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Adventure sport puts runners in woods with map, compass

Upstate trio competed in 24-hour event

By Mike Foley

STAFF WRITER

Rogaine is well known as a hair-growing product.

But the adventure sport of rogaine puts hair on your chest instead of your cranium.

Simply put, a "rogaine" is a long-distance, cross-country race using a map and compass. But simple doesn't really enter into the event when you're deep in the woods, far from any established trail, and on your feet for 24 hours trying to find elusive checkpoints.

That was exactly the situation three Upstate adventure racers/ultra runners found themselves in this past weekend as they competed in the 2008 Ultra O-gaine in Prentice Cooper State Forest, near Chattanooga, Tenn. Carl Laniak of Greenville; Jim Kelleher of Travelers Rest and Jeff Papenfus of Greenville all competed -- and survived -- the event.

Laniak, better known as an ultra marathoner, finished 16th out of 30 finishers in the 24-hour event. He scored 1,133 points by finding checkpoints -- these range in point value from 15-100 each, with the more-distant, more-difficult checkpoints worth the most -- scattered throughout the forest.

Laniak said he started strong, but after 13 hours decided he'd "had enough" and stopped. Yet despite finishing early, he enjoyed the experience.

"The weather was fantastic and Prentice Cooper State Forest is absolutely beautiful," he said. "It was a very nice, fun event."

Kelleher and Papenfus spent 22 1/2 hours roaming the woods. They both scored 1,016 points to finish in 17th and 18th places.

"We finished right behind Carl, but we were out there a lot longer. That's how much better he is than us," Papenfus said with a laugh. "With this type of event, you can be fast like Carl, or you can be a little better at finding things, which I think we are."

Unlike traditional orienteering, in which competitors follow checkpoints in order from 1 to 2 to 3, etc., and the fastest person to finish wins, rogaines have so many checkpoints no one can get to them all, Laniak said.

"So you have to figure out what route will give you the most points in 24 hours," he said. "Everyone does something different, and you can be in the best shape, but someone smarter than you at reading a map can win."

Few of his fellow ultra-marathoners are into "the navigation stuff," Laniak said. In fact, not many people are into rogaines at all.

The North American rogaine schedule includes just 10 events. Papenfus said there are only four of the 24-hour events in the country, and the Ultra O-gaine is the only one in the Southeast.

"We were talking to some of the other guys there and two were from Seattle, and one was from Colorado," he said. "So they have to come a long way to get to these. It's a very small sub-section of athletes that do this."

Rogaine began in Australia in 1976. It takes its name from the first names of its three founders: Rod, Gail and Neil (Rod Phillips, Gail Davis and Neil Phillips). An acronym was created later: "Rugged Outdoor Group Activity Involving Navigation and Endurance."

The rules vary by event and location. Generally, solo competitors or teams find as many checkpoints as possible in the time allowed. Teams travel entirely on foot, navigating by map and compass between checkpoints, in terrain that varies from open farmland to hilly forest. A central base camp, known as a "hash house," provides hot meals throughout the event, and teams may return at any time to eat, rest or sleep. Events are as short as 6 hours, but most championship rogaines last 24 hours.

Laniak, who finished third in the 2007 Ultra O-gaine when he scored 1,761 points, guessed that this year's winner, Peter Jolles of Marietta, Ga., probably covered 50 miles on foot and traversed 15,000 feet of altitude change during the 24 hours.
