

By Jeff Book

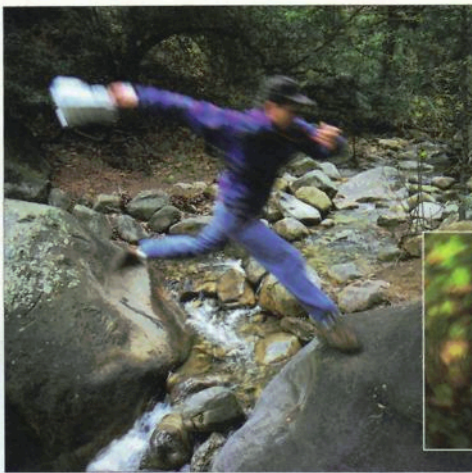
LOST IN THE O-ZONE

ORIENTEERING PITS YOU AGAINST TIME AND TERRAIN. WITH MAP AND COMPASS, OF COURSE.

ON THE ONE hand, the map, dense with squiggly lines; on the other, the terrain, dense with chaparral, oaks, and spiky agave. Somewhere in the middle am I, slogging uphill, consulting my compass as I watch out for the agaves, which dot the terrain like so many green porcupines. If I'm on course, I'll find an orange-and-white checkpoint at the top of the hill. If I'm not—believe me, it could happen—I'll catch my breath, and a beautiful view, while reckoning where I went astray.

That's orienteering's elemental formula: man + plan + land. Balancing physical and mental demands, this "thinking sport" (aka cunning running) involves using map and compass to find a series of checkpoints (called controls) as rapidly as possible. Developed as a military exercise in turn-of-the-century Scandinavia, orienteering has spread around the world, arriving in this country in 1946. Although it remains far more popular in places like Sweden—where each day of the annual O-Ring meet can draw 25,000 people—the sport has a small but loyal following in the United States, which has 65 clubs and perhaps 15,000 regular orienteers. Last year the world championships took place here for the first time, with teams from 34 countries competing. Network TV hasn't yet come knocking. Orienteering is not a spectator sport. It doesn't require flashy clothing, expensive gear, or breakneck speed. But that's OK. Easy on the environment and the pocketbook, orienteering is a low-impact, highly engaging outdoor adventure.

This is my first real O-experience, the monthly meet of the Los Angeles Orienteering Club. A week ago I received an introduction in Ojai on a simple course sponsored by K-Swiss and The Oaks Spa and set in Libby Park. The course and the map were so dense with distinctive features that compass work was academic.



TERRAIN FEATURES that appear to be relatively innocuous, even on a highly detailed orienteering map (inset), can present time-consuming obstacles (left) to the competitor.

PHOTOS BY KYLE BROOKMAN

But there are no tennis courts in sight today—only the mountains and canyons of Los Padres National Forest, 25 miles west of Interstate 5 and the Cajon Pass. En route to the meet, with directions but no map, I'd been sure I was lost—a neat irony, but no way to start orienteering.

I know the site is near when I see signs posted by the organizers asking hunters not to shoot in the area, lest someone mistake us for very large, compass-carrying quail. The registration table is under a tree, shaded from the sunshine of a perfect day.

After paying the \$4 fee (plus a buck to rent a compass), I receive a course map. Orienteering maps are highly detailed, defining features with different symbols and colors. The sport is a kind of treasure hunt in which the map holds all the clues. Man-made features and large rocks are black, topographic features (hills, valleys, knolls) are brown, forest is white, thick brush is green, clearings and fields are yellow, and bodies of water are blue. The map key defines symbols for specific features, so you can easily distinguish a bridge from the stream beneath it and the marsh beyond. Contour lines trace 40-foot changes in elevation (the climb or drop from one line to the next); closely spaced lines indi-

cate steep slopes; widely spaced ones show gentle ones.

Every map also has lines indicating magnetic north, which allow you to use a compass to align the map with the land and find the direction of the next control. As with a road map, the necessary information is there if you care to read it; if not, be prepared to go out of your way (this is *not* the sport for guys who'd rather get lost than admit they need directions). A separate table lists identifying numbers or letters for each control and a description of its location (e.g., ridge, stream junction, spur). Locations are also described by simple symbols that orienteers from around the world can read.

With my starting time recorded, I set off at a run on the easiest of the meet's three courses. As a city slicker, I'm used to navigating from signs and artificial landmarks. The only man-made features in this entire canyon are a couple of dirt roads that are relatively remote from most of the controls. The course is no walk in the park—the terrain is rugged and hilly, with a lot of bristling vegetation. I find the first three controls easily enough, marking my course card with the hole punch or crayon that hangs from each orange-and-white marker. But between the third and fourth controls, I run into a basic orienteering truth: The shortest distance between two points may not be the fastest.

