

Becoming a Competitive, Caring Club

by Moire O'Sullivan,
Lagan Valley Orienteers

'What if nobody turns up?' Ric said. I was wondering the very same thing. The carpark was empty, black tarmac stretching out before us, with just a couple of cars owned by club coaches parked close against the wall. 'I think some of the committee signed-up last minute,' Ric said, more trying to reassure himself than me. I hated it when events were attended out of sheer pity.

I knew that holding these new Club Meets was a risk. Our club, Lagan Valley Orienteers, had put on coaching sessions before in various guises. It was often a lot of effort for, at times, mediocre results. We had held junior coaching sessions that were well attended, but few of the youngsters ended up joining the club or coming to proper events. We had put on winter training that was also popular but could only accommodate adults due to it taking place on weekday evenings, which involved navigating in the dark.



Author and trainee coach, Moire O'Sullivan, still working on her map resource management skills.

This time around, there was a slight change to the format. These new once-a-month Club Meets came off the back of a long strategic planning process. Though a couple of members had said they'd like to improve their orienteering skills, the majority just wanted to hang out more. It seemed like, over the years, our club had slowly morphed into a quasi-event-management organisation, where our primary focus was putting on quality orienteering races. These efforts were seemingly drowning out the main reasons why people join a club in the first place – to learn new skills, to compete as a team, and to find and make like-minded friends. Orienteering events are notoriously anti-social: you turn up at the start at a different time to everyone else, you're not allowed to intentionally run with others and, when you finish, most people are either still in

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LVO orienteers and coaches gather for their monthly club meet.

the forest or have already packed up and gone back home. Back in the day, when life was less hectic, most orienteers went to a nearby pub afterwards to map geek and catch up. Sadly, those days are well and truly gone.

While dreaming about what we wanted for our club, we came across the strategy of the wildly-popular 'parkrun'. According to their founder, Paul Sinton-Hewitt CBE, parkrun was never really about the run. It was designed first and foremost as a social occasion, with a 5K hook to bring people in. As one parkrun runner put it, 'The actual 'running' part has become almost incidental to the community support, friendships made, post-parkrun brunches and laughs along the way.'

Agreeing that the social element would be central to our Club Meet, we also decided to make slight changes to our coaching format. The orienteering would be for everyone, not just for seniors or juniors. This meant that we committed to laying on coaching for all levels, all at the same time, grouping orienteers into Technical Difficulty (TD) 1/2, TD3 and TD4/5. We also decided to let the secondary-school TD4/5 juniors have their own separate group and dedicated coach, to try and develop more of a team spirit amongst them. The Club Meets would be regular and predictable, so we agreed to hold them every second Saturday of the

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Coaching allows orienteers to work and learn together as a pair.

month during term-time. Such a schedule meant taking the painful decision to drop four annual club events to give space for the nine new Club Meets to take place.

Just as I was thinking I'd driven all the way to Woodburn Forest for nothing, a car pulled in through the gates. And then another. And yet another. Out stepped familiar faces, some of whom have been practicing the sport for decades. I was surprised they were eager to learn something more. And then something else happened.

'Who's he?' I said to Ric, almost suspiciously. A young lad in his twenties was walking towards us. It had been a long time since I had seen a new face at any of our activities.

'I don't know,' Ric replied, before going 'But who's she?' A young Asian lady was also coming towards the group that was now slowly forming around our coaching team. We later learned Shuk Han, originally from Hong Kong, had taken a train and taxi all the way from Belfast just to attend. She had somehow found out about our event from Facebook.

The club coaches had agreed beforehand that if we had gotten ten to fifteen people at the first Club Meet we were doing really well. Before we knew it, twenty-eight ready and willing orienteers, ranging from six years old to seventy plus, were huddled around Ric to hear him give his inaugural briefing.

