

Good news development story – SLOW (South London Orienteers)

Between February 2010 and the end of 2011, SLOW increased their membership totals from 109 units to 143 units. Most of this increase has been in the “senior local” category. SLOW have had the policy of targeting the younger adult age group since a strategy review in 2001. Their age distribution now contains the most M/W 21-40’s of any South East club. These include both orienteers who travel and appear in the ranking lists and a large number who just go to the weekday local events and don’t go near a ranking event.

SLOW’s policy is to run a large number of easy to organise local events designed for the needs of this age group within Central, and South West London areas where SLOW are strongest. The events focus on making the “event experience” more attractive, and particularly more sociable. The local events are mainly:

Night Street events. Once a month midweek evenings between September and April.

Park Race events. Midweek evening events in London Parks. SLOW do 4-5 of these and with other clubs there are nearly one a week between May and August

Trail Challenge series (3 in the summer), an autumn Sunday and the Surrey Hills events.

The typical turnout at these events is between 50 and 100 with some events in 2011 exceeding 100 runners.

All of these local events are very accessible to new orienteers, as the events are in parks or on the streets and therefore the navigation is simple. All are easily reachable by public transport which is very important in London as there are lower levels of car ownership than in other parts of the UK. There is always an eat/drink/chat in a designated hostelry. There are other innovations that help newcomers, such as giving maps out before the start at the Trail Challenge events.

SLOW initially marketed their evening events as training, but found that many more people came when advertised as a race. They find that one of the reasons the Park Series and Trail Challenges are successful is that newcomers can run on the same course as GB internationals (GG, Nick Barrable, Tessa Hill etc). Their adult newcomers do not like being treated as novices - they want to be challenged and do the longest course, not a short novice course. Because their local events are of low

technical difficulty this is possible. They are still enjoyed by top orienteers - they are just making the decisions a lot quicker than everyone else and getting a good training run - and enjoy the socialising too.



SLOW members at the 2011 City of London Race.

Another thing worthy of note is that these events are spread quite widely. Club members seem quite happy to travel reasonable distances to local events so long as there is public transport available. Many Londoners are used to travelling for 30mins – 1 hour to visit friends, work or socialise and are possibly more accepting of moderate travel times for sport than people in small towns who perhaps expect everything within a short walk or drive.

SLOW do a much smaller number of traditional orienteering races aimed at experienced orienteers from a wide area (the “OK Nuts” - a yearly regional, the London City Race, something in the spring (e.g. district, score event) and a “Frolic” summer event).

Coaching is offered at events, using a monthly series run by a neighbouring club and in 2012 they are starting a weekly Club Night based in South West London.

Many of the M/W21’s prefer to stick to the sociable, accessible weekday events. Many are less keen on giving up a Sunday to travel to a regional event with a long drive (if they had a car) with no social attached. However where members do want to travel, the club has a critical mass of younger orienteers to

form a sociable group of keen orienteers (e.g. SLOW had 5 teams entered for the Harvesters relay in Sheffield). SLOW have attempted to make the event experience of other clubs’ events more attractive by making it easier for people to meet at these events by bringing the club banner/tent to events and finding a pub to meet up in afterwards. By focusing on sociability at events this has allowed the M/W21s to get to know each other. Entering the NikeGrid fortnight has given a huge impetus to this.

SLOW have made excellent use of the internet to market their events. Their main website gives a youthful and well organised image, and it’s easy to find the information you need. <http://www.sloweb.org>. The Park Race series has clever branding and another excellent website (<http://www.parkrace.org>). There are several innovative competitions such as North v South (of the Thames). This series was rebranded last year so may have been significant in the improved membership figures. SLOW also make excellent use of email reminders. Competitors are encouraged to register for the different series and then receive reminder emails about future events in the coming weeks and years. SLOW also have a Facebook page and use the Facebook options to market their events to friends and connections of club members. It’s worth noting that by focusing on the internet they may be reaching a more youthful audience than by traditional methods.

Facebook has also been used as a tool for organising lift sharing, training tips, banter about performance etc.

Regarding traditional advertising, they have used postcards and flyers quite a lot - targeted at newcomers. In particular they ask members to take bundles to their work places and their development officer has put them out in sports centres, sports shops and she gives them out to people she meets, e.g. those attending the Teaching O courses etc.

Given that Greater London makes up over 10% of the UK’s population, and has a high proportion of younger people, it can be argued that these initiatives are very important for the future of the sport in the UK.