As tempting as it may be to follow your compass directly to the next control, it's not a smart move if the route takes you over steep, brushy slopes. Savvy orienteers will chart a longer but faster route using prominent features as reference, or "attack" points, looking for "handrails" (linear elements like fences, streams, and trails that can be followed for some distance en route to the control) and "catching features" (broad features such as a road or a lake that will keep them from overshooting the control). And they measure their progress by counting paces (since the map scale is metric, it helps to know how many steps you take, walking or running, to cover 100 meters). Being less than savvy, I rely too much on the direct

approach at first, bushwhacking more than I should. Sweating, breathing hard, I recall heroic images from *Treasure of the Sierra Madre*, although this feels more like the escape from *Devil's Island*.

REACHING A BROAD, sandy wash, I head downstream, then upstream. I finally find a junction with a dry streambed, the location of the next control. Like a misplaced salmon, I continue upstream, peering through thick foliage in search of a spur that's prominent on the map but invisible from the wash. Neglecting to count my paces, I jog too far, double back, and plunge into the brush. But which ridge is the right one? The map is a crisp abstraction, the territory a rocky, 3-D reality. The challenge of orienteering comes from mediating between the two, occupying both levels at once.

Finally I find a ridge that ends in something like a spur. Combing the slope, I hit the control and take a compass bearing for the next one, located somewhere on a broad hilltop 1.5 kilometers away. But a beeline is strictly for the birds on this down-and-up route: Thorny thickets must be dodged, slippery slopes negotiated. I bound downhill, map in hand, feeling at once like a fugitive *and* his pursuing tracker.

I recall a theory that prehistoric man had navigational powers we no longer possess, perhaps even an ability to sense the earth's magnetic field. Now we need compasses to navigate, but orienteering still appeals to our dormant hunter-gatherer instincts. After all, it wasn't so long ago that most Americans *knew* how to find their way in the woods. Orienteering can help us relearn how to read a landscape, gain a stronger sense of direction, and transcend our fear of L.A. (*location ambiguity*, a term orienteers prefer to *lost*). And maybe even find the car more quickly in the mall parking lot.

An orienteering meet resembles an absurdist play, as if big-city patterns had been transplanted to the great outdoors. People on different courses cross paths,

concentrating on their own goals, moving rapidly. But orienteers are a friendly relaxed bunch. Ultimately, you're competing primarily with yourself. All ages participate, and you don't need enormous strength or stamina. Top orienteers can navigate map and territory with astonishing speed and accuracy, but many people approach it as map hiking, taking the courses at a comfortable pace, alone or with others. There are many kinds of orienteering including a relay version, marathon ROGAINes (rugged outdoor games involving navigation and endurance), and Score Orienteering (Score-O), in which competitors take the controls in any order, hitting as many as possible in a limited time. There's also Night-O, Ski-O, Bike-O, Scuba-O, Horse-O, and more.

Finally, back at the finish, I have my scorecard checked, my time recorded. Ready for more, I set out on the more difficult orange course. The distances are greater, the hills higher, and I'm slowing down. Wishing the hawk circling overhead could tell me if I'm wasting my time, I finish scrambling up that hill. More trees, more agave—and there's the control. I've only briefly escaped L.A. (in both senses), but at that moment I'm on top of the world. The O-folks are right. Finding yourself in the great outdoors can be a lot of fun. As their T-shirts proclaim, Just Say O. **W**

Getting Oriented

Orienteering requires little in the way of clothing and equipment: lightweight pants (*not* shorts), running or lightweight hiking shoes, a compass with a clear baseplate (which can usually be rented at meets), and a water bottle. Serious orienteers may wear gaiters and special shoes made by K-Swiss and others. Good equipment sources include backpacking stores like REI, Sport-Mart, and Sports Chalet or mail-order sources available through orienteering clubs. An excellent guide to the sport is *Be Expert With Map and Compass: The Orienteering Handbook*, by Bjorn Kjellstrom (Scribner's), available at backpacking stores. Basic training is available at orienteering meets, and nonmembers are welcome. For more information contact the following:

- **Los Angeles Orienteering Club**—5131 W. 134th Pl., Hawthorne, CA 900250; (310) 978-4595.
- **San Diego Orienteering Club**—P.O. Box 26722, San Diego, CA 92196; (619) 578-9456.
- **U.S. Orienteering Federation**—P.O. Box 1444, Forest Park, GA 30051; (404) 363-2110.

—J.B.