

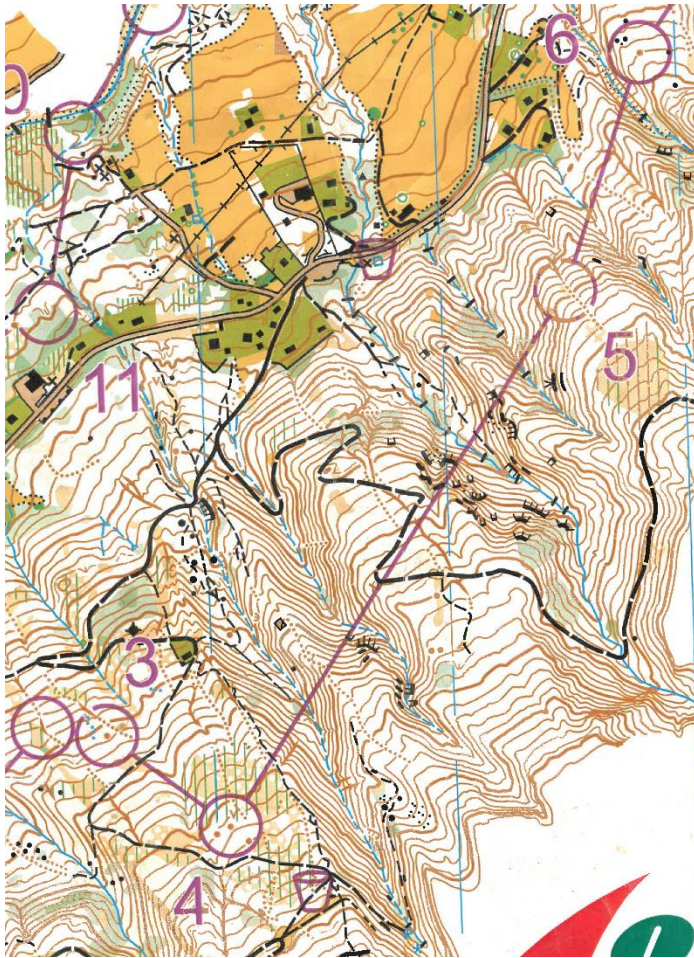
BKO Newsletter contribution, September 2025

JWOC and the 5 Days of Italy “spectator races”, Dolomites, Italy (27 June – 3 July 2025)

Orienteering in a different country – how hard can it be? Although Adam has been galavanting all over Europe for junior international orienteering competitions, Lisa and I had never tried a course outside the UK. So when Adam was selected for the GB team in JWOC (Junior World Orienteering Champs) we decided to go as spectators. It is Adam’s last year as a junior (top year M20). For some reason we had never put two and two together and realised that there were “spectator races” organised every day at the major junior competitions – populated mainly by parents from many countries but also by other touring orienteers. The venue was Baselga Di Pine, a small town in the foothills of the Dolomites, Italy. Adam was already out there training and we arrived in Verona at about 11pm, the evening before the opening ceremony, to discover that it was still over 35°C, despite being 3 hours after dark. It was going to be a hot one!

Fortunately it was a bit cooler in the hills, although still over 30°C in the afternoon for the “prologue race” starting in the town. We registered and were delighted to receive two bottles of Valpolicella (local vino) as part of the arrival pack. I told Lisa cheerfully that the Prologue course was only 2km and a way of getting your bearings in town. So off we set to the start which was actually under the climbing frame in a children’s playground in the old town. I started off well with some interesting controls on various back streets and alleys – soon discovered that it was hard to tell a private driveway from a side street between houses, so careful map reading was required. After 10 controls, my course crossed a valley on the edge of the old town and up a steep hill into another part of town that used to be a separate mountain village. This was great fun with narrow cobbled streets and archways. In the heat I was beginning to think that I must be nearing the end of the sprint. I ran to a control 19 on a tree in a grassy area on the edge of town, re-folded my map and then realised that I still had another 1.5km to go, involving finding my way through some spiky bushes and crossing over the top of the wooded hill behind town – what a surprise!! It was a great finish though downhill through some controls where they were trying to trip us up with poor route choice. Total course length 4.6km, 170m climb. Moral of day 1 - read the final details!

