

Beginners Guide to Orienteering

by Oli Johnson on 15 January 2007

Intro to 'O'

The world of 'O' can be a strange and mysterious one to the uninitiated. Regulars at times slip into an incomprehensible language filled with jargon and slang: 'I DNF'd on the brown at the last Gallophen after my dibber fell off.' Also worrying is the offensively bright kit that everyone is running around in, emblazoned with the peculiar acronyms of their affiliations: SLOW, NATO, HAVOC.

It can seem like everyone knows exactly what they're doing, everyone has the ultimate new super-fast racing compass, they're all wearing diamond tipped racing spikes and they've all done this hundreds of times before. Take it from me; this is all just an illusion. Once the race starts they'll all be getting lost and confused out in the forest in spite of their snazzy kit and experience.



Out in the fresh air...
Fiona Forrest competing on Burbage Moor
(photo: Peter Legg)

Orienteering is about as pure and liberating a sporting experience as you can find. There is no taped course around a muddy field, it is a time trial so you race on your own (although there is an option for beginners to run in a pair) and there are virtually no rules. It is just you vs. the terrain – visit all the checkpoints (controls) as quickly as you can and that's all there is to it. A quote from the British Orienteering website:

“Orienteering means maps, varied terrain and adventure. It doesn't matter how young or old or fit you are. You can run, jog or walk, you decide your own pace. Orienteering is a sport where competitors navigate their way between control points marked on a specially drawn map.”

The one thing that British Orienteering neglect to mention is that it is above all a race. The faster you can cover the distance, crash through the undergrowth, splash through streams and marshes and career over rocks, the better your result will be (and the more fun you will have).

Meet... Shane

Let's take a theoretical beginner and walk him through his first orienteering event. For convenience sake, we will call him Shane. Shane has done a lot of outdoor sport before, including fell running and climbing, so he is confident that this orienteering lark shouldn't pose too much of a problem...

'Shane'



What does Shane need for an orienteering event?

Footwear

Footwear needs to offer plenty of grip and be fairly sturdy to cope with the undergrowth. Orienteering shoes have a tough upper and aggressive rubber studs with small metal 'dob spikes' set into them. This provides the best possible grip on all surfaces from slimy mud to slippery rock. Stability in the ankle is all-important so the cushioning is usually minimal – this isn't an issue for repetitive strain injuries since the forest floor is soft and no two footsteps are ever quite the same on the rough ground surface. Fell shoes are an excellent alternative although the upper might not last long in the forest. Trail shoes are the next best choice but expect to be sliding around on any steep slopes.

Cover those legs!

Most events require full leg cover which is an explanation for the lightweight nylon 'pyjama' bottoms that most orienteers wear at events. The reason for this is health related – since you will often need to race through spiky brambles and gorse you can collect some impressive scratches on your legs. Full leg cover protects you to some extent but most regular competitors end up with an impressive web of scars on their legs (and even arms and faces). Running tights are a good option, although don't wear your best pair as they will get torn surprisingly quickly. Otherwise very lightweight tracksuit bottoms will do the job.



*An example of orienteering clothing.
Note the lightweight nylon 'pyjama' bottoms
(photo: Paul Johnson)*

The top half

Any sort of hard-wearing running top will be suitable, but expect it to get ripped and battle damaged. If the event is exposed or if the weather conditions are particularly bad, the organisers may decide to make it compulsory to take a windproof and/or a small whistle.

And don't forget...

The only other essential bit of kit is a compass. There is little point turning up at an event armed with the latest in GPS technology – these are banned at major events, but would be of little use anyway: orienteering maps do not include a grid and are orientated to magnetic north, rather than grid north, for ease of use. Lightweight, basic compasses are perfectly suited to the job, ideally with a stable needle that doesn't wobble like mad as you run through the terrain. At a basic level any small compass will do since you will be using it mainly to orientate the map, rather than for taking compass bearings.

What 'O' events can Shane take part in?

