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Orienteering challenges Main Line competitors physically and mentally

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By Seth Zweifler

Most people don't take kindly to getting lost. But for James McGrath and Wyatt Riley, finding their way through unfamiliar territory is what they do best.

McGrath and Riley, both 35, possess a world-class ability to navigate their way through the wilderness. The two men are active participants in a sport called orienteering, something they say has become much more than a hobby for them.

"There seems to be this growing 'orienteering culture' that has consumed me more and more as I've grown older," said McGrath, of Media. "It really is a great sport."

While relatively unknown throughout the sporting community, the "rules" that govern orienteering are fairly simple — at least on paper. The activity requires two underlying abilities: a keen navigational sense as well as a high level of physical endurance. With these two skills, competitors use maps and compasses to run from checkpoint to checkpoint in what is usually a dense and unfamiliar terrain. Races vary in length, but local events, on average, see a one-hour winning time.

"It's very different from running a straight shot on a track," said Riley, of Wayne. "There are a lot more factors that you have to be aware of."

Together McGrath and Riley are internationally renowned orienteers, both belonging to the Delaware Valley Orienteering Association, based near King of Prussia. Along with three other teammates they will be representing the United States in a worldwide competition next month in Hungary.

"It's certainly an honor to represent my country," said Riley, who will be making the trip with the U.S. World Championship team for his first time. "Just getting there is a huge accomplishment."

Aug. 16-23 Miskolc, Hungary, will play host to more than 400 top-level orienteers from about 40 countries. For the past three years the annual competition has been held in a European nation — Denmark, Ukraine and the Czech Republic, consecutively.

In order to qualify for the prestigious race, both McGrath and Riley had to finish in the top five in the men's division during a U.S. national competition that took place earlier this year in California. While Riley qualified for the event for just the first time, McGrath is a seasoned veteran in the competition, having participated the past four years.

"My goal this time around is to make the final round [in Hungary]," McGrath said. "I've never been able to do it before, but I think it's attainable."

The tools of the trade for orienteering are not extensive — just a map, a compass, an electric timer and, as Riley describes, "an alert mind."

During each race, competitors must find a way to balance running through crowded woods with navigating their way with pinpoint accuracy. While there are set checkpoints that runners must reach before completing the race, there is no set route for one to take. Rather it is up to the individual orienteer to decide on the best course, something that Riley describes as the "greatest challenge" of orienteering.

"It takes a lot of quick thinking on top of the need to be in shape," Riley said. "Just one minor slip-up in your navigation and you could be done. When you finish one of these courses, you should be as exhausted mentally as you are physically."

While orienteering is very much an individual competition, the two local athletes share some similarities. Both became interested in the sport at a young age, something they said has allowed their skills to grow immensely over the years.

Riley, who grew up in California, began competing on his own at the age of 14. When he was 16 he ran in his first national event, in a separate junior division. Now, however, he calls his recent qualification for the upcoming world championships his "proudest accomplishment yet," he said.

Growing up near Morgantown, McGrath was first exposed to orienteering when he was in elementary school. At the school's annual spring fair, he said he competed in a race that took him through a densely wooded area nearby, a spot where students were never allowed to venture during the day.

"I remember that it was such a liberating feeling to go into those woods with a map and have nobody stop me," McGrath said. "That's really when I started developing an interest in this."

In addition to their early attraction to the sport, both men are atop the rankings at their home club, the Delaware Valley Orienteering Association. Each year DVOA hosts about 45 local, state and national events, bringing competitors from far and wide together for a common purpose.

"Our main goal is to promote orienteering as a sport as well as encourage outdoor exercise for everyone," said Vadim Masalkov, the president of DVOA. "This is something that all of us — regardless of age — can do."

Although the two athletes say this will remain a hobby for years to come, the peak orienteering age is widely considered by experts to be from 25 to 35 years old. Thus, barring an unexpected comeback, this year's competition in Hungary might be near the end of the line for McGrath and Wiley in international racing.

"This could very well be my last chance to be part of the U.S. World Championship team," McGrath said. "I've got to make this one count."

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