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With map in hand, Anchorage residents of all skill levels navigate the sport of orienteering

By Chris Bieri

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An orienteering group checks a map before embarking on the course during the Navigation Celebration hosted by the Arctic Orienteering Club on Wednesday at Bear Valley Elementary School in Anchorage. (Chris Bieri / ADN)

Rowan Davis is a treasure hunter.

He admits his attempts with a metal detector have so far yielded modest results — a few coins and some old melted cans from a mining fire.

But the 8-year-old has a plan to expand his hunting grounds. That objective steered him to Bear Valley Elementary School on a recent Wednesday for the Navigation Celebration hosted by the [Arctic Orienteering Club](#).

“I feel like it’ll be easier to find spots using a compass, so it’s nice to do this so you can learn how to use the compass and find things,” said Rowan, who is just getting into orienteering.

Rowan and his mother, Barb Davis, were two of the dozens of people of all skill levels in attendance June 29. There were families with small children, couples who were just getting introduced to orienteering as well as top-level navigators and athletes.



Rowan Davis and his mother, Barb Davis, look at a map on the Coyote Course during the Navigation Celebration hosted by the Arctic Orienteering Club on Wednesday at Bear Valley School in Anchorage. (Chris Bieri / ADN)

The club meets weekly and generally has five levels of courses, according to Jen Jolliff, who is the club's vice president of events. The first level typically includes elementary-age kids, and the next level is slightly more

difficult without being too demanding.

“A lot of the course tends to be on trails or just off of trails,” Jolliff said. “It’s kind of a progression of how to start reading a map and thinking more spatially. You don’t necessarily even need to use a compass yet. We really have a nice series of steps that everybody can take to understand about how to read a map better and to go out at the safety level that they feel like they’re capable of at the moment.”

But there also are challenging routes for those who want to be pushed both physically and mentally.

Wednesday’s most difficult challenge — named Billy Goat Gruff — drew four skilled navigators who pressed through Section 36 in Bear Valley, which features both foliage and steep elevation changes.

Allen Spangler completed the route in one hour, 37 minutes, but each of the others took upward of two hours to complete the course.



A man with a compass and a map gets ready to start a course during the Navigation Celebration hosted by the Arctic Orienteering Club on Wednesday. (Chris Bieri / ADN)

Jolliff said the skill is a great way for both fledgling and serious Alaska adventurers to bolster their outdoor prowess and safety.

“I know so many people who go out adventuring on their own and numerous directions and in different ways, whether it’s in a packraft or whether it’s in a kayak, whether it’s hiking or traversing across glaciers on skis,” she said.

[Move over, Flattop: Little O’Malley Peak may now be the most accessible hike in Chugach State Park]

“There’s lots of different ways to travel in Alaska, maybe more than almost anywhere else in the world. And every one of those places, you are aided by the idea of being able to navigate safely and efficiently through that space,” Jolliff said. “You can go out and wander, but you’re almost certainly going to get lost. And in a place as big as Alaska, if you just wander and you get lost, it’s unlikely that you’re going to come back.”

Orienteers navigate through thick brush during the Navigation Celebration hosted by the Arctic Orienteering Club on Wednesday at Bear Valley Elementary School in Anchorage. (Photo by Jen Jolliff)

Brian Kirchner started orienteering as a kid when a friend got involved. When he returned to Anchorage from college, he got back into it and is now a member of the club’s board. He finished the most difficult course in 2:21 and said the skill allows him to access hidden gems that are often just off trail.

“I really liked that I get to explore off trails see areas that I wouldn’t ever find myself in,” he said. “I can see beautiful lakes or marshes — just things that are out close to home that you don’t realize are kind of hidden away in different parks and areas around town.”

Jolliff said learning to read maps has a bevy of benefits, including improving spatial awareness, connectivity and the ability to think navigationally. It's an especially great skill for kids, she said, and appeals to their sense of inquisitiveness.

"There's a real curiosity built into the idea that you can look at a piece of paper and know where to go in the real world," she said. "People always are interested in going new places and thinking about new places. A map tells you how to visualize new places before you even get there. It's going to help you find something that's going to be interesting."

Stella Waehler approaches a flag during the Navigation Celebration hosted by the Arctic Orienteering Club on Wednesday at Bear Valley Elementary School in Anchorage. (Chris Bieri / ADN)

Jolliff recently published "Fogrunner," a book about a young boy who lives on an archipelago and his attempts to join an elite group of navigators who act as messengers in the chain. Jolliff had initially been contacted by a local author who was writing a portion of a story that involved a character reading a map and wanted to tap her expertise on the subject.

"My partner turned to me and he was like, 'Why aren't you writing a book that really makes navigation the focus of the book? You have a degree in creative writing! Why aren't you doing this?' " Jolliff recounted. "That was my permission slip to spend a lot of time writing a book."

Orienteers get off to a running start during the Navigation Celebration hosted by the Arctic Orienteering Club on Wednesday at Bear Valley Elementary School in Anchorage. (Chris Bieri / ADN)

There have been plenty of top athletes who have gotten into orienteering — for example, former Olympic skier Bill Spencer was in attendance Wednesday. And while first-rate orienteers always combine athleticism with

know-how, Jolliff is quick to point out that even the fastest can't get anywhere without the basis of navigation.

"I remember when I first started orienteering, I was about 21 or 22," she said. "And I went out to my first course and my mother-in-law was running the same course that I was running, and she literally walked the whole time and I ran as hard as I could the whole time. And she beat me because I ran a lot in the wrong direction."

Orienteers sign up before hitting the course during the Navigation Celebration hosted by the Arctic Orienteering Club on Wednesday at Bear Valley Elementary School in Anchorage. (Chris Bieri / ADN)

Ian Moore passes out maps before the start of the Billy Goat Course during the Navigation Celebration hosted by the Arctic Orienteering Club on Wednesday at Bear Valley Elementary School in Anchorage. (Chris Bieri / ADN)

Chris Bieri

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