

A Research Report to British Orienteering – 4 Page Executive Summary

Project Overview:

In 2021, British Orienteering (BO) released their ‘Thriving Clubs for a New Generation’ strategic plan, incorporating four strategic themes: (1) Change the perception; (2) Create engaging experiences; (3) Strengthen lifelong pathways; and (4) Provide foundations for success.

Out of these strategic themes, ‘Strengthen lifelong pathways’ focuses on orienteering coaching and the need to ensure alternative pathways exist to keep individuals motivated to stay in the sport beyond their athletic years. Two strategic actions within this theme focus on creating clear coaching pathways to retain individuals within the sport, while also delivering effective and efficient training for volunteers within local club settings. Consequently, BO were keen to establish a baseline understanding of the coaching journeys and developmental pathways their existing coaches have taken to get to where they currently are.

Aim and Research Questions:

The aim of this research was to understand the coaching journeys of BO/Scottish Orienteering Association (SOA) coaches and the relationship between their biography, learning, and practice. To address this broad research aim, four research questions guided this project:

1. How do the biographies of orienteering coaches shape and structure their coaching philosophies and practice?
2. How do coaching journeys evolve over time and what do individuals learn *from* and *for* orienteering coaching?
3. How do critical incidents and formal coach education provision impact upon coach learning and development within orienteering?
4. What factors influence whether coaching journeys end or transition within orienteering?

Methodology:

- Ethical approval for this project was obtained from the School of Sport, Rehabilitation, and Exercise Sciences, at the University of Essex on October 15th, 2021.
- To understand the perceptions, experiences, and voices of orienteering coaches in the UK a qualitative online survey developed via Google Forms was utilised.
- The online survey was distributed to coaches via email through BO’s mailing list, while also being posted twice on BO’s website. The online survey was ‘live’ from 22/11/2021 to 31/01/2022 for a total of 70 days.
- In total, 84 participants completed the survey (see Appendix A), with a thematic analysis process used to interpret and analyse participant responses.

Results:

As a result of the analysis process, four primary themes were developed:

1. Journeys into coaching
2. The holistic nature of coaching journeys
3. Coach education and development for orienteer coaches
4. Continuing and ending coaching journeys.

These themes represent the core ideas, concepts, and topic areas contained within participants’ responses to the survey questions. To delve into these in further depth and detail, each primary theme contains two to four further sub themes, which help to identify more specific areas of interest (see Appendix B). The key findings within the themes and subthemes are summarised below.

Theme 1 – Journeys into coaching

Reasons for commencing coaching

- The athlete-to-coach transition was natural for some; however, others followed more ‘passive’ pathways and were encouraged to engage in coaching by others.
- Coaching journeys often began due to incidental events e.g., ‘right place, right time’ and due to participants’ enthusiasm and passion to give back to the sport.
- Orienteering coaching was interconnected to participants’ full time occupational careers within both teaching and the outdoor education sector, meaning coaching was viewed as a natural extension of their existing roles.

The role of previous athletic experiences in shaping coaching practice

- Participants discussed how their experiences of competing as an orienteer have shaped their current coaching practice, specifically with regards to demonstrating techniques, skills, and passing on ‘knowledge’.
- Participants identified coaches (both good and bad) who had a significant influence on their development, as they tried to either emulate or avoid specific coaching approaches.
- Athletic experiences outside of orienteering also proved significant in shaping future coaching practice.

Developing a coaching philosophy

- Some participants had clear values (e.g., what they think is important) and beliefs (e.g., why they believe those values to be important) which guide their coaching practice.
- Participants’ values included participation, inclusion, and providing equal opportunities for all, forming part of their holistic and athlete-centred approach to coaching.
- Many participants articulated how their coaching philosophy revolves around emphasising fun and enjoyment over competition, which were believed to be important aspects to maintain motivation and lifelong participation.
- However, some participants suggested that they simply did not have a coaching philosophy, or they could not explain or describe what it is.

Theme 2 – The holistic nature of coaching journeys

Learning for coaching: How wider life experiences structure coaching

- Through careers outside of coaching, participants suggested that they have been able to learn *for* coaching, developing management, organisational, and analytical skills which have supported their coaching journeys and practice.
- Several participants discussed how educational experiences e.g., their experiences as a student or as an educator in other settings, alongside family life, have structured to some extent their coaching journey.
- While some participants highlighted how family can be a facilitator of learning *for* coaching, family life also impacted upon coaching journeys in a negative way, specifically in terms of restricting time available.
- Participants discussed how wider life experiences coaching other sports e.g., within the outdoors sector, has helped enhance their orienteering coaching.

