

Coaching Column, part 4

by Geoff Ellis BOK/RAFO

EXPECTATION MANAGEMENT

"Any landing you can walk away from is a good landing. Any landing where you can reuse the aircraft is a brilliant landing!"

In our day jobs we are used to performing to high standards. We consistently draw on previous training, assimilate new skills and reinforce skills by regularly putting them into practice. It has taken years to get to this level of expertise.

If we take this same expectation of excellence into terrain we may get a distorted outlook on achievement that has the potential to adversely affect our progress in the sport.

Attributes and Success are likely to be closely linked but may also have no correlation at all. There are over 40 attributes that are necessary to be an effective orienteer and these cover physical ability, technical ability, nutrition and mental approach. Whilst most of the techniques need to be linked together to be effective, there are some that can be developed in isolation. It's possible to have an unbalanced skill set that delivers excellent results in certain conditions whilst being the root cause of diabolical results in other conditions.

An orienteer who has good line feature appreciation and good flat speed on light terrain (roads) may excel in urban races (sprint to classic), but will struggle in complex, rough, hilly terrain where there are limited line features. Alternatively, an excellent technical orienteer who uses navigation to gain an advantage may struggle in fast terrain. The delightful thing about orienteering is that there are always fresh challenges and techniques to learn, and that differing strengths and weaknesses permit a variety of results.

As we learn new techniques at work we have to practice them so that they become normal and it is the same for orienteering. Grooving an attribute will take time and as we focus on a particular attribute we often forget the other things that we should be doing as well. For any technique to become a conditioned and reliable activity, and therefore a skill, takes time, so we need to manage that expectation.

Learning techniques and developing skills requires a good understanding of what your strengths are, as they are the skills that underpin your orienteering. Through self analysis you will determine what new techniques need to be learnt. It is worth adding the techniques one or two at a time and grooving into skills before the next addition. Identify what technique should be developed next. This may be to eradicate a consistent problem with technique or to develop a new technique due to a shift in the type of terrain that will be regularly experienced.

Recognise that orienteering is one of the hardest sports around due to its breadth of required attributes. It takes many years to become competent, let alone competitive. Orienteers developing skills need good expectation management. It is easy to get upset with yet another poor run, but an honest review of any run is likely to reveal that there was more good than bad. It is important to take heart from the good, learn from the bad, and have realistic expectations on performance.



Geoff Ellis RAFO at BOC 2006.

DEVELOPMENT

Identifying areas for development requires effort to find the cause rather than the symptom. This will determine what techniques should be developed next, or revised.

It is understandable to be always looking to improve, get better, get quicker, but this needs to be managed within ability and expectation. (You should only measure time loss against those up to 5 places either side in the results, not against the fastest). When time loss is found, unpick the control further to understand why. Having found the cause of the mistake, compare against others you made on the course. If 6 different mistakes have been made put it down to 'one of those things' but if mistakes are repeated then that is the technique to work on. A single (bad) mistake makes it worthy of practicing a technique anyway. Analysis should not be solely failure driven. Look for ways to improve good legs and performance overall.

Having identified (a) technique(s) that require: learning (new technique required); reinforcing (refreshing a skill that has faded); developing (improving a good technique to become more efficient and therefore a faster and more reliable skill), seek to put them into practice at the next training opportunity.

Consistency of performance comes from the elimination of 10 min, then 5 min and then 3 min mistakes. Mistakes are not eliminated by stopping making them, they are eliminated by improving orienteering technique. The more time spent training (learning new techniques and analysing runs) the more likely you are to improve. It can be difficult to see why mistakes are being made and therefore what techniques need to be learnt. If you find yourself in this position, speak to an experienced orienteer who may be able to offer some insight.

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Becoming a competitive orienteer takes time. Drive, commitment and enthusiasm will carry you a long way, but expectation needs to be tempered. Celebrate the successes and learn from the failures. Review your perspective and you will likely find more success than failure.

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