Adventure Racing CORE

A Nontraditional Approach to the Physical Education Lesson

DAN DEJAGER

More than an obstacle course, this unit combines fitness activities with cognitive and affective elements to create a unique experience.

"I'll do 15, if you each do five," Bailey tells her two teammates as they run to the push-up station. The team drops to the ground and into position when they reach Brandon, a fellow student who is acting as judge for the push-up station in today's race. They count out their push-ups, while making sure to keep good form. "Good job, Bailey!" Britney compliments her teammate as Bailey finishes the final push-ups. Soon the team finishes their 25 push-ups, completing the obstacle. Bailey pops up, and the team runs together around the course, eager to move on to the next challenge.

Other teams like Bailey's participate in a variety of activities as they make their way around the circuit in an attempt to complete the cooperative obstacle racing experience. A few teams are jumping rope, trying to complete 50 jumps before they can move on with the race, and a couple of other teams are doing sit-ups with medicine balls, aiming to finish 30. At the question station, students attempt to find the solution to a math problem that involves knowing the last names of all four of the physical education teachers at the school. All around the track, students are rushing from obstacle to obstacle, running—not walking—to try to finish the mile-long race.

What Is Adventure Racing?

I started adventure racing a few years ago. I was working out in the gym, when a guy who was waiting for the machine I was using told me about it. It sounded interesting, so I did a little research, found a race, and gave it a try. From then on, I was hooked.

Adventure racing is a sport unlike any other. It is often described as the sport that shows participants "what they're made of" (Redfield, 2003). It is a sport in which physical training is important, but the fittest individuals do not necessarily win. Adventure racing (or expedition racing) is a multidiscipline endurance test. Canoeing for miles and mountain biking uphill on rough terrain are just two examples of challenges a racer might face. Typical races may include disciplines like mountain biking, trekking, navigation, running, kayaking, canoeing, and climbing. Races also often have mystery challenges such as archery, orienteering, swimming, high elements on a ropes course, and puzzles. Adventure races often take place in rural settings, but there are also extreme urban races, where teams scale buildings, scooter through intersections, and run through crowded stadiums (Cole & Gregory, 2002). The races usually involve teams of three or four people and last from a few hours to several days. The popularity of the sport is rising. At one race in Folsom, California, in 2001, more than 1,000 competitors participated (Murphy & McEntegart, 2001). Almost 600 adventure races were planned for the year 2004, an increase from more 300 races in 2003. One of the big reasons adventure races have become popular in the United States is because of the Eco-Challenge, an extreme expedition race created by Mark Burnett (Burnett, 2001).

Participants in adventure races must work together as a unit to finish a designed course and get to the finish line together as quickly as possible. It is not uncommon for coed teams to finish more quickly than all-male or all-female teams (Sieger, 2003).

All photos by Dan Delager

Whether ducking under a rope (left) or jumping over a low hurdle (right), students enjoy the challenge of the cooperative obstacle-racing experience.

Coed teams tend to have a good balance of strength and stamina, which is important in adventure racing. A team is only as fast as its slowest member, meaning the entire team must work around each teammate's weaknesses. Winners and losers are separated by the psychological demands of meshing as a team (Fisher & Levine, 1999). Only through cooperation and problem-solving can the special tests in adventure races be accomplished. Adventure-racing teams can help one another throughout the course if they wish. Often members from the elite teams who have already finished will go back on the course to help struggling competitors through tough obstacles (Murphy & McEntegart, 2001). The sport of adventure racing is enjoyed by a wide range of individuals and groups—from family teams to police officers to high-fashion models. Sarah Odell, for example, was a well-paid model for eight years before she quit modeling to take up adventure racing, and in 1995 became one of the world's top extreme athletes (Prichard, 1995). Adventure racing is a sport for people who want to get out and move. People like the challenge and often complete races just to see if they can finish, not caring what place they finish in.

What Is Adventure Racing CORE?

