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## Experience the Great outdoors



REI can set the foundation for a lifetime of adventurous fun such as hiking, biking, camping, and kayaking

By MELISSA BROOKS ■ TIMES HERALD STAFF

Standing beside REI's popular half dome tents, Matthew Hamilton remembered his first camping experience — he was 6-years old and in his own backyard.

It's a memory many of us have — fishing with our fathers, biking with our brothers and sisters or hiking with our mothers — and it's one the national consumer cooperative REI strives to nurture, to build on and to pass onto the next generation.

### HEALTH LINE

In addition to selling outdoor recreation gear and sporting goods, each year REI donates millions of dollars to support conservation efforts nationwide, and sends volunteers to build trails, clean up beaches and teach outdoor ethics to kids, according to www.rei.com.

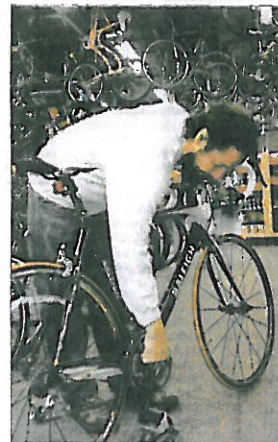
Aside from retail, REI is in the business of providing opportunities for outdoor enthusiasts — and wannabes — to learn a new activity or brush up on their skills.

Hamilton is part of a small group of dedicated instructors employed by the Conshohocken store's Outdoor School, which offers kayaking, rock climbing — you name it — by way of classes and outings.

According to Ted Smith, who heads the Outdoor School Mid-Atlantic market, the program made its way from REI's West Coast home base, to the East Coast in 2006. The 1991-established Conshohocken location is one of select stores with an Outdoor School. The next closest is in Marlton, N.J.

"It supports the retail side of REI as well as getting people outside and using the products we sell," Smith said of the Outdoor School.

Hamilton said his childhood memories of camping just outside his house are a perfect example of how beginners can ease into the outdoors. "You don't need to go into the wilderness." From your backyard you could go to a local park, he said, leave the car and go biking or swimming nearby. Maybe then you're ready for a one-nighter in a more remote area, with a simple travel map. Those experiences build on one another, and are what eventually get people involved in



Times Herald Photos/Gene Walsh

REI instructors Ted Smith, top left and holding the GPS unit, and Matthew Hamilton, above, can teach anyone the fine art of outdoor activities such as camping, biking and hiking.



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Charles Kline

back country camping, Hamilton said.

"But if you never make it there (on an extended trip)," Smith said, "at least you're getting outside."

Charles Kline, outreach specialist at REI Conshohocken, said, "The idea with the Outdoor School and other outdoor programs offered at REI — whether someone is young, old, whatever — is to get people engaged, to see it's fun and safe."

Which is why most courses are at a beginner level, so participants can start with in-store education then take what they learn outside.

Navigation classes are offered on location so people can familiarize themselves with a GPS unit before taking to the wilderness. There's a GPS outing that Smith said is safety-oriented, designed to help those concerned with getting lost to feel more at ease.

"It's a great skill to have for a day hike or backpacking," he said, "a general skill that can be utilized for whatever you're doing outdoors." Smith said many functions of a handheld GPS "free people up and get them off the couch and out doing things." Like Geocaching, a high-tech game of hide and seek played worldwide. Players equipped with GPS devices hide containers outdoors, and other players use coordinates posted online to find them.

People who aren't normally "outdoorsy," Smith said, may take interest in the technological aspect of the game. "It's incredibly low impact, scaled to anybody's fitness level." He tells his 8-year-old daughter when he brings her hiking that "there's a treasure (a small toy) in the woods, and if you follow this arrow, you'll find it."

"(GPS navigation) is something we offer that does take a lot of instruction," Smith added, "but it's worthwhile and fun for people."

