

THE FAIR HILL STORY

By Eric Weyman

DAVE'S WOODS

Sometime in the 1980's, Maryland resident Dave Linthicum (OK, QOC) tipped me off to Fair Hill. Maryland would generally be considered QOC or SVO territory, but Fair Hill's location in the NE corner made it more likely to be used by DVOA. The terrain is in fact just a long walk-to-start removed from one of DVOA's earliest "real" O-maps, a black and white map of Carpenter State Park in Delaware now known as the "tri-state map", White Clay Creek.

Dave's suggestion was to specifically check out a particular section of the park, which was indeed noteworthy for its open, Beech dominated forest, occurring on unusually flat, but mostly upland setting. I've been hyping "Dave's Woods" as DVOA's nicest, most pleasant square kilometer of forest.

DUPONT, HORSES, AND FOXES

Most flat upland forests in this region were long ago cleared for agriculture. The history of ownership might provide an explanation for the survival of this forest. The vast area of this park once belonged to William duPont Jr., who was able to shelter the land from the general forces of economic geography, reserving this tract for equestrian and fox hunting activities. Even so, much of the land has been cleared over time, some of it has since regenerated as younger, thicker forest. Still, the area still contains an unusual amount of open mature forest given the relatively flat topography.

BRIDGES, TUNNELS, AND "SUPER FENCES"

Remnants of this equestrian/ fox hunting preserve are with us today, and figure prominently in the orienteering. The tract is divided into sections by a number of roads, as well as the Big Elk Creek. To provide equestrian and pedestrian access to all sections, a network of substantial bridges and tunnels were built to span these obstacles. At the same time, the hounds and foxes needed constraints, which lead to the construction of similarly substantial fences around the perimeter of many large sections. These hound-and-fox-proof "super fences" no longer serve their purpose, but survive as strong as ever, making them a serious issue/problem for navigation, as well as course design. The bridges and tunnels continue to be used for the general recreational purpose for which they were constructed. All of these features will be incorporated in the courses, not in any intentionally tricky manner, but highlighted with the appropriate purple overprinted symbols to make the event as fair and enjoyable as possible. For more specifics, see course setter's notes.

MULTI-USE PARK

The equestrian traditions certainly continue at Fair Hill, but only part of a multi-user philosophy that includes mountain biking along with hiking, nature study, and many other activities. This multi-user park policy strikes me as innovative and a bit risky, but it

seems to be working very well. Orienteering has been welcomed into this mix. However, with this opportunity also comes the responsibility of being cooperative park users. The equestrian activity is expected to be seasonally reduced at the time of the November A meet, but there will probably be some recreational equestrians and cyclists sharing the paths and fields, so we must be alert and exercise the same consideration that I have observed during my time at the park.

To illustrate the variety of activity, I have witnessed many lifetime firsts at Fair Hill, as a live spectator. This list includes dog agility trials, the cross country portion of equestrian “eventing”, destruction derby, pro wrestling, and many other equestrian events for which I don’t know the name.

To learn more about Fair Hill check out their web site.

<http://www.dnr.state.md.us/publiclands/central/fairhill.html>

THE PROJECT

So, why didn’t we map Fair Hill years ago? Well, as attractive as “Dave’s Woods” is, it doesn’t have an obvious parking area or competition center nearby. Much of the terrain is open fields, not classic O-forest. In addition, the entire park is huge, making map financing a serious consideration. In part, it also fell through the cracks, as we took on other big event maps at French Creek, Elk Neck, and in the Poconos. This park didn’t seem fit an obvious O-map role and most of the park went unscouted for years.

However, Fair Hill resurfaced as a mapping possibility about 5 years ago, leading to an extended scouting trip by a group of DVOAers. It was at this time that Tom Overbaugh and I, independently, reached the same conclusion- this area should be used for the US Long O Championships.

We think Fair Hill is a natural for Long O because of the generally easy running, along with good route choice potential. In addition the area is obviously large. Even this 2 day Long O weekend won’t utilize the whole map. With a final map size of 26.5 km², it is DVOA’s largest map, and possibly the largest proper orienteering map in North America.

Anyway, DVOA leadership bought the Long O idea, so we flew photos, and ordered the base map. We had the good fortune to have Ralph Tolbert living nearby who volunteered to host the mappers, Vladimir Zherdev and Alexey Zuev for the lengthy time it took to complete the fieldwork. Then we had to bide some time waiting for the next schedule opening for the Long O Champs, but now we are here, in 2005.

WHERE TO RUN & NOT

While there is an abundance of open fields and significant white forest, we can’t ignore the presence thicker vegetation. There are significant amounts of impenetrable vegetation, as well as vegetation covered by every other green symbol. Much of the thick

vegetation is thorny, dominated by the multiflora rose, but other thorn species are present as well.

In our region, most fields become rimmed by sunlight-stimulated, thorny thickets. For the orienteer, the transition from the easy running fields to the easy running forest or trails is extremely critical, not only for performance, but for enjoyment of the event. Much time has been spent checking and revising the access points, trailheads, and thicket breaks along field edges, and we encourage everyone to make good use of them. For more, see course setter's notes.