

# Orienteering: The Original Obstacle Race

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**The century-old sport involves natural obstacles, navigation, and endurance.**

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*(Photo: Alison Crocker competes at the World Championships in Finland.)*

The rise of mud runs and gladiator races has brought new twists to traditional running races, as participants learn to maneuver obstacles and navigate difficult terrain.

But for racers in the sport of orienteering, none of that is new. The combination of puzzle-solving and strategic running is at the core of the century-old sport.

Instead of traversing man-made obstacles and jumping over fire pits with a crowd of other runners, orienteers race through unmarked terrain alone, except for a map and a compass.

Each orienteer's goal is to complete a point-to-point course in the shortest amount of time. Along the course are controls, and orienteers have to hit the controls in a designated order using the map and compass.

This test of fitness, agility and strategy rewards the strongest-willed runners and most cunning navigators.

“You are running through the forest, crossing marshes, climbing up hills, jumping over deadfall and hopping over rocks,” said long-time orienteer and World Orienteering Championship participant Ross

Smith. “Layered on top of the physical, there is a puzzle-solving component as well. You end up doing math in your head, at high speed and under oxygen debt, deciding when to run straight (the shortest distance between two points) and when to instead run around to avoid some physical challenge, i.e. skirting a lake, avoiding a steep climb.”

Orienteering originated in Sweden during the 19th century as navigation and fitness training for the military. After the first public competition in 1897 in Norway, the sport spread to Finland and Sweden. By the middle of the century, orienteering became a recognized sport throughout Europe, and the International Orienteering Federation was established in May 1961.

Since 1966, the top five male and female orienteers from various countries have met in designated wooded locations and battled for the World Orienteering Championship (WOC) title. In July, the United States sent three women and three men to the championships, which were held in a forest in Northern Finland.

European teams often dominate the world scene, and this year athletes from France, Switzerland, Finland, Russia, Norway, and Denmark walked away with first-place finishes in individual races.

Still, the United States has a competitive spirit at the WOC.

“We always want to beat the Canadians!” said Alex Jospe, a member of the U.S. team who competed at the WOC. “We’re often close with the Irish. There’s usually a lot of good trash-talking and camaraderie among the English-speaking nations, so it’s fun to be competitive with them.”

Two years before every WOC, the forest where the athletes will compete is embargoed to anyone who might run in the World Championship’s races.

To give the athletes a sense of what the race terrain will entail, the host country sets aside “model” terrain and maps for the participants to practice in the week leading up to the championships.

The mapmaker who makes the championship maps designs the model maps, so the racers can get used to the maker’s style. Some designers may put more emphasis on natural barriers and obstacles, including hills and streams the orienteer has to cross, so it is important the participant understands what scale the mapmaker is using in defining obstacles.

“In forest orienteering you have to get a sense of what the forest is like,” said Alison Crocker, a top American and a WOC finalist. “The terrain is much different in Finland than it is in Ohio.”

While foreign terrain may be a challenge, language boundaries aren’t an issue to orienteers.

“There are standard symbols for orienteering,” Crocker said. “I raced in Japan once and although I can’t read a word of Japanese, I was able to read the map.”

Before the race, participants are quarantined and monitored so there is no advantage given to a team that may have multiple runners in a specific race.

“Everyone runs the same race in finals, so runners are sent off at intervals in order to make sure no one follows each other,” Crocker said. “Earlier racers and coaches cannot contact them about the terrain and course.”

Recreational runners can become involved by visiting [Orienteering USA’s club directory](#) and finding a local club. Most clubs offer beginner instruction at meets and welcome all abilities. Races start on trails with strings or chalk to help the runner identify the trail, and then become more difficult, until the entire race takes place on unmarked terrain with various natural physical barriers.

“My advice to everyday runners who are interested in trying orienteering is that you try it out on an easy day, since you'll probably stop a lot to look at the map,” Jospe said. “As you get more experienced, you can read the map as you run, and the intensity gets higher. You can orienteer competitively or treat it as a walk in the woods with your family. It's really a sport for all ages and all abilities.”