



## Knowing the ropes

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By **GARY MILLER**  
Staff Writer

Shannon Gattens finds her husband rappelling.

No, that doesn't mean there's anything wrong with their marriage. Actually, rappelling brings them together.

"That's my husband, up there," she said, pointing to Jeff Gattens as he rappelled the side of a 35-foot rock in Ringwood on a recent frigid morning.

The Jersey City couple were among 15 people who gathered for a rope-climbing clinic to learn ascending and rappelling. The skills are key for those involved in adventure racing, a growing sport for hardy outdoors types. "When I met my husband, one of the first things we talked about was Eco-Challenge," she said, referring to the 300-mile expedition race held over six to 12 days in a different exotic locale each year. "I said, 'I'm going to do that.' And he said, 'Let's do it.' I think it's all about gaining confidence. I'm interested in going to the next level."

Adventure racing can involve any number of outdoor skills, including climbing, hiking, running, canoeing, and biking. An event can last several hours or several days.

Although Jeff has experience in ropes, the clinic helped him to keep his skills sharp.

"This is excellent," Jeff said, "It's good information. They don't give you a clinic for the race; you've got to kind of expect it. So it's nice to have this -especially having it taught by guys who are adventure racers themselves."

The clinic was taught by veteran adventure racers Richard Raschdorf and Chris Ballou of the New York Adventure Racing Association. Its purpose was to help those new to the sport get their feet wet - or as was the case this day, chilled - so they can decide whether they'd like to continue.

"When you get on the ropes, you have to be confident enough that you know what you're doing," Raschdorf said. "When you're racing and you're out there for 24 or 48 hours and you've only had an hour of sleep, we want to make sure that anyone who goes through our classes ... even if they're completely exhausted, that they can put their stuff together and be safe."

While Ballou, a New York City detective, and other experienced climbers set up the ropes, Raschdorf gave the class a lesson on how to use the equipment for ascending and rappelling. Each student had his or her own harness and other basic equipment.

The more expensive equipment and ropes were supplied by NYARA and donated by Moosejaw Mountaineering, which co-sponsors the group's clinics.

"All they need is a harness and a couple of loops," Raschdorf said. "Then they can get on the ropes, try it, see if they want to pursue it, because it's a big money investment."

The students in the class ranged from people who had never been on a rope or in a race before, to intermediates who took the opportunity for a refresher course.



▲ Kirsten Iverson rappelling down the face of rock in Ringwood State Park.

Photo by: PETER MONSEES

The clinic did the trick for helping beginner Karen Baier, 37, of Allamuchy to improve. Before taking her first turn, she said with some trepidation, "It looks like learning to walk again."

After going up once and rappelling to the bottom, she said, "It was harder than I thought. It took a lot of arm strength."

But after a second time up and down the rock, she seemed to have picked up the knack.

"I got more of the rhythm of it," she said, the satisfaction apparent. "I used a lot less upper-body strength the second time. It felt easier."

Erik Resurrección, 33, of New York City, an experienced racer who has been out of the sport for a few years, hoped to brush up on old skills in preparation for a race in New York this year. Knowing that the pressure and exhaustion of a race can make it "easy to crack," Resurrección said: "You want to do this so that it becomes idiot-proof. ... If you make a mistake, that's your life right there."

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If multiple sports are your thing ...

From a ropes clinic on a 35-foot rock in Ringwood to a 300-mile endurance test in Fiji, adventure racing is one of the fastest-growing sports in North America, according to the U.S. Adventure Racing Association.

There were 65 adventure races worldwide in 1999 and more than 600 in 2001, according to the New York Adventure Racing Association.

Shorter races, known as sprints, last six to eight hours. The longest, expedition races, can last 12 days.

But even a six- to eight-hour race might sound intimidating to the average weekend warrior, so how do you know if the sport is for you?

"If you like the outdoors, and you like to do multiple sports, I'd say it's worth a try," said Richard Raschdorf, vice president of NYARA. "We get a lot of people who have never done it before. They take our courses to learn how things work, and they go out and they have a great time."

One of the best-known adventure races is the Eco-Challenge, created in 1992. It is a 300-mile expedition race that will be held in Fiji this year. It consists of mountain biking, river rafting, horseback riding, mountaineering, kayaking, and navigating. The race is run 24 hours a day, so racers must deal with sleep deprivation as they make their trek.

But beginners would want to start out slower, with a sprint race. One of the most noted sprint race circuits is the Balance Bar Racing Series, known until recently as the Hi-Tec Racing Series. They typically include running, kayaking, and mountain biking, plus special obstacle tests over a 20-mile course. A sprint race is scheduled for New York in May.

-Gary Miller

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