

Chris Cassone: Orienteering Pro

□ GREG SACK, OCIN

Last May I wangled a trip to New York to observe Chris Cassone in action. Most of us in the orienteeing community need no introduction to Chris. I suspect that a certain number of us may need a reintroduction, though.



Kids of Lewisboro Elementary chasing down the clues.

Photos and layout by Greg Sack

That's cute, but is it orienteeing?

Most of us know him from his long time involvement with orienteeing, his many connections with training camps, compass companies, etc. Many of us have visited treasurehuntadventures.com.

So what is it with this guy? Has he given up and sold out? Is using orienteeing to make a living an abuse of the sport? Is it possible to make a living through orienteeing?

Here is somebody willing to dress up in character to get people to run around with maps on made up quests at just about any kind of event from birthdays to corporate conferences.

He has probably gotten more people in the US to play map games than any other single individual. Yet, is what he does orienteeing? Does it pay "dividends"?

School events still are important

I visited Chris last May in his home region north of New York City. He was preparing for day two of a three part O-lesson and I wanted to see him in action. I was also interested in finding out if he was still actually teaching orienteeing, being somewhat skeptical of pirates.

He told me that he does four schools on a regular basis and over 20 per year on a "hit and run" basis. The length, depth and content vary from school to school.

He has been listed on several school systems' provider lists, sometimes more than once for different subjects. In one system, an art teacher wanted him to help teach cartography after a science teacher had utilized his services.

"The trick there is to forge a good working relationship with a particular teacher. That teacher can help you get on their provider list. Then you will get calls from other teachers in the system.

And don't be afraid to charge for your services. The schools all have PTAs or other groups that raise money for special events and enrichment programs. They expect to pay, and if they get your services for nothing, they think your services are worth nothing."

So what are his methods?

Chris learned his methods at O-Ringen in 1991 on the Wilderness Education Assoc/Bjorn Kjellstrom Scholarship. The favored unit involves three days: one class period indoors; one class period split between indoors and outdoors on campus; and a field trip to a park with an O map.

He makes a map of the classroom with 10 unnumbered controls which he copies before his first class. After introductions, the students are asked to define what a map is. He then gives his definition: "A bird's eye view of the ground."

At this point the kids are ready to help him draw a map on the chalkboard. "The kids get really involved! 'No, the desk is bigger, and move it over to the left!'"

Once they have the map making process modeled and experienced, they get their copies of the room map. Everyone puts his or her map on the floor and becomes a bird for a few moments. They "fly" around the map, and then they pick up the maps to "fly" around it again.

Finally, they are ready to hunt for the clues marked on the map. This is a mass start score-O done in absolute silence. The



kids have to find the clues, which are numbers on small squares of paper. They add these numbers up and show them to the teacher, Bob Lazzone. He records their finish order.

The second period

When Chris shows up for the next segment they are excited. They have been looking forward to this all week. Some of them have seen him out on the grounds placing tags and controls.

Chris starts off by showing a very short video clip from Nickelodeon that he had helped with. "Keep it short and keep it moving. Build the excitement. Videos should not be more than 5 minutes at a





time,” Chris says.

After reviewing the definition of a map, he talks about how “the bird is flying higher today.” Each student gets a school map that shows the immediate play area behind it. The map symbols are explained, then he has them set the map. He has them put their finger on various objects represented on it to help develop their symbol recognition.

Master maps of the next course are passed out, one per work table. The students are told not to touch the master while copying the course onto their playground map. Once they finish, it is time to go outside.

Chris has them all face north, set their maps, explains the game (another mass-start search for clues), shows them a sample tag, suggests they think about their strategy and says “Go!” And they are gone!

This time the tags have a number and a letter. Once they have all 11 clues they arrange them in numerical order to find the secret message. And again they quietly show the teacher their answer to have it checked and their finish order recorded.

Time to fly higher

Each student receives her or his third map, this one of the whole school grounds. This map has all of the next event’s controls marked on it, as well as punch blocks.

This is, again, a mass start, but this time they are looking for standard O flags and punches to punch their maps. “I use mass start formats due to time considerations,” says Chris. Again, at the word “GO!” they are gone!

Some of the controls are around the side of the building, some past a fence and into

the soccer field, but everybody is intent on being as quick to finish as they can. The first finishers with each group are beaming and giving high-fives. Even the last finishers and the few that had to be called in due to time seemed quite enthused. By this time, the teacher has the information he needs to make up the teams for the off campus event.

Once back in the classroom, there are a few last words about how to dress and what to bring on next week’s field trip, and class is dismissed.

Up to this point, all maps are hand drawn, black and white maps with no contours. Other than a two minute in-class preview of an enlarged version of the park map, the lesson for these concepts takes place at the park with the O map. Several parents are recruited to wait at safety stations to prevent kids from wandering off of the map.

“Last year two students from this school got pretty engrossed in their discussion and just walked right off of the map. We will have a parent just down the trail from strategic junctions to turn anybody that comes their way back onto the course.”

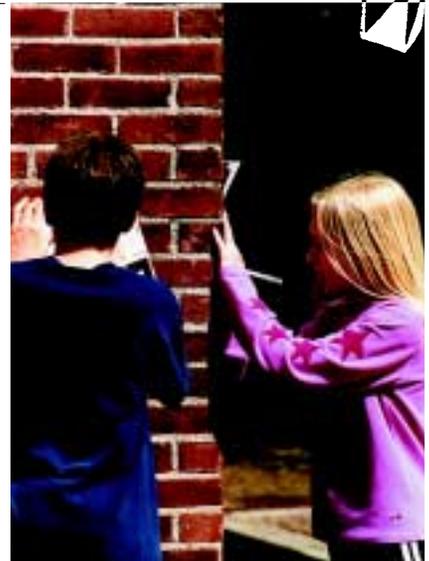
Part of what makes this whole thing work is that Chris keeps records on every event and every school. One secret is to streamline. So he uses the same White/Yellow course over and over again. It is new for each group of kids. And the teachers like it since they know what to expect.