The next "Fundamentals of GPS Navigation" class is offered at the Conshohocken store at 7 p.m. March 3. A hands-on "Introduction to GPS Navigation" class takes participants out

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# GREAT



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into the field for the day and begins at 10 a.m. March 7, at Marsh Creek State Park in Chester County.

For most classes and outings offered by the Outdoor School, REI provides transportation and equipment. The intention is to make it simple for the general public to get involved in outdoor activities.

"The goal is to get people engaged in this as a lifetime pursuit," Kline said. "This generation of kids is much less exposed to the outdoors — it's a much more urban society. For the health of everyone in this society, it's something we're very concerned with, and we see family hiking as key (to that success)."

When customers walk into the store and express an interest in outdoor activities but have no clue as to where to start, Smith said REI sales associates ask if they're looking to get fit or maybe do a triathlon. "If so, they might point them to the 'Introduction to Road Cycling' class," he said, slated for 10 a.m. Feb. 21 at Heebner Park in Worcester.

Hamilton said all biking instruction is outside. Participants meet at the store, transportation is provided to the park and riders are taken through surrounding neighborhoods. Mountain biking is also offered (next class is at 9 a.m. March 20). Bikes are provided; bring your own helmet.

In the spring there's a "How-to-Ride a Bike" course for adults. There's also a free bike maintenance course.

Because most classes provide the necessary equipment, Smith said it's a good idea to sample different sports before buying the gear and getting too involved. "If you have equipment already, great, bring it and we'll incorporate it," he said. "If not, we're available to talk in the store after class about what fits them."

Of all the activities offered at REI, kayaking has been the most popular sport with customers for a while now, Smith said. There are two different courses, one that introduces paddle strokes and another that is self-rescue oriented.

Rock climbing, offered since just last year, is not far behind. "People experience the most hurdles getting started with it, so we have the most to offer when teaching it," Smith said.

The "Artificial Rock Climbing Anchors" class teaches the basics and is held at 9 a.m. March 21, at Ralph Stover State Park in Bucks County; transportation provided. Another course, "Introduction to Outdoor Rock Climbing" is at 9 a.m. March 28; same loca-

tion.

For those who want to prepare for an upcoming trip, to know everything about what to bring, how to pick a site or filter water, there's an "Essential Camping Skills" class at 9 a.m. Feb. 27. Smith said there's even a "Backcountry Cooking" course "for those who've maybe been camping or backpacking for a while and want to spice up their usual Ramen noodle meals."

Someone who wants to go camping but doesn't yet have the gear might consider renting equipment from REI, which makes everything from tents to stovetops available and teaches customers how to use it all, Hamilton said.

For the most part, intro classes are \$20, according to Smith, who said it's not necessary to take a class before going on an outing, but the more education a person has, the more he benefits from the outing. Some outings however don't have classes associated with them, he added.

"Instructors are pretty knowledgeable about local areas and want people to continue (beyond REI classes and outings)," Smith said, "so they're always willing to provide additional information about what cycling or mountain biking groups to get involved with, and what local areas to check out.

"They also talk about the stewardship," he said. "We're using the parks and have a responsibility to keep them up as well."

Kline said REI also partners with community organizations, in order to point people in the right direction after they've taken an intro course with the Outdoor School. "If you want to go on a family hike, we tell you where you can find programs elsewhere, like Riverbend Environmental Education Center."

According to Kline, REI's president and CEO Sally Jewell once said during an interview that her company does not see other recreation retailers like L.L.Bean or EMS as its competition. Instead their competition is video games.

The Conshohocken store carries in its book section Richard Louv's "Last Child in the Woods," about the disconnection between today's wired generation and nature. The book offers practical solutions, he said, ones REI strives to help parents reach.

From children to seniors, REI has something for people of all ages, Kline said. "We offer hiking poles for more stability for older people or for rockier surfaces. Our goal is to provide diversity in the outdoors."

"It's not just for the hardcore backpackers," Hamilton added, "it's for everyone."

For details or to register for a class, visit [www.rei.com](http://www.rei.com) or call the Conshohocken store at 610-940-0809.