



Williston brothers succeed at unique sport (11/12/09)



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OBSERVER STAFF

Trail runners enjoy quick jogs down root- and rock-laden paths. Mappers like using compasses and maps to chart interesting routes through different terrain. Orienteering competitors combine both in strategy-filled endurance races that require participants to think on their toes while watching where they put their feet.

"It's like trying to read a book while running a five-minute mile," said Andrew Childs, a 17-year-old Williston resident and Champlain Valley Union High School senior.

Childs and his younger brother, Ethan, 15, are two rare athletes in Vermont. They compete in the sport of orienteering, an activity that mixes strategy and physicality. It requires the competitor to have expert map and compass skills while simultaneously dashing through thickly wooded areas.

"You have to find a balance between thinking and the speed you're going," said Ethan Childs, a CVU sophomore. "Go too fast and you might miss something."

In any given orienteering event, competitors follow a well-detailed map from point to point to point. Each destination is called a "control," and racers that find each control must log their entry to complete the race. The racer who finishes with the fastest time wins.

The Childs are on their way to being the best in their game. On Oct. 26, both teens placed high at the U.S. Orienteering Championships in Wisconsin, despite competing above their normal age categories. Ethan took home a gold medal in the 17- to 18-year-old age group and Andrew took home a silver medal for the 19- to 20-year-old age group.

The Wisconsin race posed several challenges — ankle-twisting boulder fields, chest-deep swamps and other natural features that make the 8-kilometer race a hard one.

Such challenges make it important to consult a map before bounding off to the next control, the brothers said. By using the compass and map skills, an expert orienteering competitor can find the quickest route to the next control. That can be harder than just running through the woods, Andrew said.

"With orienteering, you don't always want to run the straight line," he said. "The main challenge is reading the map quickly, keeping on track and not screwing up."

The strong performances in Wisconsin could be the deciding factor for the brothers to earn spots on the junior team for the U.S. Orienteering Federation. In doing so, the teens will be able to compete in the Junior World Orienteering Championships and other races in Europe.

Last year, Andrew made the team and competed in the international event in Italy. This year, he plans on making it again and bringing along his younger brother. He envisions orienteering in Europe as an annual family tradition.

"Every summer now, we'll be in Europe competing," the elder Childs said.

An orienteering culture

Orienteering may be a niche sport in North America, but it's a popular one in Europe, specifically in Scandinavia, where it started in the late 1800s. The Swedish military devised orienteering as a military sport to test soldiers on land navigation skills and physical endurance. Eventually, it became a popular civilian activity.



COURTESY PHOTO

Andrew Childs finishes an orienteering race at the Canadian Championships last year.



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Ethan Childs logs in at the finish line of an orienteering race held in May.

Today, thousands compete in European events, but only hundreds compete in races in North America. In an activity that has relatively few competitors compared to other endurance sports, a friendly camaraderie develops between participants, Ethan said.

“We all know each other and are friends,” he said.

It’s also a family affair — the Childs’ parents, Carl and Mary Jo, met while orienteering in Europe and continue to compete. Ethan said he and his brother were reared on the sport.

“Ever since I could walk, I’ve been orienteering,” Ethan said.

The sport has proved a perfect way for the family to see the world from a completely different viewpoint. The Childs boys consider themselves lucky to be able to experience a run through the meadows of the Alps or the pine forests of Sweden.

Though the closest orienteering courses can be found in New Hampshire and New York, the Childs train by creating their own courses in Williston and compete on the CVU cross country team. But there’s nothing like getting out in the woods, racing with a compass fastened to a thumb and map wrapped around a wrist.

“When I’m doing an orienteering course, I’m pushing myself physically,” Andrew said. “But I’m usually focusing on my map so much and when I’m doing that, I don’t even notice how (physically challenging) the race is.”

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