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**ADVENTURE RACING**  
**New sport takes outdoor activities to extreme**

By MICHAEL LEVY

Have good outdoor skills in map and compass, paddling, backpacking, mountain biking and mountaineering? Think you're fit enough for a marathon? Like competition and teamwork?

Adventure racing will either kill you or make you stronger.

It's a new and growing outdoor competition, probably a natural evolution by the extreme sports generation.

"This is just an extension of the outdoor stuff I've liked to do since I was in the Boy Scouts," said Tom Wagar, co-founder of "Adventureheads," a local adventure racing club that in one year has attracted about 50 members who live in a 100-mile radius of Buffalo.

Wagar, 37, is lean and tough as a buggy whip - and I am exhausted just listening to his description of the sport.

"It's sort of like triathlon, in that there are several disciplines," Wagar said. "All races feature trekking, mountain biking over technically difficult terrain, a paddling component and rope work: You usually rappel down something."

Events range from six- to eight-hour sprints to weekend-long events that run 24 to 36 hours and week-long races like the five-day, 400-mile Eco-Challenge.

While the sport attracts those seeking to test their physical and mental breaking points, these are team events - three- or four-person teams must stay in visual contact while slogging up a muddy mountain trail with full pack, swimming a lake or paddling a raft through whitewater rapids.

Wagar seems surprised that his overtures to orienteering, hiking, cycling and paddling clubs has not caused a landslide of new members.

"This is a great sport for someone with a family and a job," he said, "because we usually train at night, outside of family time, or on Sunday from 5 to 8 a.m., so there's time to clean up for church."

A three-man Adventurehead team finished ninth in the recent Balance Bar Challenge in New York City. Wagar, club co-founder Dave DiTullio (now on duty in the Middle East with his Navy reserve unit) and Paul Clark arrived at 2 p.m. on a Friday with mountains of gear. Each team's gear was stashed at checkpoints along the way by the race organizers as 83 teams - about 250 racers - were bused to Harriman State Park for orientation and a meal, followed by strategy sessions as teams pored over the maps they were given, deciding on routes.

Saturday morning they began a 20-mile trek (including swimming a half-mile across a lake), then changed clothes for the next stage - a 50-mile mountain bike ride down the Hudson to Nyack, arriving at midnight, Saturday.

"We'd been racing for 17 hours by then," Wagar said. His team had a 15-minute nap while awaiting a tide change and then kayaked 15 miles down the Hudson to the George Washington Bridge, which was crossed on foot.

"This race was a bit different because we had to put on roller blades and skate into downtown Manhattan," Wagar said.

Now, in full daylight, racers dashed to the flight deck of the WW II aircraft carrier museum Intrepid. There, ropes were rigged for rappelling. Thirty feet over the river they dropped and swam to shore to roller-skate to the finish.

Adventureheads had put in 26 hours of nearly nonstop exertion, 12 hours behind the winners, the local NYC club.

"They know the trails and got a break with the tide," Wagar said. "But 74 teams were behind us, including several that had to quit."

That's another thing: If one team member crashes and burns, that team is eliminated. Hypothermia is the most common reason for failure.

"I admit this sport appeals to people who like gear," Wagar said. And entry fees can be steep because of the complex race logistics. Perhaps that's why the majority of Adventureheads have well-paying jobs. Some help also comes from local sponsors like Leki (trekking poles); and one need not own a kayak or canoe, as event sponsors usually provide whatever watercraft are called for.

Born in New Zealand, the sport is growing inexorably as more and more people are attracted to extreme sports, fitness training regimens and outdoor activities like mountaineering. Once trekking and climbing were limited to all but the most fit, the most daring and the most wealthy. Today competent eco-tourism outfitters have helped even grandmothers dog sled to and from the North Pole.

"Adventure racing puts things in a new perspective," Wagar said. "Boy Scouts might do a 50-mile canoe trip in five days. Here, we do it in 15 hours. My wife and three little girls all backpack and do some canoeing, so this is just an extension of that. All I had to do was add a little gear or upgrade some things like my mountain bike."

Wagar, a systems engineer with Nortel, sharpened other skills by designing the club's Web site: <http://www.adventureheads.com/>. There you will find more information on the history of the sport, the gear, skills, training and event schedules.

"There's some sort of event almost every weekend within driving distance of Buffalo," Wagar said. "Our club tries to get to three or four of the weekend warrior events each year and several more one-day sprints. There's a good sprint in Allegany County this spring, for instance."

If you think you are man or woman enough, check out the Adventurehead Web site and go for it.