valleys alongside rivers, roads and trails.

The good news is that everyone can be taught. "No one is born knowing how to read a topo map," Crawford said. "The contours are one of the last things that beginners get. But if they practice, they can learn."

The RMOC makes that learning opportunity available to anyone with the interest. For a small fee, the club provides the compass.

A timeless skill

"Technology is not the answer. I have a GPS and it's the most expensive doorstop I've ever owned. To me, it takes the fun out of using your brain to figure things out," said RMOC president Sherry Latasi of Denver. "People talk about extreme adventures, but they aren't ready for that if they can't even read a compass or read a map. If they want to stay safe, this is a great way to build the skill."

Latasi's club has about 150 members, plus some families, and spans from ages 2 to 85.

For adventure racers such as Kirkland, the sense of exploration and the confidence her orienteering skills provide has opened doors to places much of the world will only ever read about.

"I just thought it was important for me to know," Kirkland said. "Any other backpacking I'd ever done was just parking a car, putting a backpack on and

hiking a trail for five miles, then you set up camp and hike back out the way you came. That's awesome, but there was no real sense of adventure. I decided I wanted to have better adventures."

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