

Hi Bruce,

I have written some ideas down relating to the Victorian state series and other bush events for discussion at this year's strategy day. Apologies to those reading this if this is a bit of a brain-dump. These things are best discussed amongst many anyway so hopefully some of the ideas here will get some good conversations going. I also apologise if I suggest anything already being done. It has sadly been a couple of years now since I have run in Victoria.

From what I gather the focus for this year's strategy day is to have a good look into our state series of events. My first state series event was "OY 8" at Mosquito Creek, 6 August 1995. I was eleven years old. Not knowing which course might be the most suitable for me, I ran course 12. Not satisfied with that, I thought I'd give course 11 a go. But enough reminiscing...

Orienteering is a sport, a fact not lost on any of us but a fact still definitely lost on the majority of the general public. The identity of what our sport is is a challenging concept to market. One reason for this comes from the prolonged incorrect use (e.g. in maths text books) of the terms "navigating" and "orienteering" interchangeably. Navigating is an activity, a skill. Orienteering is a sport where one hopefully does some accurate navigating while competing! The other side is the ever growing and branching nature of our sport. Park, street, middle, sprint, long, classic, relay, ultra, forest, urban, score, scatter, hageby, loop, mountain bike, orientshow, skins, maze, micro, staggered chasing start, mass start, reverse chasing start... you get the idea.)

As such many of the ideas suggested below focus on what could benefit the series but also our sport as a whole by helping re-enforce the identity of orienteering being a sport (and not a treasure hunt). So to begin:

Organise a sporting season, not a just a series of events

When looking at how we should be structuring our year, I first asked the question "How are other sports doing this?" No point re-inventing the wheel when you can borrow concepts that already show promise. The first example I want to highlight is the XCR (Athletic Victoria's Cross Country and Road Racing series). This series draws many parallels to our own states series, but there are some differences I see in the way it is run that could be of benefit to our series:

High club focus

Despite being an individual sport, the "team" (athletics club) you run for has a huge importance in this series. Whilst there are a couple of relay races in the mix that do help foster this, even in the individual races it is as much about your club performance as it is your own. You run "for your club" as much as you run for your own result. You wear your club's colours when you run. You meet up, warm up, cool down and discuss your race with fellow club members (and others too). Team results/ladders are posted right next to the individual results/ladders on the website giving them equal standing. There is extra motivation for people to "turn up and compete" because you are not only doing it for your own benefit but for the benefit of others, their fellow club members. There is also extra motivation for people to encourage other club members to come to events for the very same reason.

Over the years I have seen various degrees of success in Victoria when trying to foster a similar club atmosphere within our sport. I think it is something that is worth the effort of doing and there is plenty of evidence that it is the type of culture / atmosphere our sport and our series would benefit from. Anyone who has spent any time orienteering in Scandinavia will have experienced the excitement a stronger club focus brings there. You just have to look at our own NOL series to see the benefits that a "team" focus can bring. Would as many people fly across the country for a NOL race if they were just going for themselves? Would the shared travel and accommodation arrangements (that sometimes are the only way people can attend these events) even be organised if it wasn't done under the banner of the NOL team? It certainly could, but in practice it might not.

So, if there are benefits to be had by bringing a club focus to our state series, how might we go about achieving this?

- **Club buy-in:** Our clubs have to get on board with the concept. Without co-operation (and funding) from the clubs it would be far more difficult to achieve
- **Club colours:** Competitors should be highly encouraged to run in club tops. There are SO MANY benefits to this! An event looks so much more professional with people running in team colours. Club members who don't know each other well get to know each other. New members to clubs (and the sport) feel more comfortable approaching someone wearing their own club's colours, even if they don't know them. The list goes on...

- **Club funding** - Unless things have changed much, most Victorian clubs are far from short on cash. Some more funds channelled towards club uniform subsidies for members (to help the point above), club tents, club banners etc. to increase the club/team atmosphere at events would be a worthwhile spend. It also helps make the whole event more visually exciting, more fun to attend, more social and more fun to organise or volunteer to help at

- **Relays** - Schedule the club relays to be a "relay round" of the state series rather than a standalone event. It would give the relay event even more significance if you were not only competing for your club to become the state relay champs but your efforts were also helping you club become the state's championship club for the whole year

- **Publicity** - There's no good having an inter-club competition if it's never written about and the results come out late or are impossible to find. All club team results should be given equal (if not greater) standing on results websites. There are only be a few individual podium places at an event but a winning club can have many more members to feel proud of their combined success



Club tops bringing people together - Even on the other side of the world!

Organise a Pre-Season

The introductory series was mentioned (apologies as I'm not as familiar with this). Why have a whole separately named series for this purpose when the events could be marketed as the state series pre-season events (much like the pre-season cup for the AFL). You would still keep the events focused on being suitable to introduce people to bush O (and still market them as such). The events would also be the pathway that newcomers would then go on to run for their (newly joined) club in the main season. As far as I can tell this natural progression is the current intention of these events anyway so why not formalise it a bit more. Perhaps even have club representatives at these events finding out where newcomers are from and introducing them to people from the most suitable clubs they might like to join. Having newcomers exposed to the friendly and supportive atmosphere that all our clubs provide will help increase newcomers enjoyment and hence retention in the sport. The events could also be used by the more experienced population to "blow out the cobwebs" before the main season, but without the "introductory event" stigma attached. Even throw in some (cash?) prizes for the pre-season cup winners to spice it up. Drawing experienced orienteering to events targeted at new comers is important for newcomers too, especially juniors. Would you come back to give another event a go if you got to see, or even meet, the national champion at the last event you were at?

