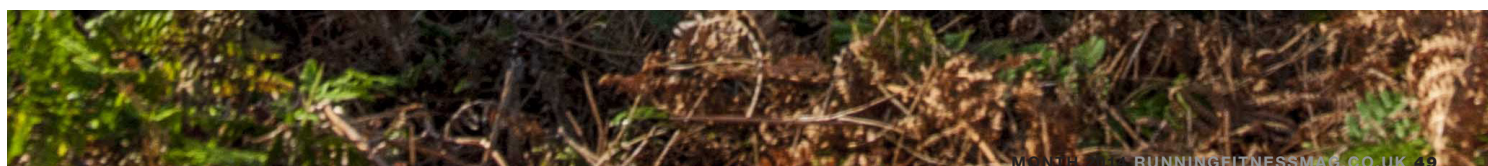




AN OUTDOOR ADVENTURE

Grab a compass and step outside your **COMFORT ZONE**, as *Rf* takes you on an orienteering adventure WORDS Ellie Ross



Racing beneath a dense canopy, I almost ran straight past the little orange and white flag billowing in the breeze. “There it is!” I yelped, skidding to a halt and sending a pile of crisp brown leaves shooting into the air. Surrounded by woodland, the marker stood small and alone – but it was like a beacon of hope for me on my first ever orienteering experience. It marked a control point, a precious 10 marks to add to my tally. I ran over to it, punched my electronic tab into the box and heard the satisfying beep. Then I checked my map, wiped the sweat off my forehead and pressed on in search of another.

ORIENTEERING: THE CONCEPT

I had come to Sherwood Pines Forest in Nottingham to take part in a brand new orienteering event, the Red Bull Robin Hood. Despite taking place on the first weekend in November, its inaugural race was blessed with blue skies and sunshine. But unlike the weather, I didn’t get off to the brightest start. One in three of us can’t read a map, according to research by GPS specialist Garmin – and I got lost driving to the event. In the age of the smartphone, map reading seems like a dying skill. But orienteering requires fitness and navigation in equal measure. To make matters worse, I hadn’t brought a compass. I would also be running with my 64-year-old dad – the oldest competitor – who, as well as a compass, had forgotten his glasses. Luckily, coaches were on site to help. After changing into my event t-shirt, I asked Pauline Olivant, from Nottinghamshire Orienteering Club, for some tips. “Keep checking where you are on the map,” she told me as I nervously walked to the start-line with my blinking dad and other athletic-looking competitors.

“Sticking to the paths is easier – and keep an eye on the time.”

HISTORY

Born in Scandinavia, orienteering first arrived in the UK in the 1950s but it took off properly in the 1960s, partly because of a Swede called Jan Kjellström. His role in developing the sport here was so significant that Britain’s biggest orienteering festival is named the JK Festival in his memory.

Orienteering is steadily increasing in popularity in the UK. In 2009, the number of times an orienteering course had been completed was 205,521. By 2013, that number had risen to 238,300.

But Craig Anthony, development manager for British Orienteering, which partnered with Red Bull for this event, thinks more needs to be done.

“Orienteering has a perception issue. Some people see it as simply walking around with a map and they don’t see the sport side,” he explained. “But it is as much about fitness as it is about navigation. It’s both a physical and mental challenge and not all sports offer that. This is a fantastic event because it’s fun and appeals to more people.”

HOW DO YOU DO IT?

The aim of orienteering is to navigate between control points marked on a map in the quickest time. Competitors are given an electronic ‘dibber’ to wear on their finger and ‘dib in’ at each control box. The data is collected so you can see how you did just minutes after crossing the finish-line. You are given a map with the course five minutes before the start, but can only look at it 60 seconds before.

Most orienteering events see competitors set off individually, in staggered starts on a pre-determined linear route, with the fastest finisher



Wearing the right kit is essential to avoid brambles and other obstacles

IMAGES COURTESY OF RED BULL



HANDY HINTS

- **BRING YOUR OWN COMPASS.** There aren’t spares on the day.
- **WEAR LONG TROUSERS/SOCKS.** You’ll need to protect your legs as you might run through brambles.
- **FINISH ON TIME.** Time penalties are severe (minus 10 points per late minute).
- **PLAN YOUR ROUTE.** It’s tempting to dash off at the start, but spend a minute or two working out an efficient route.
- **DON’T JUST FOLLOW OTHERS.** Trust yourself – orienteering is an individual sport and they might be going the wrong way anyway.
- **WORK OUT THE MAP’S SCALE.** Then you can expect how far to run between controls.
- **BE STRATEGIC.** You will inevitably have to miss out some controls to finish on time. Be decisive about which to leave out.
- **FUEL IS EN ROUTE.** There are plenty of water and Red Bull stands to keep you hydrated – so you only need to carry your map on the day. But check beforehand.



