



←The joy is in the journey.

→ADVENTURE RACING

Start your boots!

A new sport is off and running

STORY BY PETER BRONSKI

IT STARTED SNOWING IN THE PREDAWN HOURS. By 5:00 a.m., nearly two feet of fresh powder blanketed the landscape as 30 racers gathered for the start of New England's first-ever winter adventure race: the Frigid Infliction. Hosted by the Green Mountain Adventure Racing Association (GMARA) at Vermont's Bolton Valley Resort in early March, the event challenged 10 teams with a 10-mile course that required map-and-compass navigation, snowshoeing, cross-country skiing, and a Tyrolean traverse.

Brian Staveley, a high school teacher from Cambridge, Mass., raced with a fellow teacher and three students. He was the only one with race experience, and in the end the group was unable to complete the course. But that wasn't the point. "The experience meant a great deal to the kids," he says.

The novices on Staveley's team, like the race itself, were just the latest additions to the sport of adventure racing (AR), which has seen explosive growth in recent years. Adventure races are team-oriented, multi-discipline sporting events where competitors strive to log the fastest time while negotiating an outdoors course via established checkpoints. Races can last from a few hours to a few days, and often incorporate elements of trail run-

ning, mountain biking, and paddling. Other races may include navigation, rappelling, mountaineering, or other challenges. Prizes for winners can reach into the thousands of dollars.

Racers come from every age group, and are drawn to the sport for many reasons. Mike Morris, one of New England's premier adventure racers, found that AR blended a love for the outdoors with a passion for competitive sport. Others are drawn to the camaraderie, teamwork, and scenery. And some, like GMARA's Chris Yager, saw the Eco-Challenge—an international, expedition-length race—on TV and thought "it looked cool."

And the attraction is growing. In 2001 the United States Adventure Racing Association (USARA), the sport's national sanctioning body, recognized 75 events nationwide. Four years later, that number had jumped to 350. In 2001, Vermont had no adventure races. Today, it has at least four major races, including the Frigid Infliction, and roughly 20 events are now USARA-sanctioned from New York to Maine.

Increasing exposure and sponsorship account for much of the growth, as does a proliferation of beginner-friendly race formats. "In a lot of ways we did the sport backwards," says Troy Farrar, USARA president. "We started with expedition-length events. Now we're seeing a lot more sprint events—six hours or less. It would be like if the sport of running started with ultramarathons, and after the fact, someone said 'Maybe we should do some 5ks.'"

Host communities are embracing the sport as a boon to the local economy. Racers stay at local hotels, eat in area restaurants, and go to neighborhood shops to pick up last-minute gear needs. Advertising, sponsors, television coverage, and tourism boost the financial influx, which can range from tens of thousands of dollars to upwards of several million.

However, the sport's growing popularity has raised some concerns among land stewards about its environmental impact: racers bushwhacking through environmentally-sensitive areas, garbage left on trails, or the impacts inherent when racers, support crews, and race volunteers concentrate at checkpoints. In response, USARA, along with environmental stakeholders such as Leave No Trace and The Nature Conservancy, and land managers including the National Park Service, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and U.S. Forest Service, developed ecological standards for adventure racing that focus on minimum impact guidelines for race planning, hiking, mountain biking, camping, water recreation, and ropes courses.

Thinking about trying a race yourself? Matt Drayer, an AMC member and webmaster for the New England Adventure Racing Association, mountain biked, kayaked, and hiked for years before getting into the sport. His advice: "You don't have to be an elite athlete to give adventure racing a try. Go for it!" ●

→DID YOU KNOW?

The longest adventure race took place in 2000 in Brazil. It took **12 days** to finish the 523-mile course.

→PETER BRONSKI IS AN AWARD-WINNING ADVENTURE WRITER. HIS FIRST BOOK, *AT THE MERCY OF THE MOUNTAINS*, WILL BE PUBLISHED IN THIS FALL BY AMC BOOKS.

PHOTOGRAPH BY PAUL TONY ANGELL. WWW.GEMOUNTAINRACING.COM. STOCK