

Orienteering combines fitness and navigation

In the Field

By Amber Travsky

The 30 competitors gathered as the clock ticked down to the starting time. The group included men and women with a wide range of ages from 20-something to several in their 70s.

Laramie resident and race director, Mikell Platt, stood out front. “Here are the maps,” he shouted and proceeded to pass them out. Racers had only about a minute to look them over before Platt signaled the start of the race. “Go,” he shouted as about two thirds of the group took off in a lope across the open hillside, heading for the timber – while also looking at their maps. The remainder took a more leisurely approach and didn’t move much at all while scanning their maps and planning their routes.

This was Day 6 and the final race of the Laramie Daze orienteering event held on Pole Mountain this past week. Racers came from around the country and even Canada. Unlike most running races, there was no designated route and, for this particular race, no trails or roads to follow. Each racer was on their own to pick and choose their route. The trick was that they didn’t know where they were headed until given the map mere minutes before the race began.

Mark Parsons from Boulder, Colo. explained that orienteering is the “cognitive running” sport. “It requires a mix of mental ability as well as fitness,” he explained. “You might be the fastest runner but if you don’t select the best route, you likely won’t come out ahead.”

While runners carry compasses for orientation, it’s about reading the map and finding a good route. Platt explained orienteering is not an Easter egg hunt. “You have to know how to read a map and figure out the best route – while you’re moving,” he said.



The maps Platt handed to the racers have incredible detail, showing vegetation types, terrain contours and even individual trees and boulders. They put regular topographic maps to shame. The ones for this race were created by Platt who has been mapping the Pole Mountain area since moving to Laramie in 1995.

Platt began his orienteering career while a cadet at West Point. He was the U.S. Intercollegiate Orienteering Individual Men’s Champion while at the Army Academy in 1980 and has been racing around the globe ever since, especially in Europe where the sport is quite popular.

This final race of the Laramie Daze is called the Rocky Mountain Goat. Platt explained that a goat event is typically a longer course with a mass start. “Many events have staggered starts so the racers begin on their own and can’t be influenced by other racers,” he said.

Racers must stop at checkpoints, called controls, marked with a three-sided orange and white flag. At each control the racer punches the control card they carry. In some races they’ve upgraded to an electronic system instead of the manual punch.

Amy Winston from Denver watched near the last of 20 control stations. She took special care to stay hidden so as not to give

away the location. She explained she opted out of the goat event since she was new to orienteering and it was a fairly difficult course. “Often there are different courses for varied abilities,” she explained. “It’s a great way to learn. It also attracts more kids with the easier courses.” As racers advance in ability, they adopt a special talent for running and reading a map at the same time. They do so while also running cross-country: over varied terrain, through creeks and around boulder fields.

Ludwig Hill from Tucson said he was attracted to orienteering due to his love of the outdoors and hiking. “This is more competitive than just taking a hike and also mentally challenging,” he said. “It’s all about finding that balance between picking a fast and efficient route while also being able to physically do the course.”

Peg Davis, also from Tucson, agreed. “This race that Mikell puts on is especially fun and the maps he provides are fantastic. It’s like summer camp for adults.”

