

Running Wild: Lessons Learned and Success Stories from Lagan Valley Orienteers

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Overview

Running Wild has proven already to be a highly effective initiative for attracting families to orienteering, building club membership, and transitioning new participants into committed members of Lagan Valley Orienteers (LVO). Over the course of its first year's implementation (September 2024 - August 2025), we've learned valuable lessons and witnessed encouraging success stories that speak to the long-term sustainability and growth of orienteering in Northern Ireland.

Photos from 1st Running Wild Session, October 2024: <https://adobe.ly/4e4iDfa> (Courtesy of George Savell).

Running Wild on LVO Website: <https://lvo.org.uk/juniors/running-wild/>

What We Got Right

1. Immediate Pathway to Club Membership

Running Wild directly feeds into club activities by integrating with the former Tollymore Orienteers hub—taking over its location, activities and online Facebook presence. This seamless transition gave participants a familiar identity, while gently guiding them toward full LVO membership. Importantly, we made it clear that Running Wild is a *starting point*, not the endpoint, of their orienteering journey.

2. A Clear, Cost-Effective Membership Offer

We were transparent from the outset: Running Wild is free for club members, while non-members pay a modest fee (£3 per child, max £10 per family). Given that junior membership pays for itself after just a couple of sessions, many families quickly saw the value in joining LVO. We also worked in tandem with the club's event system, raising the price of non-member event entry fees so that there were other financial incentives to being a member.

3. Family Engagement from the Start

One of our strongest successes has been our insistence that parents attend, thus ensuring they understand both the sport and their role in supporting their children's involvement. This has eliminated any expectation of Running Wild as a 'drop-off' activity and instead created a culture of active, informed parent engagement. This is particularly important given that juniors, in previous times, came from parents who were already orienteers. We are now faced with juniors whose parents do not orienteer and who therefore also need to be exposed to and educated in the sport.

4. Building a Social Fabric

Orienteering can be solitary by nature. Running Wild makes a deliberate effort to be social — offering tea and sweets post-session, providing time for parents to chat, and ensuring the same

coaches return monthly. These touches have created a sense of community that encourages repeat participation and club loyalty.

5. Consistency Matters

Sessions are held on the *last Sunday of every month* in Tollymore Forest, establishing a predictable rhythm appreciated by families — similar to other mainstream sports. Even with disruptions like storm closures, we maintained this consistency by relocating or rescheduling when necessary.

6. Focus on the Right Age Group

We've found the most success with children aged 8 and above (P4+), aligning with typical age entry points for other sports. Younger children are assessed case-by-case however, particularly if their families already have some experience with orienteering or if they have older siblings who attend. So far 15 Running Wild participants across a spread of ages from 10 to 50 have gone on to become LVO members and attend one or more events in addition to Running Wild.

What We Have Learned

1. Family Involvement is Non-Negotiable

Experience with schools and scouts shows that children rarely transition to club participation without their parents. Even when juniors join independently, parents remain essential to support travel and logistics. Family buy-in is crucial.

2. Tailored Coaching Builds Confidence

We now split Running Wild groups by age:

- Under-10s engage in fun games and simple navigation activities.
- 10-14s receive structured coaching aligned with TD3/TD4 standards, delivered by NIOA junior squad coaches.

This segmentation allows older children to form peer bonds while developing their competitive skills.

3. Communication Builds Community

Upon joining the club, families are added to an active WhatsApp group that shares event info, gear advice, congratulations, and logistical support. It has become an invaluable onboarding and retention tool for new members.

4. Selling the Club Before the Sport Works

“Come and Try It” events promote the activity—but not the community. Many enjoy the experience but don't return. Running Wild flips the model: it first sells the *people* and *culture* of LVO, then the sport itself. Once people feel connected, they're far more likely to stay.

5. Embracing Orienteering as a Competitive Sport

While orienteering is often marketed for its health benefits, Running Wild proudly emphasizes its competitive nature. Participants are told that orienteering involves *running*, *decision-making*, and *competition*—and that success is possible at individual, club, and even national levels.

6. Quality Over Quantity

Initial sessions attracted 20–30 participants. As of July 2025, numbers average 12–20, with 3–5 new faces each month. Though smaller, this group is more engaged—many are already club members or on the verge of joining. Smaller numbers allow for deeper coaching relationships and better outcomes.

Unexpected Insights

- **Running Wild as a Feeder to the NIOA Junior Squad:** What we had not anticipated was just how effectively Running Wild could serve as a pipeline into the Northern Ireland Orienteering Association (NIOA) Junior Squad. As of 2025, NIOA has only 9 male juniors who can viably fill the 24 available places for the September 2025 Junior Inter-Regional Competition (JIRCs). Encouragingly, the NIOA Junior Coach has already identified four girls, all from Running Wild, who show strong potential to fill the W14 category for 2026—with appropriate support over the coming year. Currently, the entire JIRCs team comes from LVO, even though NIOA includes other clubs (FERMO and NWOC). This highlights both the success of Running Wild and the pressing need to share these lessons with NIOA more broadly. Tailored support and adaptation of the Running Wild model may help these other clubs grow their junior sections and ensure a more balanced regional representation in future.
- **Replication Potential with Caution:** The Running Wild model fits well within LVO’s size and capacity (185 members as of August 2025). It’s effective because we have a wide and diverse volunteer base to support it. For smaller clubs, the exact same model may not be feasible or sustainable.
- **Volunteers Stepped Up:** We initially estimated that the project would require 3 days per month from the Families and Juniors Officer. However, LVO volunteers took on more responsibilities than expected, cutting this down to on average 1.5 days per month. As a result, we achieved agreed outputs and began seeing positive outcomes, while spending only 55% of the budget. Total annual expenditure was £4,241.74, compared to the allocated £7,650.00, with £3,500 provided by OF (see page 5 for full details).
- **Integrated Social Media:** We’ve streamlined communication by consolidating our social media presence under the main LVO Facebook, website and email channels, rather than running a separate Running Wild account.

Success Stories

- Families who initially came “just to try it” are now active club members. Some juniors compete at regional and national levels; others have brought friends into the sport.
- Several parents, initially on the sidelines, now are willing to volunteer for the club, shadow children on courses, and even compete themselves.

- One young participant from Running Wild attended the 2024 JROS Hawkshead camp —a testament to how far the journey can go when the right support is in place.
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Next Steps

- **Increase Club and Competition Integration:** Continue encouraging Running Wild families to attend regular LVO events for further coaching opportunities and to begin travelling to regional competitions. This will help embed new members into the wider orienteering community and foster long-term commitment.
 - **Expand Coaching for Aspiring Juniors:** With the aim of fielding a full M/W14 team for the Junior Inter-Regional Championships (JIRCs) by 2026, we will deliver a ‘Teens and Tweens’ 12-week intensive age-specific coaching course within Tollymore in Autumn 2025. These will complement Running Wild and our monthly Club Meets, and help fast-track the development of promising juniors into competitive athletes.
 - **Evaluate Long-Term Impact:** A full strategic review of Running Wild will be conducted after two years, aligned with the conclusion of Orienteering Foundation (OF) grant funding. The review will assess outcomes using both qualitative and quantitative measures from LVO’s strategic plan, focusing on membership growth, retention, and junior development pathways.
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Conclusion

Running Wild has helped LVO clarify its identity: we are a *competitive, welcoming, and family-orientated* club. By designing a programme that prioritises connection, consistency, and quality, we’ve built not only skills—but also community.

Our model demonstrates that when you put people first, the sport will follow.
