



In honour of Valentine's Day, just a few archive photos to remind us how much we all love orienteering!



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Equality in Orienteering

I am not sure whether any of you have come across the podcast – The Run In, which is devoted to all things orienteering. It is worth a listen!

A recent edition featured four top female orienteers talking about sex equality in the sport of orienteering, prompted by the Swedish Federation considering equality in competition. GB orienteers, Cat Taylor and Megan Carter-Davies were joined by top Swedish orienteers, Lina Strand and Emma Bjessmo.

Although much of the discussion centred on the Swedish set-up, it was clear that parallels could be drawn here and across other sports.

The Swedish orienteers were of the view that even in Sweden, where orienteering is virtually a national sport, there is an underlying feeling that greater resources are focussed on male orienteering, in terms of training opportunities and competitions. For example, Lina commented that females are not particularly encouraged to undertake night orienteering in Sweden. Training opportunities in the discipline are concentrated on men. Lina, pointed out that this results in differentials in the opportunity to compete at night, as evidenced by the lack of night legs in the women's category of the famous Tiomila relays, which leads to women orienteers lacking night orienteering skills.

Also, in the Tiomila, relay teams require 10 runners for the male-dominated overnight event and only 5 runners for the women's teams. Some of you may be thinking that this differential is helpful, as perhaps there are fewer women wanting to run. However, Lina explained it is a classic catch 22, if only 5 runners are needed, others who would have run in a 10- person team miss out, lose impetus and so do not get the experience of big competitions and night orienteering.



Cat Taylor also commented that a reduced focus on women's night orienteering results in proportionally more women deciding that they do not 'like' night orienteering, leading to reduced female participation.

Another issue that was discussed was the idea of adopting equal estimated finishing times when planning courses so that the course lengths result in the same estimated finishing times for both men and women. This principle is being adopted by the Swedish Federation, with the IOF just announcing that finishing times for long distance events will be increased for women. Currently the planning for men's long- distance events aims for a finishing time of 90 minutes, whereas the aim for women is 70 minutes, but why? Are we honestly saying that women are not capable of running for 90 minutes?



IOF Eventor - Lina Strand

There is already equality of finishing times for sprints and middle-distance events and IOF is working towards equality in long distance events by recommending an increase at World Championships and World Cup level events to a finishing time of 80-85 minutes for women, with a further review to assess the effects of the change in 2 to 3 years' time.

The point was made that potentially a staggered increase is preferable to allow the changes to training regimes that would be needed to change from running 70 minutes compared to 90 minutes, in competition. However, the consensus seems to be that there is no good reason not to work towards equality of finishing times and that this should be achieved by increasing women's times to the same level as the men's, rather than reducing the men's times.

Another matter of interest that was discussed, is the tendency for there to be a big drop off in the number of women competing in W20 class and above (which was mentioned by both the Swedish and British orienteers) and which is not reflected in such high numbers in the men's ranks. Why is this? What more can be done to retain women in the sport?

Cat Taylor also gave her view of the set-up of the GB Squads, which she believes favours men over women. She pointed out that there are fewer women than men in the GB squads. Currently, the men's senior squad is made up of 14 athletes and the women's squad has only 10 athletes. The Junior Talent squad has 11 men and only 7 women. Why is this? Are there simply more boys and men meeting the standard and if so why?

Is the issue about the pool of athletes at lower levels and what should be done at an earlier stage to ensure more females arrive at the top levels?

In addition, Cat drew attention to the fact that often, whereas a full squad of men will be selected for international competitions, the women's squad will have empty spaces. You may say that numbers are not important and that if runners are not reaching the required standard they should not be selected and therefore as long as there is equality of opportunity a differential in numbers is not important.

However, Cat raised the converse argument explaining that, if a strategic decision is made to take fewer women, then there is potential for talented runners who do not get selected to become demotivated. These runners also miss out on valuable opportunities to develop and gain experience which they can draw on to aid improvement.

All the orienteers were interested in the expectation that junior women run shorter courses than junior men. For example, looking at the British Championships long in 2018, the M14s ran 5km, whereas the W14s ran 3.95km and M16s ran 6.25km, whereas the W16s ran 4.75km. The point was made that this gender differential from an early age can reinforce negative stereotypes for girls, such as; 'you run slow', 'you are not as strong as boys' and this then inevitably leads to the expectation, as they move up through the sport, that they will run shorter courses. Is this necessary? Would running longer courses actually reduce the numbers wanting to compete?

You may think that the issue should not be about comparing females to males but more about making sure that opportunities and messages are the same at an earlier stage/age and of course it needs to be remembered that the sport of orienteering is not well funded and much work is carried out by volunteers.

(continued)



Catherine Taylor



IOF Eventor - Emma Bjessmo

All the athletes interviewed thought that a greater understanding of female specific physiology benefits female athletes in terms of training and performance. There is a growing field of research into the effect of the menstrual cycle and female hormones on performance, with the introduction of female education sessions and a growing body of knowledge feeding into training plans and nutrition. Perhaps the specific effects of the menstrual cycle on performance should be compulsory training for all coaches?

There are obviously some interesting talking points here and no doubt issues that will result in some lively debate and I am more than happy for people to let me have their comments and thoughts on the issues raised.

There is currently a group of W21s who are taking up some of these issues with BOF and who may be developing surveys to gather relevant information so please keep an eye out for these as contributions are encouraged.

I suppose the main things to bear in mind are that just because things have always been done a certain way does not necessarily mean that they are right or cannot be improved and the concept of 'equality' may mean different things to different people.

Finally, where does this leave WCOG as a club? Well, I would say we do pretty well. We have a good mix of male and female coaches and Lynne is now head coach for the North West Junior Squad. Thursday evening events are equally open to both sexes who can run whichever course they choose and the Galoppen events are colour-coded, with both sexes able to run their preferred course. The handicapped Club Chase enables anyone to be the winner and the Parish Relay teams can be made up of any combination of runners, all male, all female or mixed. We also have a good crop of talented, top level orienteers, both male and female.

But it is important not to become complacent. There are still far fewer female orienteers than male orienteers, especially in the junior ranks and so as a club we should be continuing the good work already being done to encourage the engagement, development and retention of talented athletes of both sexes.

Lockdown Viewing -

Rosie Watson's film of her journey so far. Well worth a watch. Here is the link:

<https://vimeo.com/490190740>



And Lockdown Listening -

Listen to the exploits of WCOG member Steve Birkinshaw

<https://theinspirationalrunner.podbean.com/.../episode.../>



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Episode #138 Steve Birkinshaw There Is No Map in Hell

A 17hr Bob Graham, seven times winner of the OMM, winner of the...