

BRITISH ORIENTEERING FEDERATION

HOW TO IMPROVE YOUR ORIENTEERING

- 1. Before you start study the map and legend.** Do so for as long as you can. Get familiar with the general shape of the area. You don't want to waste time during the competition trying to puzzle out what's high and what's low, what's a fence and what's a wall. Take a few sample measurements.
- 2. Don't think of the competition as a race.** It isn't, it's a time trial, you against your own weaknesses. The person you are trying to outrun may be going an idiotic way, or may be fresh from standing scratching his head for five minutes while you've been toiling up that hill. Even if you do outrun him, he may be a better orienteer or stronger over the whole course. So you overtook the British Champion on 300 metres of flat path - so what? He won't stop when he comes to the hill or the bracken or a difficult route choice.
- 3. Never run at absolute top speed.** You should finish an orienteering course as you finish a good meal, feeling that you would have enjoyed just a little bit more. You must never let yourself get exhausted. You can waste time on the last control as easily as on the first and it's really frustrating to ruin a good run near the end simply because you got a bit too tired. If you do finish with plenty of energy, go out again over your course and see where you wasted time making poor route choices or standing around.
- 4. Try not to stop.** Take a breather if you need to, but keep moving even at a slow walk. The difference between first and tenth is often not the speed of movement but the amount of time spent not moving. Add up half a minute here, fifteen seconds there, when you weren't actually moving and you'll soon realise that, like everybody else, you could have won easily.
- 5. Don't stand still if you're lost and can't work it out.** The Fairy of the Forest might appear and light your way but she never has for me. Retrace your steps if you can. If you can't, decide on a direction - If I go east, I must hit that road - and move, fast, but keeping your eyes skinned for any feature which you might be able to identify on the map. Get to that road as quickly as you can and start again from there. Better to spend a couple of minutes running 400 metres than a quarter of an hour travelling nowhere.
- 6. Don't run on 'feel'.** Keep your map set, always, even on a track. And in the forest always run on the compass, however roughly. It's horribly easy to drift to one side or the other, without realising it and come out on the wrong path, even one at 90 degrees to the one you were aiming for.
- 7. Don't rush off** from one control vaguely towards the next thinking that you can plan your route later. Move a little way and then plan. Pick a definite attack point and plan your route to it. You must know what you're doing - or when you do think you're getting near you might find yourself confronted by a great marsh or a hill you should have been working your way around.
- 8. Don't ever run without counting your paces,** however unnecessary this may seem. So you think you can see your attack point? Well maybe you can but count anyway. It might be a similar feature 50 metres earlier or later, and

those 50 metres can leave you stranded and panic stricken if you don't know they're 50 metres and not 200. If you count and keep your map set, it's *impossible* to be lost.

9. Don't ever assume you're right and the map and compass are both wrong. It's possible but most unlikely. Our preconceptions are our greatest weaknesses. If you 'know' it's the right re-entrant but there is no control, be humble enough to consider that it might just be you that's wrong. Look at the map and see which parallel re-entrant you have, in fact madly rushed down. Forget where you thought you were. It's surprising how often you can work out where you are if you're prepared to admit that it's just possible you're not where you 'know' you are.

10. Don't forget to read contours on the map and on the ground. It's easy for beginners to think of contours as those dammed bits of spaghetti that get in the way of walls and streams. Even good orienteers go wrong surprisingly often, not noticing they should have been running downhill instead of up.

11. Don't kid yourself that you can beat the superstars. You must accept the fact that orienteering skills have to be learned. There's nothing magical about bearings, step-counting, contouring or map memory. But theory is not enough: being able to use them with confidence and speed can only come with practice. And if you don't train for orienteering then you must be prepared to use some competitions to experiment a bit. Don't

worry that you might have come third if you hadn't tried to cut through that bit of forest. It's no good running around the paths. For a year I rushed about covering tremendous distances, thoroughly enjoying myself, but scarcely orienteering, scarcely improving at all, scarcely learning anything except that it's not possible to beat someone who can run *and* go through the forest. Here be no dragons except the dragons of panic in your own head.

12. Don't let them tell you fitness is not all that important. There are those near the top who don't run particularly fast but they're all very fit. It's always the fit who tell you fitness doesn't matter and they may have forgotten or never have known how easy it is to make terrible mistakes simply through exhaustion.

13. These tips are reproduced from an article by John Knight, which appeared in the December 1983/January 1984 edition of '*Compass Sport*'.

And finally, don't forget that a range of Orienteering publications are available from the National Office of the British Orienteering Federation.

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