Imagine walking or running in the woods. Armed with a map, compass, and your wits, you find your way through unknown terrain. You scan the woods for a boulder, a pit, a trail turning. Searching for orange and white flags in the forest. Navigating your way along trails and streams, across meadows and through woods, you feel totally connected with your surroundings. You sense, rather than see, other competitors around you. You are orienteering.

Orienteering is the “thinking sport”, and can be enjoyed by those of any age or fitness level. You can go out alone, or in groups. Want to try orienteering for the first time? The Delaware Valley Orienteering Association (DVOA) puts on events almost every weekend. There is a range of courses for everyone – beginners can try a White or Yellow course, and a club member will give you some instruction before you head out. The cost is modest – non-members can go out for about ten dollars, and that includes a beautiful detailed map of the park with the controls and a clue sheet. You get to keep the map.

If you decide you love the challenge of off-trail navigating and running, you can begin to compete with world class runners. Some DVOA members are elite runners who travel all over the planet to compete with the best in the world on their turf. Others are weekend warriors who put on their shoes and club shirts every Sunday. Age and gender classes and electronic timing for splits mean you can compete with your peers and compare splits after every event. Even the worst run can have some bright moments, and they keep you going!

Courses can be White, Yellow, Orange, Brown, Green, Red and Blue, with White being on the trail, with simple navigation. For your first time out, try White or Yellow. You can always come back and try a more advanced course. Red and Blue courses are very challenging. They are quite long, and require the ability to be one with the map. You have to read contours and features and make decisions on the fly.

Because finding a control on most courses requires some off-roading, long pants are strongly suggested. You’ll want to wear your favorite hiking shoes. Insect repellent is not a bad idea, either. Club members can fill you in on the traditional “tick check” routine. Orienteering, by the way, is rain or shine.

The Delaware Valley has beautiful parks, woodlands, forests and gamelands. French Creek State Park is the home of American Orienteering, and hosts several events each year, but DVOA has maps on hand for New Jersey, Delaware and Eastern Pennsylvania.

For a schedule of events and lots of information about orienteering in the Delaware Valley, check out DVOA’s website, www.DVOA.org. Their website says “All Welcome”, and they mean it!