

A different approach to learning how to orienteering – Andrew Pitcher

It's no good, I'm getting old and I'm slowing down. My knees constantly ache and my back does too, and now I think my hips are starting to miss out on my misery and want to join in. I've got to face the fact that I'm never going to be British Orienteering Champion now, although I did beat Tony Burton for the first time in 40 years of trying at an event a couple of months back - perhaps his running parts are wearing out faster than mine!

With my running demise in mind I thought it would be a good time to curtail my own selfish orienteering obsession and encourage my youngest daughter Maddy (age 8) to take up my mantle, because she seems to have inherited my good sense of direction and is not averse to running. This year's North West Kent league score events seemed a good place to start with her making all the navigational decisions.

Traditionally beginners learn to orienteer through a progression of classic colour co-ordinated orienteering courses (a bit like in judo belts) starting with white, then yellow, orange etc, the idea being that these courses are technically easy to build confidence and avoid the beginners biggest problem of GETTING LOST. For an adult getting lost is all part of the fun, but for a youngster and particularly an 8 year old girl this could be a deal breaker. There is also the added problem with classic O courses, that other checkpoint locations not on your chosen course are not shown on your map, but maybe very visible and distracting on the ground. Again this aspect adds to the challenge to an adult, but will be confusing for a youngster.

Learning to orienteer on a score course event goes some way to solving these problems. The first event of the NWK summer series was at Danson Park, possibly the most technically easy orienteering area on the planet, but perfect to learn orienteering. With its large open areas, big lake, manor house, tennis courts and children's play area Danson Park offers the orienteer more long range visibility than anywhere else I can think of. From the start point alone there were 3 different controls in view, and because each checkpoint number is printed on the map running to any of them will immediately identify where you are, even if it wasn't the control you were aiming for.

The other great aspect of the NWK summer series is that you get given the map when you register, so you have plenty of time to work out and decide on your optimum route from the 26 controls shown on the map before you start running. Maddy wrote these down on the side of the map with a couple of different route options if time permitted. Time is another important aspect to a score event, but a good thing because you know how long you're going to be running for and 45 minutes is about the running limit for an 8 year old.

So with her route worked out we started the course, and to my surprise she was off, banging out one control after another. Because of the good visibility it was not unusual to be able to see the next control to visit, but even if it wasn't Maddy wasn't fazed because she could easily work out where she was from other obvious features shown on the map. The best thing about this format though was when she got it wrong, like on the occasion she visited the same control site (73) 3

times, twice in error. As she could see where it was on the map, she wasn't lost, and could immediately relocate, get her bearings sorted and move off in the right direction.

She returned to the finish within the time limit with a minute or so to spare (there are point penalties deducted for finishing after 45 minutes) having scored 18 controls and finishing a very respectable 18 out of 28 runners, in the process beating with far more older and experienced orienteers. This turned out to be no fluke, as she attended other events in the series and even better performances occurred meaning she finished the series as top junior in the score category. Perhaps my future British Orienteering Champion dream is closer than I think....

As good as she is, I do have to run around the course with her, but only as bodyguard and time keeper (Maddy doesn't use a watch yet). It would serve no purpose if I told her where to go when she got lost – I make her work that out for herself, but the style of the score course format enables her to do that easily. I think this would be a much better way to introduce beginners to our sport and wished that there was more score formatted orienteering events when I began to learn the sport all those years ago as I'm sure I would have improved my skills far quicker.

Andrew Pitcher

Thought for you Phil - For the junior championships which are currently run on a classic course basis with several different courses, would it be helpful if all the control sites with their numbers regardless of course were 'ghosted onto all the competitors' maps' with just their selected course shown in bold red as per normal. This would help with both the relocation and distraction aspects (albeit I recognise that it might clog up the map and possibly hide useful navigational features).