Make sure you understand the map’s scale before starting



Ellie running with her dad, who happened to be the oldest competitor

NAVIGATION TIPS

Orienteering requires some extra skills other than just running, here are a few tips:

- 1

FAMILIARISE YOURSELF WITH THE MAP

They are specific for orienteering, so look slightly different to a regular OS map. You are given a sample before the race – take time to understand what the different colours and symbols signify. Make sure you orient the map. The most important thing for a beginner is to keep it pointing in the right direction.
- 2

USE A COMPASS

Then you will always know where north is, helping you to orient the map and run the right way.
- 3

KEEP TRACK OF YOUR POSITION

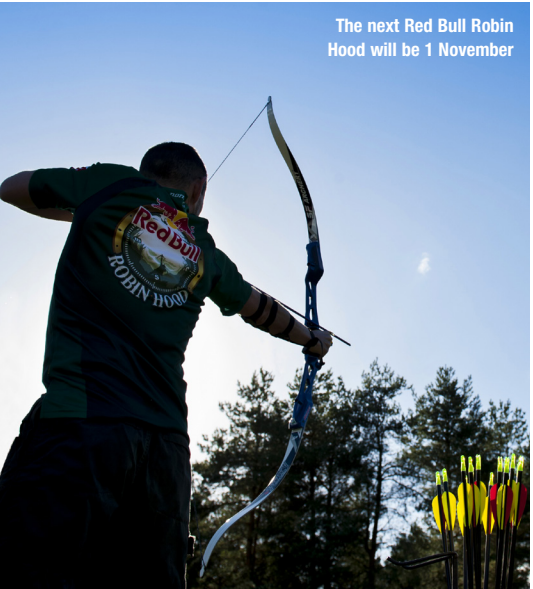
Fold the map and use your thumb as a marker whilst navigating your way round.
- 4

STICK TO PATHS WHERE POSSIBLE

This will make it easier if you're a beginner as you will have an easier terrain.
- 5

PLAN AHEAD

Take time at the start of the race to find where it finishes, and plan your route accordingly.



The next Red Bull Robin Hood will be 1 November



Use your thumb as a guide on your map to avoid losing precious time during the race

SOME SEE ORIENTEERING AS SIMPLY WALKING AROUND WITH A MAP THEY DON'T SEE THE SPORT SIDE

crowned winner. But the Red Bull Robin Hood was run as a 'score' event – a mass start with no preset route and a 75-minute time limit. About 130 competitors raced around the 18km course, some in groups, some alone. The course featured 30 regular controls – worth 10 points each – and six additional physical and skills-based 'challenges' – from archery and rope climbing, to a balance beam and even onion catapulting. Each of these was worth a golden 30 points if successfully completed.

With £2000 in the prize pot – the biggest prize sum for a UK orienteering event – competitors had an extra reason to vie for victory. Winners of both male and female categories would bag £500, with £300 and £200 for second and third places, respectively. This enticed everyone from top Team GB athletes and club members, to complete beginners like me and my dad.

GETTING STARTED

Seconds after setting off, I was scrambling through brambles and fern in what I

thought was a short cut to a challenge. Minutes later, I was out of breath. After half an hour, I had my first stitch. The competition element meant I was running faster than I would on a training jog, and the constant stopping and starting to check my map burnt more energy than usual.

With no compass between us, my dad used the position of the sun to tell me where north was, as I oriented the map and looked for nearby control points.

The best orienteers are good hill runners. Strength and endurance are required to power through challenging terrain, from marshes to shrub vegetation. Athletes train on rough surfaces, and build up supporting muscles with exercises like catching a medicine ball while balancing on one foot.

"I usually start with a spin on the bike or a run in the morning, then I do a 10 to 20km trail run at lunch and intervals or hill reps in the evening," explained Hector

Haines, a 25-year-old semi-professional British orienteer, who trains three times a day. "But it's a sport for anyone, no matter how fit you are. You can still enjoy the challenge of navigation around the course. Being alone in the wilderness and getting from A to B has always captivated my imagination."

MENTAL CHALLENGE

I quickly realised that the challenge was not only physical but also mental. The more tired I became, the harder it was to focus on map reading. Decision-making and organisational skills are also key. Lucy Butt, winner of the ladies' category, told *Rf*: "Orienteering really relies on your mental technique. Should I take this route around the hill or take the risk and go straight over? Running up hills is tough but rewarding – and orienteering is all about the adventure."

Timekeeping is also crucial – arrive late and you lose precious points. I made a big



Additional obstacles score you extra points



Winners celebrate with a medal and a beef stew

error by not planning a route based around where the finish was on the map and ended up at the furthest point from it with just minutes to go.

As my dad and I sprinted towards our final control, we lifted our hands in unison as we crossed the finish-line to the sound of a cheering crowd. But our joy at completing the course was swiftly tempered by the fact that we were five minutes late, halving our score to a paltry 50 points. In comparison, the winner secured 380.

Nevertheless, navigating my way through the forest with a map instead of a smartphone, while clocking up the running miles, had been exhausting – but completely exhilarating.

Brushing some mud off my leg as I tucked into a finisher's beef stew, I vowed to practise my map reading before next year's event. And, I thought, it's high time to invest in a compass. ●

GET INVOLVED

The second Red Bull Robin Hood will take place on Sunday 1 November 2015 in Sherwood Pines Forest, Nottingham. All registration fees go to the Wings for Life charity. See www.redbull.co.uk/robinhood.

For more information on orienteering, and where to find your local event, see britishorienteering.org.uk