So parents are involved and see the kids having a great time. They see the kids going off in pairs (in alternating clockwise and counterclockwise directions.)

They see them triumphantly finish and exuberantly chattering. Kids with issues are even doing great. It is only a small step to invite the parents to bring the whole family to the next local meet.

“I give everyone a club schedule, but you know, I am not a missionary. If they never come to a meet, at least they have had a great time out here.”

Chris told me that self-promotion and good press releases were important. He also told me about several of his special events. He is particularly proud of the West Orange event that had a whole town doing a history-O. We talked about how businesses are willing to pay 10 to 20 times what he gets for a school. But as we watched the fifth graders at Lewisboro Elementary zooming around, he looked over to me and said, “It just doesn’t get any better than this. This is really great!” ▲





Captain Jack

It doesn't take much to see that Chris revels in his altergo and in showmanship. The bigger the better. The single event that he is proudest of is when he

got the whole town of West Orange involved in the Town Wide Family Treasure Hunt in 1999.

It involved a "journal" with sponsorship ads and instructions on how to play. In the centerfold there was a map with controls marked and an answer sheet on the back. The participants were to find the 11x17 placards with historical statements that pertained to the sites of placement. Each statement had a word missing with one letter marked as being a clue to the final secret phrase.

Those that had the correct phrase were issued a treasure map at the town picnic. Those that successfully completed that hunt had their names placed into a drawing for prizes.

Good merchandising and a great schtick, but is it orienteering? "You know what? I don't even care. The kids are out there and families are having fun together."

How about the rest of us? Do we care?

Actually, I think we do. There is a lot that we can learn from Capt. Jack. Like how to have fun and how to engage the audience. We can learn more about providing incentives and leading people into the spirit and excitement of orienteering. But, personally, I do care if they are ever to seek out the club and become active. I also care whether institutions of learning see the value of developing orienteering in their programs.

Alternative learning institutions

We are all aware of the Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts and their take on orienteering. There are some surprising sources of teaching orienteering out there. Summer day and overnight camps routinely teach "orienteering", though they are often even more disheartening than the scouts' "Finding your way" badges. So what happens when an O'er becomes involved with one of these situations?

My wife, Bobbi, is a Cincinnati Parks Naturalist and was responsible for helping to develop an Outdoor Skills day camp. She got excited when she heard about Chris' and ROC's programs. After grilling me, she developed one that was more appropriate for her 8-12 year olds. Here is how her hybrid program works:

Day 1

The leader shows all participants how to handle a map. This includes the definition of a map as a bird's eye view of the ground and how to keep the map in agreement with the land. After the initial lessons and a little guided practice, the kids are randomly assigned a number. They each study the map to identify where on the map their number is and then race to find their part of the puzzle (a single letter, a "treasure map" or a key) hidden at that location. This takes place in a field about the size of a baseball field.

As soon as they figure out what they are looking for (treasure chest) and know where to look, they are off like a shot! The staff has the day's



snack in the chest and everyone gets some cookies.

Once everyone is back at the start the kids are given a little review and a lesson on the next game. This one is called a Safari-O. There are sixteen controls each with a different number and letter. Each kid gets a map with four controls, and the identifying number. When the kid has found his/her correct four controls and written the four letters on the map they have to unscramble the letters to find out which animal they are. If there are enough kids this game can be used to for group identities, eg. owls might be a group name.

After all were back and identified compasses were introduced. "I started off by asking 'What do you do if you can't find anything that you know to orient your map by?'" says Bobbi. So everyone got to try working with the compass.

Day 2

The next morning's event begins at the nature center. Everyone gets a chance to talk a little about the previous days events and the next one is explained. It is a Score-O in the fringes of the woods surrounding the center. Everyone has seen a few controls coming in, so they can't wait to get going.

They need some review on map and compass use first. The kids get to try orienting the map both with the compass and by landforms. After the review and some modest



extension, the kids are released and they are off like a shot again. Usually it is the most thoughtful team that wins this one, with the speedy boys getting a lesson in strategy.

Day 3

Most days have the kids subdivided into smaller groups doing various activities. On this morning the whole camp gets to do a white course. Staff members are stationed just down the trail from any intersection that someone may make a wrong turn onto.

Once everyone is given a last lesson on contours and the map key, and after map and compass use is reviewed, teams of two are sent at intervals in opposite directions. Since some will only walk, it is a good idea to have some kind of activity for fast finishers as they wait.

The methods of teaching contours included “Knuckle Mountain” and the use of a model. Knuckle Mountain is done by making a fist and drawing contour lines around the biggest knuckle on down to the hand. Once drawn, just open the hand for a dramatic 3D to 2D transition.

Day 4

This camp has a GPS unit, so they tried a Geocaching activity. Once kid got to hold the unit, one a compass and one a map. The kids all worked together to decide their route to the cache. This turned out to be a good lesson on map use.

Day 5

The whole camp goes to a different park on this day. While half are canoing, the other half are map walking, taking turns leading the group. They talk about some of the skills that they have learned so far. But mostly, they each get a leadership role for a while.

When the kids get a chance to say which part of camp they



most enjoyed, it is usually “Orienteering!”

The staff is excited about this program and is now encouraging Bobbi to develop and extend it. Orienteering will figure in programs involving Girls Scouts and schools and may result in permanent courses as nature trails in more than one city park.

Cincinnati Parks Education Department reaches many school children. They may turn out to provide many of them with their first real orienteering experience.