So, fully equipped with all the right gear Shane checks out the [British Orienteering fixture list](#) to see what events are on. There are various sizes of events ranging from Local through to District, Regional and National. Local and District events can only be entered on site, while Regional and National events usually need to be entered in advance, either online or by post. Instructions of how to enter are always available on the local club's website.

Shane notices that there is a District event on at Loxley Common and decides to go along. Events are usually well signposted once you get close but unfortunately they are rarely accessible by public transport. If you want to get to an event without a car, post a message on the club's forum and some friendly person will offer to give you a lift.

Once there you need to find the registration car or tent, where you will need to fill in your details on an entry form (these are sometimes handed out as you come in to the car park). At this level courses are colour coded according to difficulty; at larger events you simply run on the course appropriate to your age-class (e.g. M21Long or M21Short). The colour scheme is as follows, according to the BO website:

White – very easy, all on paths, mostly used by 6–10 year olds and family groups. **1.0–1.5km.**

Yellow – uses simple linear features (paths, walls, streams etc), mainly under 12's and families. **1.5–2.5km.**

Orange – progressing to basic use of the compass and route choice, ideal for novice orienteers. **2.5–3.5km.**

Light Green – the technical ability requirements begin to increase, crossing terrain using simple contours and ‘point’ features. Ideal for improvers. **2.5–3.5km.**

Green – technically difficult using contour features, ‘point’ features. Used mostly by experienced under 18’s and adults wanting short but challenging course. **2.5–5.0km.**

Blue – technically difficult but a longer and more physically demanding course in comparison to green. The distances are more varied between controls. **5.0–7.5km.**

Brown – physically demanding and technically difficult. For experienced adults only. **7.5–10.0km.**

A good starting point for adult novices might be the Light Green course, which offers a good compromise between technical difficulty and distance. It is worth being aware that the distance may sound short to anyone experienced in running, but it is measured from checkpoint to checkpoint as the crow flies. In practice you will run significantly further and, of course, the hills and undergrowth will slow you down. Top elites might run as fast as 5 minutes per kilometre in easy terrain, but novices might take up to twice as long to cover the distance.

Dibbers at the ready...

Naturally Shane is up for a challenge, so he decides to tackle the green course. He hires a ‘Sport Ident chip’ (sometimes unfortunately called a ‘dibber’), which is the small electronic device that is used to register your time at each control and at the finish. Worn on the index finger, it is a short plastic rod with a clock inside that needs to be inserted into a slot at the control – a positive ‘punch’ is recorded by an LED flash and a beep. You will need to clear the memory of the SI chip before you start. Officials at the start will show you how to do this.



*‘Punching’ a control
(photo: Phil Winskill)*

The one golden rule of orienteering: once you start you **MUST** download your SI chip at the finish, even if you retire from the course – if you fail to do this then the organisers will assume you are still out on the course and organise a search party!

Once you have registered for the event and paid the (usually small) entry fee, you will also be given some control descriptions. This list, which is sometimes written in a strange set of hieroglyphics, tells you the number that will be written on each control and its exact location on the map. Controls are marked on the map with a circle and it is not always obvious what feature to look for in the centre of the circle. An example might be: ‘1. 115 W most thicket, SE side’. Take this with you around the course and check that each control has the correct number on it. This list of descriptions is usually printed somewhere on the map as well.