I liked adventure racing so much that I wanted the students in my physical education class to experience it; however, this presented a few problems. My school is not located in the middle of the woods or in the mountains, and having 48 middle school students race on busy streets was not a feasible option. The race would have to take place on school grounds. The school also does not have any kayaks, canoes, mountain bikes, ropes course, or rock-climbing equipment, so I chose to exclude those disciplines in the race. To make up for the lost disciplines, I added obstacles that teams would have to complete before they could advance in the race. Students would complete a "cooperative obstacle-racing experience" (CORE). It would use the core ideas of adventure racing without the risk or fancy equipment.

In a CORE adventure race, students form teams of two, three, or four. Students must remain together with their teams while running through a course and complete all challenges together.

The following are the rules for adventure racing:

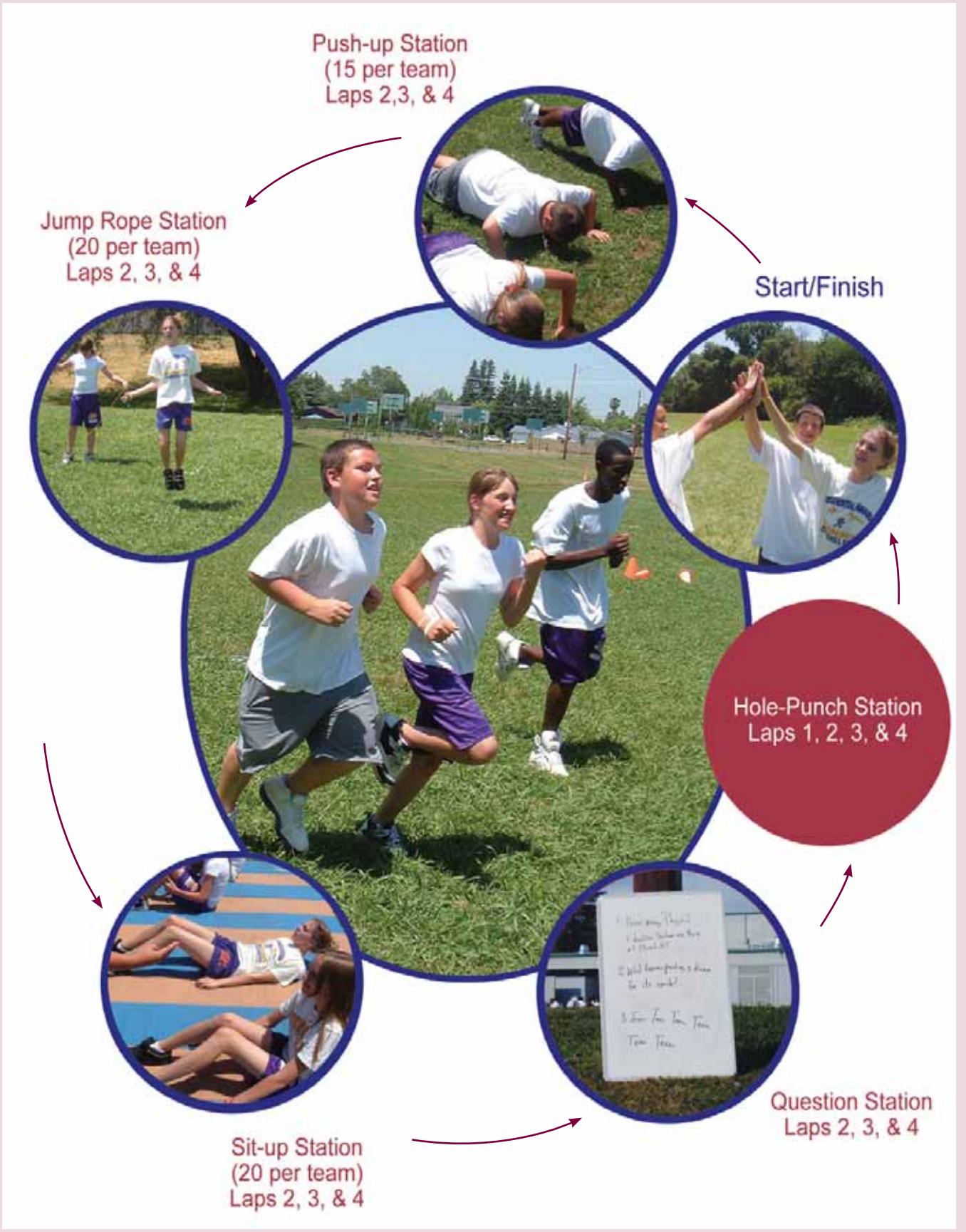
1. Teammates must stay together as a team for the entire race.
2. Racers may help other teammates as well as other teams to get through obstacles during and after the race.
3. Students not competing in the race participate as judges at the various challenge stations during the race. Judges may not help racers.
4. The only station that racers complete on the first lap of the race is the question station. Teams will complete all stations every lap after the first.
5. Teams must follow all rules that are specific to the race they are competing in.