The JWOC competition began in the afternoon with the sprint relays, promising some very exciting spectating. However, first we were faced with Stage 1 of the “5 Days of Italy Tour” – a “shortened long” race in the steep wooded area Val di Sella. The first thing we wondered is why most of the courses on the tour were “shortened longs”. My course length was only 4.1km, 230m and Lisa’s was 3.2km, 145m. However, we soon discovered that this is because running up and down hills in the heat cannot be sustained indefinitely. The forest however was mature and the shade was blissful under the tall trees on the walk uphill to the start. We soon discovered on the way to control 1 that the forest was runnable and all the marked features were very distinct – a ditch was a proper climb down and up, a trench had steeper sides and streams were torrents with steep banks. At least there was no missing the features, but it was clear that after 4 stream crossings to control 1 this could be challenging. Control 2, on a ditch of course, was followed quickly by 3 on a knoll and then a steep climb through a rough open filled with fallen trees to control 4.



The full enormity of the next leg to 5 dawned on me at that point (see map). Four major ravines to cross and no obvious path choice except a very big descent (about 150m) followed by 17 contours to cross on the climb back up (85m): *no thanks* I thought! So I decided to climb 30m to the water station, follow a path around the head of the first ravine and then contour along the steep slopes above ravine 2 to intercept a track just before ravine 3. Seemed like a good plan. What I didn't appreciate was that the slopes were so much steeper than they looked on the map. Basically they were loose shale slopes covered by leaves. Traversing was OK to start with, although feet sometimes sliding, but became more and more precarious. When I had crossed ravine 2 but had still not hit a track I realised that I had gone wrong, but where was the track and more importantly where was I? The slopes were too thickly forested to see below and it was way too steep to go down to investigate and return. Eventually I decided that descent into the next ravine was the only option: sliding down the slope on my backside, directing myself feet first from one tree to the next for braking. Finally, I reached the stream – still no track. No option but to follow the stream down, although it was slippery. Yeah – the track discovered, crossing the ravine and heading on the right bearing. I followed the track above the head of ravine 4 and then descended through a rough open area (not too steep) into the forest again to control 5 which was of course in a deep ditch, although the control symbol was a clearing – a puzzling choice I thought. Total time elapsed from 4-5: 40 minutes! What an adventure though. Where had I been? I soon realised that I had climbed gradually during my traverse, to avoid slipping after ravine 1, which had actually taken me off the map uphill onto even steeper terrain. No boundaries – the mountain just kept on going. Second lesson of the week. Take the easy route down and bite the bullet for the 85m climb back up from the track. Surely plain sailing now? No it was not to be, because there were two further ravines to cross from control

5 to 6. My plan on the particularly steep looking ravine #6 was to try and cross where a small dam was marked on the map – preferably above it but not so high as to be falling down the crags. I was not far off, but below the dam when I dropped into the ravine (literally). However, try as I might I could not climb out because the shaly banks were too loose and kept on coming away in my hands. I did feel like a stranded beetle, but the way out was to ascend to the dam as planned and climb out on the stones there. The rest of the course was challenging, but not steep. Lisa was at the finish soon after me, although she had started an hour after me, and had had a great run. It turned out that her course had descended earlier and so she had none of the 6 ravines of doom to cross – or at least that is my excuse and I will stick with it.

No rest for the wicked and a drive downhill into the valley for the JWOC competition. In time to spectate, but now it was the afternoon and the temperature had soared to over 35°C – not the best weather for a sprint and perhaps surprising that it did not get cancelled or postponed. The solution in Italy is that there are hose pipes with taps on stands at every event. The aim is to stick your head, and indeed the rest of your body, under the hose before going to the start which certainly helps. The sprint relay format is mixed teams of 4 in the order W, M, M, W where the first women sprint off from a mass start. The start and finish were in a large park on the edge of a small mountain town, Levica Terme, with the courses heading out into the town and then competitors coming back into the park for a run through before a final (hilly) loop within the park to the handover to the next runner. The GB team had the maximum entry, consisting of 6 girls and 6 boys which means 3 relay teams. The competition was really tense and I encourage anyone to spectate in a sprint relay.