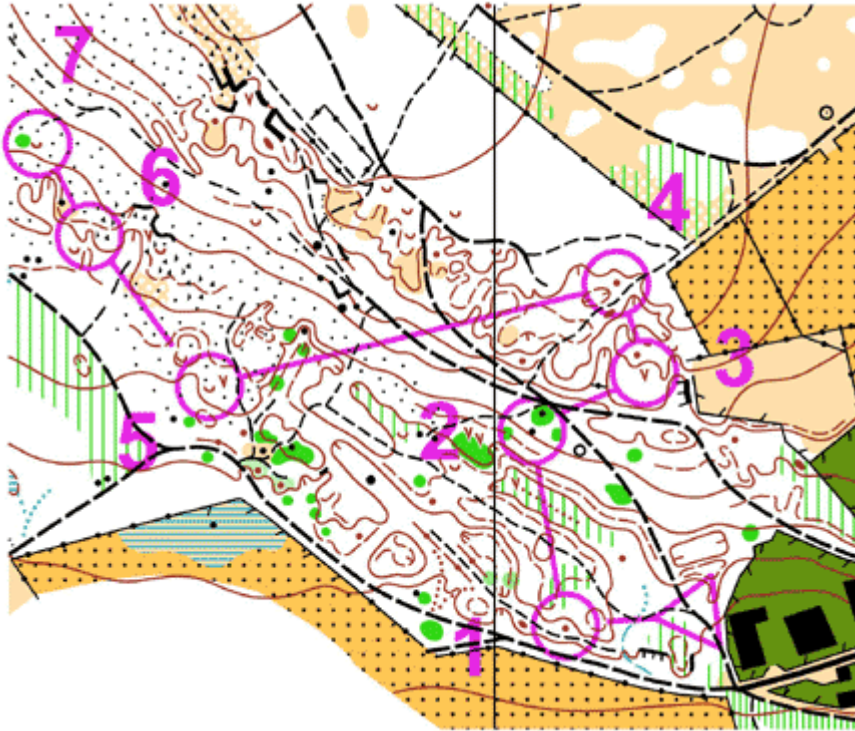
1 M21L		7.830			400	
1	98					
2	104			0.8		
3	115			1.75		
4	112			0.8		
5	113			1.0		
6	114			1.0		
7	116			0.7		
8	118			0.7		
9	117					

*Hieroglyphics to the uninitiated... but
'control descriptions' to the orienteer*

And off he goes!

Shane is finally ready to go to the start, where he will clear his SI chip and wait for a start slot to come up. Competitors start at one minute intervals to avoid following, so you will usually be asked to queue for a couple of minutes while others set off ahead of you. At larger events you will be pre-allocated a start time and you will need to turn up punctually at the start ready to run on that minute.

On the start line you will hear a clock beep for the final 5 seconds of the minute and then you are off. Punch at the start to activate the clock in your SI chip, pick up a map from the correct box and you will usually need to follow some tapes to the start point. Marked on the map as a triangle, this will be represented on the ground with a red and white flag. From there you venture off into the unknown towards the first control. It is entirely up to you which route you take.



*Example of an orienteering map, showing controls 1–7
(credit: South Yorkshire Orienteers / Oli Johnson)*

Shane has mixed fortunes on his way around the course. He finds it tricky to get used to the scale of the map, which is 1:10,000 and includes lots of small details that aren't shown on OS style maps: small boulders, bushes and knolls. There is a temptation to leg it off as fast as you can and hope for the best, but that technique rarely works out. It is much more productive to take your time to read the map and slow down when it gets difficult. There will be plenty of places where you can use your strength and fitness, but there are other places where it will be faster to use your head.

Anyway, Shane reaches the last control in a respectable time with only a few mistakes along the way. From there he runs as fast as he can along some tapes to the finish, which is marked on the map with a double circle, punches to stop the clock on his SI chip and makes his way to the download tent to find out how fast he has run and what position he is in.



*Punching the finish.
Note the 'SI chip' worn on the index finger
(original photo: Phil Winskill)*

And finally...

I'll finish off with another quote from the British Orienteering website:

“Orienteering can be a leisure activity. It is an easy, painless way of staying fit or getting into shape. A great sport to take up with friends and family, allowing you to share your adventures afterwards. At the competitive and elite level Orienteering is a highly competitive sport involving intense concentration, skill and fitness running against the best in the world at international competitions.”

All true, except perhaps for the ‘easy, painless’ bit. Whatever level you are at, orienteering is rarely easy or painless – it is tough, demanding and you often end up battered, scratched and bruised. But this is also the appeal of a sport where you have to take on the elements and the terrain. Where else can you get the opportunity to race in some of the wildest parts of the country and venture far off the beaten track, with only your own physical and navigational capabilities to rely on?

As a beginner, as at all levels, the most intense competition in orienteering is with yourself.