Consistency, event-to-event, year-to-year

When it comes to discussions about how to "revamp" an event or a series in orienteering, the suggestions of doing new/exciting/different formats for events always comes up. My advice is to approach this angle of "refresh" with a good dose of caution. There is a lot to be said about the strength a consistent experience brings to a sport. I address this on two fronts:

Event-to-event consistency

Different state series events get organised by different clubs. Absolutely nothing wrong with that. This 'everyone giving back' to the sport is part of what makes orienteering so great. The downside comes when the experience as a competitor varies wildly from event to event despite them being billed as being part of the same "series". If you are running a classic state series event then some things should really not differ from event to event. Examples of these include: cost to enter, entry procedure, starting layout/procedure, download procedure, quality of map. Ensuring consistency in these type of key areas is even more important to newcomers. If they attended one event and were exposed to one way of doing things they should be able to come to a second event and everything should work the same way. It should be familiar to them. Consistency here is also highly important when it comes to safety and knowing who is out in the forest. If your starting

procedure isn't consistent you could end up missing competitors (or having random extra ones) in your check controls which puts doubts into who exactly is / is not still out there. In the years before I moved away, there was much improvement in this space (particularly entries :)) so this may no longer be a problem. But if there are suggestions on how certain things could still be improved then I see there being benefit in discussing them.

Year-to-Year consistency

If you are going to have/add a couple of different formats to events in the series across the year (a relay round would be a great addition) then there is nothing wrong with that (though personally I think the majority of the events should still be traditional classic orienteering for this series, it is the state level showcase of our sport). However what should be consistent is that if you are going to run some different formats (let us say 5 classics, a middle and a relay) then you should run the same formats every year and in the same order (and yes, even near enough to the same dates) every year. Now I'm not saying that things should never ever change, especially if something is not liked or not working. But this year-to-year consistency allows people to know what to expect from the series and makes it easier for them to plan their attendance. Looking at the XCR for example, they always open and close the season with relays and Jells Park and the Tan. Take our own NOL, always opens with eureka challenge (ok not so much anymore, but still the labour day weekend) and finishes with the national relays on that last Sunday. Not only does this help attendees plan well in advance but organisers and planners (sorry, course setters) too! When you are not spending time on deciding whether you should run a middle or a classic you can spend more time organising a better one of either. This year-to-year consistency is even more important, and drives more success with our non-series standalone events (but I mention that below). Orienteers are often quick to judge a series of events of the same format as being dull or uninteresting, but they forget that every race, even in the same format is completely different from any other race you run (even on the same map!). That is the beauty of our sport and the reason we keep coming back. But this is sometimes forgotten amongst the never ending list of possible new formats. Consistent spacing between events is something else that should be attempted. Regularly spaced events helps to maintain motivation and momentum between events helping to keep people coming back. Have long periods of downtime between events and people's interest can wain.

Technology

Those who know me well will know I could write pages on this topic. But I'll keep this one short:

SI Air+ - If you aren't running mixed punching events using SportIdent Air+ yet, then do it. I have spent many hours discussing this one! Just do it (Switzerland are for all their events, so is my London club). You will never look back. Direct punching is terrible by comparison.

Commentary - Doesn't have to be NOL level fancy, doesn't have to be commentary at all. Even a PA playing some music and with the occasional welcoming or informative announcements would be a plus. Announce the first start time, announce junior fundraising, announce first finisher (if finish is nearby), announce some course leaders on occasion, plug the next race of the series, plug other upcoming events, announce the nice weather (or apologise for the bad). Keep it simple, create an atmosphere and promote the sport. Anything else is a bonus

Video and Photography - Film stuff, take a few photos, get them up with the results. Post it on Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat it even. Use your flashy camera, use your iPhone. It doesn't matter. 10sec or 10min. Just get something up that shows the event happened and that it looked fun/exciting/challenging, sport like! Get people sharing, get people talking.

Standalone Events

Whilst I realise the focus is on the state series one must mention that good standalone events exist and can be used to benefit the state series. The best example I can use is the Bendigo ToDay. Year-to-year consistent date, format and (rough) location so you know what to expect and can plan to attend well in advance. Positioned well in the calendar to act as a pre-season (pre first NOL round but pre state series and the rest of the year too) and, importantly, promoted as such. With all of this already decided, extra time and effort gets putting into organising the event as best it can be. The result, great events year after year (every year I have attended was great fun) and that "I'll definitely be back next year" feeling. You can't get that feeling if there is no event next year. So consider planning our other non-series standalone events (championships etc.) in a similar fashion.

Anyway I think that's about enough from me. Hope the ideas here generate some good discussion.

Matthew Schepisi