Learning from coaching: How coaching impacts wider life experiences

- Participants were able to describe ‘soft skills’ they believed they had learned *from* coaching e.g., skills related to leadership, problem-solving, decision making, and reflection.
- Interpersonal, organisational, and leadership ‘soft skills’, amongst other traits and attributes learned *from* coaching, enabled the participants to thrive and succeed in wider occupational aspects of their lives.
- Furthermore, participants who work in other educational settings were able to articulate how they have been able to learn *from* their orienteering coaching experience and apply specific facets to their educational practice.

Theme 3 – Coach education and development for orienteer coaches

The influence of critical incidents on facilitating coach learning

- Several participants alluded to the importance of working with a mentor or team/squad manager, either formally or informally, to develop an area of their coaching practice.
- For some participants, coach education courses acted as a ‘light bulb’ moment or source of reflection. It was suggested that the delivered content opened participants’ eyes to new coaching methodologies and approaches, while providing insight to become more self-reflective.
- Participants also highlighted how engaging in informal conversations with other learners often proved to be significant, inspirational, and critical moments for development.
- Participants recalled critical incidents which forced them to reflect, act, and make changes in situ to their coaching practice. Such moments, which were often spontaneous, forced coaches to learn through experience. Participants also reflected upon critical incidents which they felt captured the true essence of orienteering, centred primarily around the notion of support, alongside lasting participation, and engagement.

Positive perspectives towards formal coach education

- Participants spoke positively about attending orienteering specific coach education courses, outlining several aspects they believed were beneficial to their learning e.g., new approaches, ideas, and knowledge.
- Several participants explained how attending formal coach education courses has helped increase their confidence, practical skills, and feelings of ‘preparedness’ for the challenges and complexities of orienteering coaching.
- Participants highlighted how the opportunity for social interaction and informal discussions with other coaches was by far the most enjoyable aspect of attending formal coach education. Having the chance to network, discuss, and contextualise knowledge with other coaches was considered highly valuable.
- Participants spoke favourably of the annual BO Coaching Conference, regardless of whether this was delivered face-to-face or online. The online learning opportunities provided COVID were appreciated and enjoyed.

Critiques of formal coach education

- Participants were critical of BO’s/SOA’s prescriptive and traditional approach which promotes a standardised ‘curriculum’. Several participants outlined how the content within coach education was often generic and irrelevant to their coaching context and needs.
- The overly bureaucratic, timely, and tedious nature of current coach education provision, with an overemphasis on paperwork and ‘box ticking’, put participants off wanting to attend any further courses or CPD. The overt focus on progressing through linear courses with instrumental assessment procedures did not appeal to participants.
- Although self-reported, some participants believed that the courses they attended did little to change their existing beliefs, approach, or coaching practice.

Recommendations for improving formal coach education

- Participants argued that coach education provision should not assume all learners are orienteers themselves, and instead appreciate the backgrounds and biographies of all individuals, while reviewing current assessment procedures. Participants advocated for optionality and choice within their provision.
- Some participants suggested that courses beyond level 2 within BO’s pathway is limited and should begin to focus on squad systems while facilitating a culture of sharing. In contrast, some participants felt that current provision is too focused on high-performance orienteering coaching. Instead, participants discussed the need to not only reconsider content, but also the terminology used e.g., ‘teaching’ and ‘instruction’ might be more appropriate.
- There were several recommendations related to the increased use of practical sessions, coupled with more collaborative group-based discussion activities to share ideas, and co-create knowledge between coach learners.
- Other participants called for increased online/hybrid learning opportunities in conjunction with more accessible resources and practical sessions where appropriate.

Theme 4 – Continuing and ending coaching journeys

Reasons behind coaching journeys ending

- Participants suggested that available time for both preparation and practical delivery was a key element behind deciding to continue coaching or not. Additional time constraints and pressures associated with family life were often identified as a temporary, rather than permanent reason to stop coaching.
- In addition to having children and starting a family, changing circumstances in their professional and full-time occupations, or relocating, often resulted in less available time and energy for participants to dedicate towards coaching.
- Alongside age and health problems, participants also identified challenges associated with internal club politics, structure, and support which have impacted upon their decision to end their coaching journey
- Moreover, for some participants the perceived red tape and constraints associated with obtaining and maintaining coaching qualifications were considered a barrier to pursuing coaching journeys further. The administrative requirements (e.g., time and cost) and perceived lack of support from BO/SOA were identified as significant factors.

Opportunities: A door open or closed for coaching journeys?