And boy, were we glad of those twenty-eight bodies, for we had ulterior motives. Ric together with fellow LVO members Aine and Mark had just completed the first part of their UK Coaching Course Level 2 (UKCCL), generously supported by the Orienteering Foundation. They now needed to do four linked coaching sessions and a final assessment. The Club Meets meant that they could assemble a group of orienteers on whom they could hone their coaching skills and



Racing to their attack point on a TD3 star exercise.

ultimately get their qualification.

Ninety minutes later, the nearby hall we had hired was packed with hungry and happy orienteers. I went around asking people how the coaching went.

'It was really good,' road and mountain runner Gillian exclaimed. 'I learned loads. Like the coaches really broke things down so it was easy to understand. I really loved it. I will be back!' The more people I talked to, from beginner to elite, the more the enthusiasm for the coaching was evident.

But what was much more important was the din of orienteers actually hanging out. I saw newcomers being welcomed by old-hands, longstanding members engaging



The TD1-2 group learning all about maps from LVO coach, Steph.

with novice orienteers. I saw our under 12s lined up against a radiator checking out games on each other's phones. Shuk Han was happily chatting with our juniors coach, who found out about the taxi and train journey. Shortly after this, we established a WhatsApp group so orienteers can car share more easily.

Though these Club Meets are still very much in their early days, we are now averaging around thirty orienteers per session, supported by a team of eight coaches. We acknowledge there is still work to do, especially in terms of junior attendance. But we are heartened by the fact that people are still enthusiastic, taking time to socialise over an indoor packed lunch after multi-ability coaching.



By making 'hanging-out' just as important as the orienteering, we hope that LVO will eventually become a healthier, happier, bigger and better club.



Footnote:

LVO is one of several clubs that the Orienteering Foundation has supported with grants towards club development. For some clubs that has been for a paid club development officer post. In LVO's case the grant was for delivering a UKCC Level 2 coaching course to several LVO members who would deliver coaching at the Club Meets. If you are interested in how the Orienteering Foundation might support your club's development, head over to www.orienteeringfoundation.org.uk to find out more or get in touch with one of our trustees or ambassadors.



Safety Spotlight

A column collated by Tim O'Donoghue (safety@scottish-orienteering.org) and Karen Ashworth (safety@southdowns-orienteers.org.uk) aimed at helping clubs to learn from each other's near misses. If you have a story of your own to contribute, please get in touch. We promise anonymity in what gets published!

#15 The one with... The Car Park Fire

What happened?

Following the devastating car park fire at Luton Airport (Oct 2023) and a smaller incident at Gatwick Airport (Mar 2024), is there anything we could / should be learning for our event parking arrangements?

Both fires appear to have been caused by vehicle faults and both spread to nearby cars. The Luton Airport (multistorey car park) incident resulted in damage to 1200 cars and partial collapse of the building.

The Gatwick (open air long stay car park) fire was extinguished rapidly by the airport fire service.

Did you know that around 95% of UK petrol/diesel cars have plastic fuel tanks and that the testing requirement for these is to withstand an open flame for 2 minutes? Once you have a fire, it is therefore likely that you will, relatively quickly, have escaped fuel adding to the spread of the flames.



Car parking on Day 1 of 2008 Croeso on Ffos y Wern with Tor y Foel in the background.

What can we learn for orienteering event parking?

The key difference between the Luton and Gatwick fires appears to have been

a combination of speed of response and factors which determine how rapidly fire spreads between vehicles.

Some questions to consider when setting up event parking arrangements:

- Do we have mobile phone reception to call the fire brigade?
- Do we have physical access to get a fire engine in?
- Do our controls allow for getting a fire engine in if, for example, there is a single-track lane that might be blocked by exiting traffic?
- Have we kept our parking area segregated from obvious sources of ignition (generators? barbecues? catering suppliers?) and combustible materials (straw bales? tents? dry vegetation?)
- For a larger parking area, have we planned in fire lanes (which serve both to allow access to the fire service and to provide a fire break which slows the spread of fire – ideally at least 6m wide, so more than the length of a parking space between rows; more than 2 missing vehicles in a row).
- Do our emergency plans include for imposing a cordon to keep people at least 50m from a vehicle fire?