

Orienteering FAQs

What is orienteering? Orienteering is an organized sport for people of all ages that involves navigating a course by hiking or running through forests and fields from one checkpoint to another. It can be a competitive race of navigational skills and physical speed, or simply a hike through the countryside with the added fun of finding the checkpoints, which are known as control points in orienteering. The basics can be learned easily, but you can spend a lifetime honing your skills.

Do I have to join the club to participate? No. Events are open to anyone. When you do join, you receive a discount on event fees and the club newsletter.

What should I wear? Beginners can wear clothing and footwear suitable for a hike or run. For intermediate and advanced courses, you'll want comfortable long pants or gaiters, and long sleeves to protect against scratches. An inexpensive nylon warm-up suit works well, but also dress for the weather. Sneakers, trail-running shoes or light hiking boots are appropriate. Wear clothing and footwear you don't mind getting dirty. Avoid wearing shorts because some routes may take you off trail into brush or briars. Orienteering-specific clothing and equipment can be ordered from stores that specialize in orienteering.

What other equipment is needed? A compass, orienteering map (supplied by the club) and watch are essential. Depending on weather, think about sunscreen and a hat. The club provides food and beverages, but it's wise to drink fluids before a race, especially if you run. You may want to bring a change of clothing and footwear. Since you may go off trail, you could get muddy and wet.

What's different about an orienteering map? It is a detailed topographic map used to choose the best route to a series of designated features (called control points) in courses of varying difficulty. The challenge is to choose the best route to the control points by understanding the map and relating it to the terrain. The map comes with a control card that uses symbols to describe the land features at each control point. Orienteering maps are printed in five colors, with each designation a feature: green for thick brush, yellow for clearings or fields, white for normal forest, blue for water, brown for such topographic features as contour lines, and black for such manmade features as roads, trails, fences and buildings. Get descriptions of orienteering symbols [here](#).

How are distances measured on an orienteering map? Distances in orienteering are measured in meters. One meter equals 3.28 feet or 100 cm. Map scales are printed on the map in ratios, such as 1:10,000. This means one unit of distance on the map, whether it's inches or cm, equals 10,000 of those units on the ground. For instance, 1 cm on the map would equal 10,000 cm on the ground, which is the same as 100 meters, and 100 meters equals 328 feet.

How do you orient a map? You study a road map with the writing face up, but this isn't the case with an orienteering map. By orienting a map, you rotate it so that the features on the map always line up with the same landmarks you are looking at on the ground. This is an important basic technique for finding your way.

What compass should I buy? Start with an inexpensive base plate compass that consists of a clear plastic rectangular base plate with a rotating compass housing. These can be found in most camping and sporting goods stores.

Can I do the sport with a partner? Orienteering can be done solo or in groups of two or more, although serious competitors often race alone, similar to road racing. Families are welcome.

Can someone teach me how to orienteer? Members provide instruction at events, and the club conducts several learn-and-practice sessions each spring. To see the schedule, look [here](#).

How much does an orienteering meet cost? The club charges \$5 for members and \$10 for non-members. The charge for learn-and-practice sessions is \$10. Also, entry fees at Schoellkopf Boy Scout Camp events are at the member rate of \$5 for all Scouts.

Will I get lost? You may get disoriented and go the wrong direction at times. That is part of orienteering. If you become lost, you can always relocate your place on the map by abandoning your search for controls and finding obvious landmarks on the map, such as roads, trails and water. Meet officials also keep track of who is out on a course.

Where and when are events held? For most meets, registration and beginner instruction begin at 10:30 a.m., with individual starts from 11 a.m. to noon. Times may vary a little, so check the schedule. The club conducts meets at many locations, including Chestnut Ridge Park, Emery Park, Sardinia Forest, Little Rock City, Schoellkopf Boy Scout Camp, Sprague Brook Park and Hunter's Creek Park. Once you get close to a site, look for orange-and-white orienteering signs. Events are held rain or shine. Get driving directions [here](#).

How long do meets last? It depends on the length of the course, the skill of the orienteer and whether you run or walk. As a beginner, expect to spend from one to three hours out on a course. Generally, there is a three-hour time limit.

Do you walk or run? Many participants walk. But the object is to complete a course in the shortest possible time, so competitive orienteers run as much as possible. Nevertheless, a fast runner can lose to a slower person who is a better map-reader. A great thing about orienteering is that it can be done at any pace.

What else can I expect at an event? When you arrive, you will receive a map and a description of the checkpoints (controls). There are usually three courses: beginner, intermediate and advanced. After signing a waiver and receiving a brief instruction session, you will be given a start time, and off you go, using the map to find the controls. Each control is located near a distinct feature on the map, such as a trail junction, stream or boulder. At each control, there is a paper punch that makes a distinctive pattern. Orienteers use the punch on a control card carried with the map to prove that they have visited each control. Upon your return, your total time is recorded.

What course should I try? The United States Orienteering Federation uses seven courses graded by color according to their navigational difficulty, length and, in sanctioned meets, age category. Local meets generally offer three difficulty levels: beginner, intermediate and advanced. In general, beginner courses are on or near trails and focus on distinct map features. The four advanced courses (brown, green, red and blue) all have the same level of navigational difficulty but differ in distances and climbs. At A-meets (events sanctioned by the U.S. Orienteering Federation), you run in competitive age categories or in an open class for all ages.

Courses	Navigation Difficulty	Terrain	Distance (kilometers)	USOF Competitive Category (age/gender)
WHITE	Beginner	Trails	2 - 3	F-10, F-12, M-10, M-12, MF-White, Group-White
YELLOW	Adv. Beginner	On or near trails	3 - 5	F-14, M-14, F-Yellow, M-Yellow, Group-Yellow
ORANGE	Intermediate	On or near trails	4.5 - 7	F-16, M-16, F-Orange, M-Orange, Group-Orange
BROWN	Advanced	Cross-country	3 - 5	F-18, F55+, F60+, F65+, F70+, F75+, F80+, F85+, M65+, M70+, M75+, M80+, M85+, F-Brown, M-Brown
GREEN	Advanced	Cross-country	4.5 - 7	F-20, F35+, F40+, F45+, F50+, M-18, M50+, M55+, M60+, F-Green, M-Green
RED	Advanced	Cross-country	6 - 10	F-21+, M-20, M35+, M40+, M45+, M-Red
BLUE	Advanced	Cross-country	8 - 14	M-21+

1 km = 0.62 miles

What do the names of orienteering meets mean? The major types of orienteering events include cross-country, also known as point to point; score;

sprint; and ROGAINE. The events are also categorized as nationally sanctioned A meets, regional B meets or local C meets.

What's cross-country orienteering? This is the standard format used for most meets. Competitors find control locations in a specified order. The winner is the person with the fastest time. Route choice is important. Night-O events are conducted with flashlights and headlamps.

What's a sprint meet? A sprint event is a shorter course, with beginner to intermediate level navigation. Speed plays a bigger role.

What's a score-O? The object of score orienteering is to visit as many controls as possible in a preset time. Participants choose which controls to visit and in which order. The controls are worth points, and the challenge is to pick the most efficient route in the allotted time. The winner amasses the most points.

What's a ROGAINE? The acronym stands for Rugged Outdoor Group Activity Involving Navigation and Endurance. These are long score-orienteering events, usually with time limits of three, six, 12 or 24 hours.

Can I practice map-reading? Yes. Each year, the club sets up courses of 25 controls at several parks for orienteers or hikers to do at their leisure. These are called Map Hikes and cost \$7 each. Get details [here](#).