

## UT astrophysicist is also a world class orienteer

**BY MATT MARKEY**  
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University of Toledo astrophysicist Ali Crocker competes in the World Orienteering Championships in Vuokatti, Finland in July 2013.



Crocker

Distance is not something that Alison Crocker finds the least bit intimidating. She is currently studying “nearby” galaxies — those within 30-to-60 million light years from earth, or roughly 180 trillion miles away, or more.

The University of Toledo astrophysicist is adept at traversing through vast space, and she also can skillfully make her way through the woods and hills of Finland, where she recently competed in the World Orienteering Championships.

Away from her computer screen and the countless images of our space neighbors that have been captured by telescopes from all over the world, Crocker is an American woman in the sport of orienteering, which is essentially a race in land navigation. The sport traces its roots to a training exercise in land navigation developed for the military in Sweden late in the 19th century.

In contemporary orienteering, the competitors receive a map at the moment they start, revealing a course they have never seen before.

With just a compass and the coordinates on the map, they must check in at various points on the course, while navigating over often rugged terrain.

An electronic device worn on their hand makes a record of the control points they reach, and the competitor who hits those check points in the shortest time with the fewest mistakes in finding their route along the way, and does so in the shortest time, wins the race.

“This is more fun than running,” said Crocker. “All you get is a map, and each point is a puzzle to try and get to. It’s not surprising that almost all orienteers are math-science people.”

In Finland, Crocker was the only American, man or woman, to get through the qualifying rounds and make the finals in any race in this sport that has been dominated by the Scandinavians, Swiss and Russians.

In the women’s sprint event, which covered urban terrain in a Finnish village, she placed 25th. In the middle distance race, which was more technical and a more challenging navigation, Crocker was 29th — the best ever finish by an American in that race distance.

In the long race, which covered about 14 kilometers, Crocker placed 18th, recording the best American finish in the history of the event.

Glen Schorr, the executive director of Orienteering USA, puts Crocker’s remarkable accomplishments into perspective.

“Ali is not only very good at this, she is really fast, and really smart,” he said. “With the true orienteers — the great ones — they have that ying-yang thing going. They are not only in superior physical shape, but they also have a great ability to run.”

Crocker’s introduction to the sport came unexpectedly, just six years ago.

Crocker, who grew up in Poughkeepsie in upstate New York, was an avid cross country skier who competed at the NC while earning undergraduate degrees in physics and mathematics. When she won a Rhodes Scholarship to study at the University of Oxford in the United Kingdom, she had to leave the cross country skis behind.

A friend at Oxford took Crocker to an orienteering event, and despite getting “totally lost” in her first race, she was an orienteer.

“I think what appealed to me initially is that it isn’t plain vanilla running, because throughout the race you are trying to out and out-trick everyone else,” she said. “With my background in cross country skiing, you are always thinking about what’s ahead on the course, so I liked the similar challenges orienteering presented.”

After earning a doctorate in astrophysics at Oxford and further studies at the University of Massachusetts, she came to Cornell as a post-doctorate researcher in astronomy.

Her ascent in the orienteering ranks is equally impressive — Crocker went from her somewhat clumsy baptism into the sport in 2007 to making the U.S. national team just three years later. Later this week, she will be one of just two American women representing the U.S. in The World Games that get underway in Cali, Columbia.

“I find that one of the biggest challenges in this sport is maintaining full concentration, full time,” Crocker said. “You can’t daydream for a second. You have to find that line where you can be running very fast, yet still be continually focused. It’s a strength of mine.”

Schorr said that the 28-year-old Crocker has the quick-thinking, analytical mind, combined with the athleticism that orienteering requires.

“That’s the great thing about orienteering — you just can’t be fast, you have to have that ability to think on the fly, with the knack for making great decisions out on the course,” he said. “Ali has all of that, so she’s a natural at this. And what she does is really pretty cool.”

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