

Know your sport: So what is orienteering?

For those who are orienteering enthusiasts, it may not seem necessary to answer this question. However, those new to the sport may well ask it and expect a simple answer. In practice though it is not that easy since there are many varied versions of the sport and, trying to include them all within a simple definition creates problems. Here then is a short description to help newcomers know what **orienteering** actually is!

A publicity leaflet produced by **British Orienteering** states:

Orienteering is a challenging outdoor adventure sport that exercises both the mind and the body. The aim is to navigate in sequence between control points marked on a unique orienteering map and decide the best route to complete the course in the quickest time. It does not matter how young, old or fit you are, as you can run, walk or jog the course and progress at your own pace.



This does incorporate most aspects (but not all!) of the sport. As a competitive sport, it is open to all and can be enjoyed in many different ways. At its most competitive, orienteers are athletes who maintain a high level of fitness in order to race at speed across the terrain whilst still navigating accurately. For these orienteers, there are national, regional and world championships with selection for the national team being an important incentive as a way of progressing to a future world championship medal.

But it does not have to be seen in that way! Many 'orienteers' enjoy the opportunity to visit local woods or country parks and to walk a new route as set out by the course - speed may not be a consideration. They may choose to go round as a pair, a family or a group - at most events this is perfectly acceptable. Children will often initially go around a course with a parent or teacher so as to gain confidence in map reading. Age is no problem either. For the very youngest 'orienteer', special courses are sometimes provided where the map reading is kept very simple and the route to be followed is shown on the ground by a string. Courses are also provided suitable for all age groups which take into account the declining strength and endurance of the older competitor - currently there are competitors in their 90s. In most cases results are based on the speed taken to complete the designated course although even that is not always the case. In TrailO, it is the more the ability to accurately compare the map to the terrain which is critical.



There are though variations on the basic concept. The definition above states 'outdoor' - there have been events held inside buildings.

It also states 'run, walk or jog' - but there are versions of orienteering for cyclists (MTBO) and for skiers (SkiO) and versions allowing wheelchair users to compete with the able-bodied (TrailO). Another variation is to allow competitors to choose the order in which they visit controls so in these events the 'sequence' is not important. **What all these variations have in common though is the use of the map to create a challenging competition.**

As a competitive sport, it is an **individual** test where decision taking and accurate navigation provide the mental challenge. This aspect makes the structure of an event rather different from, for example, cross-country. For many events, competitors start at minute intervals so that you are not racing alongside others. For large events, this means that people may be starting over a period of 2 or even 3 hours. They are then also finishing over a long period so it will not be known who is the fastest until later in the day.



Finding out more...

For several years, the **BKO Newsletter** has published a series of articles covering a wide range of orienteering topics. These are all available for download from the 'What is Orienteering' page of the BKO website (see the 'Club Information' section). The complete list (with direct links) is provided below with the different leaflets grouped into topics:

Different orienteering formats:

- [Events, Competitions and Activities](#)
- [Long, Middle or Sprint?](#)
- [Night Orienteering](#)
- [TrailO](#)
- [Mountain Bike Orienteering \(MTBO\)](#)
- [Orienteering Relays](#)
- [Permanent Orienteering Courses](#)
- [The JK International Festival](#)

Taking part

- [What to Wear?](#)
- [Colour-coded Courses and Technical Difficulty](#)
- [Electronic Timing: Emit and SI](#)
- [Compasses](#)
- [Map Scales and Pacing](#)
- [Control Descriptions](#)
- [ISOM 2017 - The New Map Symbols Explained](#)
- [Up and Down: Using Contours](#)
- [Vegetation - From Yellow to White to Green](#)

Performance and Technique

- [Ranking Scores](#)
- [National Incentive Schemes](#)
- [Techniques: CAR\(E\) and RAG](#)
- [Post-race Analysis](#)
- [Planning, Training and Competitions](#)
- [Developing GB Talent](#)

Administration

- [The Early Days of Orienteering](#)
- [Administering the Sport](#)
- [Event Officials](#)
- [Where do orienteering maps come from?](#)
- [BKO's Event Locations](#)
- [Welfare Issues in Orienteering](#)
- [Top Orienteering Websites](#)
- [Event Safety](#)
- [Land Permission](#)

For more information, see British Orienteering at: <https://www.britishorienteering.org.uk/>

