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Race Preparation

By John Campbell

Most orienteers go through a process in preparation for a race that they have fine tuned and done so often that it has become a ritual. Preparation is important to help the mind focus for the race ahead. Part of this process is to ensure that you take care of the elements that you can control prior to start of the race: you do not want to get to the start to find you have forgotten your compass, or waste time in the woods tying shoe laces, etc. The following are techniques I use which I have found effective. I have not addressed the question of mental race preparation from the perspective of using music and other techniques used by some elite runners to calm and focus the mind before a race, as I do not have sufficient knowledge to comment wisely.

While most of this advice applies to A events, much of it can also be applied to local events.

Arrival At Event

Make sure that you arrive with plenty of time to catch up with friends, make your preparations and warm up. It is okay to arrive early at the start area but irritating to be late for your start both for the organizers and yourself as it increases your anxiety. At certain events you may not be allowed to start if you arrive late, so do not take the chance.

Event packet / Course Setters Notes

It is important to read these thoroughly as they provide details on distance to the start, how the start/finish set-up is arranged, course distances and climb, valuable insight from the course setter about the terrain and how it is mapped, and any other particularly important notes.

Orienteering Equipment Tips

Shoes: I have had various models of O-shoes over the years and regardless of how comfortable some have been, I still seem to get blisters when running on certain terrain. For a multi-day event this needs to be avoided. My daughter Alison recently taught me a great tip: prior to putting on socks, I put strips of duct tape (yes, the indispensable duct tape!) across the areas prone to blisters. This has worked wonders for me. Other orienteers require an elaborate system of taping to help avoid sprained ankles.

Tape your shoe laces: How many of you will admit to having lost time in the woods tying your shoe laces even though you double/triple tied them? To avoid this time lost, wrap your laces with electrical tape. It makes it a lot harder for the vegetation to pull on them.

Clue Sheet/Code Description Holder: It is important that you keep the code description sheet separate from the map. Why? When you are running through the woods with your map folded and oriented in the direction you are navigating, you do not want to lose contact with your location on the map by having to unfold the map to read the code descriptions. You then have to refold the map and re-establish the orientation and contact with your actual location to that on the map. This is a distraction that is easily avoided by carrying the code description on your body where it can be easily read on the move. There are multiple approaches to this: some people attach them to their forearm, others hang them from their waist. The key is to make sure the code descriptions are covered whether using a purchased holder or covering with clear tape and that they are well secured to avoid being easily torn away from your body.

E-Punch: It is strongly advised to have a secondary strap for your epunch tied around your wrist. Epunches are expensive and occasionally slip off your finger. You can purchase one from DVOA that support the juniors.

Thumb Compass: I have deliberately stated "thumb compass" for a good reason. The main use of the compass is to make sure your map is correctly oriented. With your map folded into a small area showing the current and next few legs, you should be pinpointing where you are on the map with the pointed end of the thumb compass with the north arrow aligned with the north arrow lines on the map. This way you know where you are consistently and the direction you are facing. This enables you to execute your planned route with tunnel vision knowing and focusing on checking off the pertinent features along the way and when you need to change direction.

Whistle: It is always advisable to carry a whistle in your pocket. You never know when an accident may happen and you need it.

Bicycle gloves: Not essential, but after a nasty fall several years ago running fast along a trail in French Creek, where I effectively dug a deep divot into my writing hand just short of causing permanent damage, fingerless bike gloves are for me a cheap insurance policy and provide an bonus. The slight padding on the palms of them are excellent for brushing aside tree branches and briars.

Fluids

It is important to start a race well hydrated, especially in the hot summer months. Make sure you are drinking sufficient fluids. Having said that, a pit stop on the way to the start is advisable – you don't want to have to stop in the woods and waste valuable time.

Map

Study the map whenever it is available. At places where events have been held previously, study the map in detail to get a feel for the overall terrain and especially focus on the contours to get an understanding of the shape of the terrain. The more you can comprehend the terrain from the map, the better. Look at the map from different angles, to get a feel for running in different directions. Are there any unusual symbols or features? Think about the right orienteering technique to suit the terrain.

Also, check the map scale.

Course Descriptions

Study the course descriptions to make sure you understand the feature for each one. Are there symbols you are not sure of? If so, ask someone for clarification. As you approach the start, remember the first few control features and code.

Warm-up

Allow time to go for a warm-up run and stretch thoroughly before you move into the start box. It is good to run in the warm-up terrain itself, getting your feet wet, sandy, muddy whatever the terrain is, so you don't try to dodge these features, pulling you off course, once you have started the race. This is the time to start your mental focus on the race ahead. Remember, you are running against the clock and not others. You need to block them out of your mind. It is recommended that as part of focusing, you do not talk with others within five minutes of your start. Orient yourself to know where north is and its relationship to the direction the start is set-up.

Clear & Check

Remember to clear and check your e-punch before entering the start box. You don't want to get out there and have a great race and not have space to hold all the controls! Plus it is a pain for the e-punch crew.

Start Chute

At start minus 1, when you have been given the map blank face up, as 95% of maps have the north at the top of the map, align the top of the map with north, i.e. if north is to my left, I turn the top of the map to the left so that when the start whistle blows and I turn the map over, it is aligned in the direction I am facing. This saves time orienting the map.

Being well prepared enables you to focus solely on the task ahead, planning and executing the appropriate orienteering techniques at speed around the whole course.