Most races consist of four laps of running around a quarter-mile circuit; however, they can be made longer or shorter. All teams start with a card that must be stamped by a judge whenever they finish a lap. On the first lap, teams do not do any of the challenge stations except the question station. Because this station is near the end of the lap, teams will spread out before reaching it, thus preventing overcrowding at obstacles later in the race. At the question station at the end of lap one, teams look at the question sign, come up with an answer, and give that answer to the answer judges at the hole-punch station. The judges then make sure that the entire team is together and that the answer is correct. If it is incorrect, the team must run back to the question station before making another guess. If the answer is correct, the team's card is punched or stamped and they are permitted to move on with the race. After the first lap, teams continue running and completing every obstacle along the way. Obstacles may consist of sports skill stations, a balance beam, puzzle building, problem-solving activities, written quizzes, or fitness activities. Teams are considered finishers if they stay together and complete all four laps around the track (including all of the obstacles on laps two, three, and four) within the time limit.

National Standards and Adventure Racing CORE

After I did a couple of races with my class, other teachers in my department decided to give it a try. I am lucky that I work with an open-minded, supportive physical education department. Soon we replaced our weekly mile run with the adventure race. The students seemed to like the adventure

Figure 1. CORE Adventure Race Course



races more than they liked running the mile (DeJager, 2004). The races were also helping the students to achieve the national standards for physical education (National Association for Sport and Physical Education, 2004).

Adventure Racing CORE can be linked to standard one ("Demonstrates competency in motor skills and movement patterns needed to perform a variety of physical activities") because students perform various motor skills and movement patterns during the race. In some adventure races, students may be demonstrating how to do the Electric Slide, using skills they learned in the line dance unit. In other races, students must use proper form while trying to throw a football through a hula hoop hanging on a fence. Racers who miss the hula hoop with the football must determine what their errors in personal performance were, based on their knowledge, and take moves to correct them in order to get the football through the hoop. This detection and correction is just one example of how the adventure races can help achieve standard two ("Demonstrates understanding of movement concepts, principles, strategies, and tactics as they apply to the learning and performance of physical activities"). As students run and perform a variety of muscular strength and endurance exercises during the race, they are working on standard four ("Achieves and maintains a health-enhancing level of physical fitness").

Respect and responsibility are also practiced during Adventure Racing CORE, as racers cooperate with peers and accept the decisions of the judges during the race. The practicing of this respect and responsibility helps students achieve standard five ("Exhibits responsible personal and social behavior that respects self and others in physical activity settings"). Standard six ("Values physical activity for health, enjoyment, challenge, self-expression, and/or social interaction") can be achieved as well. This happens as students recognize the races as positive opportunities for social interaction and view their learning of new activities in the races as challenging.

Adventure Racing CORE can also be linked to the national standards in many other ways to help a person become physically educated. Physical education teachers and race directors can determine what type of course they would like to create in order to teach particular standards and achieve their goals.