Our first two GB teams (GB1: Imogen Pieters, Ben Gostick, James Hammond, Isobel Howard; GB2: Emily Gibbins, Finn Selmer Duguid, Adam Methven, Emily Atkinson) were neck and neck on spectator run through of the second leg and doing well overall. Adam was on the 3rd leg and we were fortunately close to the relay hand over location. Adam was off only 6s behind James and by the time they came back round to the spectator run through they were still close, James only just ahead. On the final loop James really flew and managed to make up 2 places – really going some with a drop down through the park and then steep climb back up through a couple of controls. Overall the GB team places were: 8 (GB1), 11 (GB2) and 38 (out of 65 teams completing). A great start to the competition.

JWOC event 2 (morning) and the Tour Stage 2 (afternoon) were both sprint races in the medieval mountain village of Cembra. The way it works with the JWOC races is that each team is allocated a set of time slots for M and W and then the team can decide which runner goes in which slot. Adam opted to start late. However, since the competitors who have not yet run are not allowed to encounter someone who has finished, they must spend a lot of time in the quarantine location near the start. If you run near last, then this can be 4 hours in quarantine, so people take cards and books. James also came equipped with lego, so they did a game where James read the instructions but had to explain to Adam how to build the lego (without seeing the instructions). This passed the time and kept attention off the clock and worrying so much about the race. The sprint itself was of course fast paced and the medieval village had many irregular streets and covered passageways (one of which seemed completely pitch black in the middle due to a bend in the passage) so it was a great venue for it. The GB got some great results overall, and James made the podium in 4th on the M race in a time of 13:25. One of the best GB results in JWOC for many years. The winner was from Norway in 12:57 and Adam was 20th in a 3-way tie at 14:01 showing how close the competition is (this year 180 M and 160 W). Emily Atkinson was the lead GB woman in 15th position. The spectator race was in the same village in the afternoon. Scorchio!

JWOC Long – Pian del Gac, Tour rest day. This was another very hot day for a long race (10.0km, approx. 500m climb). Resulted in a number of retirements, including Ben Gostick, HH (fortunately he was fine for later races). Nevertheless, the boys did well with Finn coming ahead in 14th (time of 1:17:56), James in 16th and Adam in 30th (1:22:31). The leading girls were Imogen Pieters (42) closely followed by Isobel Howard (43) only 17s behind.

JWOC rest day, Tour shortened long in Pian del Gac. My best day – now wise to the “shortened long” format and not being too ambitious with contouring on steep slopes.

JWOC Middle, Tour shortened long, both in Laghestel forest next to Baselga but starting on opposite sides of the road. Again a great showing from the GB team with highest positions to James (23), Adam (28) and Isobel (30).

The highlight of the whole week was the final day of racing. The Tour middle was followed by JWOC Forest Relays, both in Laghestel forest. As the initial tourists had started the day was hotting up again. However, this time a localised storm developed rapidly and it started hailing hard. This created quite an issue for the people who were already on courses – it was hard to look forward (avoiding the stones) and even in the trees they were getting through. Luckily for me, this was all over before I started. The Tour had to finish before the JWOC relays started. The run out for the mass start on the first leg was quite narrow between tapes between the trees and lined with spectators. This meant that there was a start grid for the first runners like in Formula 1. The men’s relay was first and Adam had his best run, coming 6th out of the second leg runners and bringing GB1 team up from 29th to 15th. There was huge excitement when we saw James (on 3rd leg) at the second TV spectator control where he had pulled up to 6th overall – a massive move up field on the first half of the course. However, it was not to be and he took a direct approach to one of the last controls through a marsh which was very rough going (and no elephant track because others were coming in later from a track) and he missed the control to one side of a thicket (we could see this from the GPS tracker, although he could not of course). So he had to loop round to re-locate losing several minutes bringing the team in 10th place overall. Very nerve-wracking for everyone watching. The women’s GB1 team did even better with GB1 (Emily Atkinson, Imogen Pieters and Isobel Howard) coming 9th overall and Isobel pulling up 6 places on the last leg.