- Participants often referred to the availability or not of opportunities as an aspect to consider when deciding upon whether to continue coaching or not (e.g., opening or closing doors).
- Limited paid coaching roles and the increased cost of courses hindered available opportunities, while many participants suggested BO/SOA need to do more to recruit younger coaches.
- Some participants explained how their passion and enthusiasm for providing orienteering opportunities for specific populations of athletes (e.g., newcomers, teachers, women) was a key factor which motivated them to continue, rather than end, their coaching journey.

Transitioning roles and passing the baton

- Several participants within this research acknowledged that they were in a process of transitioning from coaching to other club related roles, most notably acting as a coach developer or mentor.
- Alongside functioning as an informal coach developer within local club environments, participants also outlined how they were interested in transitioning into broader roles related to talent development, map planning, and co-ordinating coaches.
- Several ‘older-adult’ participants suggested they had a duty to the sport to ‘pass the baton’ on by providing coaching opportunities for younger coaches within their clubs.

General Recommendations:

Following the findings of this project, below are a list of broad recommendations for BO/SOA to consider implementing:

1. There is currently an aging orienteering coaching workforce – more needs to be done to recruit younger coaches.
2. Diversity within the orienteering coaching workforce – devising programmes and initiatives to increase the number of qualified and active Black, Asian, and minority ethnic (BAME) coaches within the sport seems imperative.
3. Accessibility of formal coach education provision – e.g., consider course costs or online provision.
4. Facilitating informality within formal coach education – the inclusion of more practical coaching opportunities, group-based tasks, problem-based learning scenarios, role playing, questions and answers, collaborative small-group projects, and peer observations.
5. Developing formalised mentoring support to provide meaningful learning for coaches.
6. Increased optionality and choice regarding course content within coach education.
7. Recognition of coaches’ prior learning and wider life experiences before enrolling on coach education courses.
8. Embedding content related to coaching philosophies within formal coach education courses.
9. Support the athlete-to-coach transition by offering tailored training to individuals.
10. Supporting the coach-to-mentor transition by helping coaches at the end of their journey to understand the role and responsibilities of being a coach mentor/developer.

Appendices:

Appendix A – Participant Demographic Information

Individual-Level Variables	N	Percent	Mean	SD
Age	84		59.1	12.0
Sex				
Male	50	59.5		
Female	34	40.5		
Ethnic Group				
White - English/Welsh/Scottish/Northern Irish/British	79	94.0		
White – Irish	2	2.4		
White - Other	2	2.4		
Other Ethnic Group	1	1.2		
Country of Residence				
England	65	77.4		
Northern Ireland	1	1.2		
Scotland	16	19.0		
Wales	2	2.4		
Years Coaching Any Sports			21.1	14.8
Years Coaching Orienteering			17.8	12.6
Current Orienteering Coaching Age Group				
Children (5-18 years)	33	39.3		
Adults (19-64 years)	5	5.9		
Children and Adults (5-64 years)	14	16.7		
Adults and Older Adults (19-65+ years)	2	2.4		
Children, Adults, and Older Adults (5-65+ years)	10	11.9		
Current Orienteering Coaching Context				
Participation	29	34.5		
Development	27	32.1		
Performance	6	7.1		
Participation and Development	1	1.2		
Development and Performance	4	4.8		
Participation, Development, and Performance	1	1.2		
Not Coaching	16	19.1		
Highest Level of Orienteering Coaching Qualification				
Level 5	3	3.6		
Level 4	6	7.1		
Level 3	20	23.8		
Level 2	32	38.1		
Level 1	17	20.2		
Unknown	6	7.1		
Orienteering Coaching Sessions Taught (per week)			1.1	1.3
Orienteering Event Engagement (per month)			3.6	2.6

Appendix B - Themes and sub theme development

Journeys into coaching	The holistic nature of coaching journeys	Coach education and development for orienteer coaches	Continuing and ending coaching journeys
<i>Reasons for commencing coaching</i>	<i>Learning for coaching: How wider life experiences structure coaching</i>	<i>The influence of critical incidents on facilitating coach learning</i>	<i>Reasons behind coaching journeys ending</i>
<i>The role of previous athletic experiences in shaping coaching practice</i>		<i>Positive perspectives towards formal coach education</i>	<i>Opportunities: A door open or closed for coaching journeys?</i>
<i>Developing a coaching philosophy</i>	<i>Learning from coaching: How coaching impacts wider life experiences</i>	<i>Critiques of formal coach education</i>	<i>Transitioning roles and passing the baton</i>
		<i>Recommendations for improving formal coach education</i>	