Organizing a CORE Adventure Race

In order to put together an adventure race, you will need a place where students can do laps, whether on a track or open field. You will also need equipment for every station in your race. For this article's example of an adventure race (figure 1), about 12 single jump ropes and six medicines balls should be used for every 36 students that are racing. Mats for the sit-up station should also be used. You will also need a white, dry-erase board for the question station. Write down four questions (one for each lap) on this board. They can be about fitness concepts learned in class, or interdisciplinary questions that incorporate math, history, science, and other subjects. When you are designing questions, do not make yes or no, true or false, or multiple-choice questions, but make sure they have a clear answer. Questions should become gradually more difficult as the race goes on. Make the first one easy (so that students remain spread out for the obstacles). Change the questions for the classes after lunch, because some students will give each other the answers during lunch time. For more variety, or to better meet students' needs or interests, obstacle stations, length of race, and type of questions can be changed. A hole-punch or ink stamp and index cards (they can be cut in half to make more) will also be needed.

Select 10 students to serve as judges for the race. Choose students who are injured and "challenging" students to be judges during the race. You can use fewer judges in order to get more students actively racing if you trust students to be honest during the race. Two judges are placed at the push-up, jump rope, and sit-up stations during the second, third and fourth laps. Judges will ensure that racers do 15 push-ups, 20 jumps with the jump rope, and 20 sit-ups at their appropriate stations. No judges are needed at the push-up, jump rope, or sit-up station if the students racing are honest enough to properly complete these obstacles before moving on with the race. One judge should be stationed at the question station and should hold up the question for students to read on each lap, throughout the duration of the race. Two judges are at the hole-punch, or answer, station. One judge makes sure the entire team is together (teams need to be holding hands, linking arms, or touching shoulders at the station). The other judge hole punches or stamps the cards for teams with correct answers to the question. The final judge is the timer, who starts the timer at the beginning of the race and tells the teams their times after every lap of the race.

The remainder of the students are then put into teams and given an index card. Students run four laps around the circuit, and teams have to stay together. During the first lap, they run until they get to the question station, where they receive a question about a fitness concept. Once they know the answer, they go to the answer station and link arms, hold hands, or touch shoulders with their teammates. They then give their answer to the judge. If their answer is correct, their card is punched or stamped, and they move on with the race. If it is incorrect, they must run back to the question sign before giving another answer. They are not able to move on until they give the judge the correct answer. Other adventure racers can help them with the answers to the questions. While running each of the remaining laps, students stop at the push-up, jump rope, and sit-up stations along the way. Each lap, as a team, they do 15 push-ups, 20 jumps with the jump rope, and 20 sit-ups with the one-pound medicine ball. Students split up the push-ups, jumps with the jump rope, and sit-ups with the medicine ball any way they like, as long as they complete the total number of repetitions required for the team. They continue to answer the questions at the end of each lap. When a team has four holes in their index card, they cross the finish line. As they finish, students are

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is your key to seeing like an expert. Try it and see what you have been missing.

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Paul G. Schempp (pschempp@uga.edu) is a professor at the University of Georgia, Athens, GA 30602, and Sophie Woorons Johnson is director of performance tennis at Brookstone Meadows, Anderson SC 29621.

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told their times and allowed to cool down and stretch while supporting and cheering on their classmates. Water should be kept on hand and made available to students as needed.

Using Adventure Racing CORE

I took up adventure racing a few years ago because I was looking for a new challenge and for a way to make my workouts more interesting. Not only did I find what I was looking for, but I found an exciting new activity to try with the students at my school. The students and staff have liked it enough that we have replaced our old cross-country unit with an adventure-racing unit. It seems that adventure racing has many benefits and can fit into the physical education curriculum in many different ways. It can be used to replace weekly runs or cardio-fitness units; it can be used during a sports unit, incorporating sport-specific skills into stations; and it can be a unit of its own or be part of a cooperative-games unit.

No matter how you use Adventure Racing CORE in your class, have fun with it. Be creative with the obstacles that your students have to overcome, challenge them physically and mentally before they can continue with the race. Ask them questions that will take some time to answer, so that other teams have a chance to catch up. Keep it interesting and challenging. In the world of adventure racing, it is not always the fastest teams that win or even finish the race. It is the teams that work together. This is something that you will see as you watch your class participate in their first adventure race.

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Dan DeJager (ddejager@sanjuan.edu) is a physical education teacher at Winston Churchill Middle School, in Sacramento, CA 95825. He has written a book about Adventure Racing CORE that is scheduled for publication by Human Kinetics in 2007.