

# BOF Virtual Coaching Conference 2021

## SOA Session on Additional Support Needs in Orienteering Coaching, 21<sup>st</sup> Jan 2021

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### Why the Topic?

If, as a sport, orienteering wishes to be inclusive and welcoming to everyone, then we need to understand what different people's needs are and to raise awareness of the opportunities and benefits that the sport can offer. Traditional style orienteering events have very rigid structures, rules and ways of doing things which may be off-putting for many people and we must consider what adaptations can be made so that activities are more accessible to all. There is a lot of anecdotal evidence that orienteering appeals to different people who have not shown interest in other sports, for example many people with autistic spectrum disorders, and we should be embracing this to ensure that their needs are suitably catered for, whether in the coaching or competitive environment.

Many coaches are aware of all these issues, but a primary driver for this conference session is that we don't talk about them enough. In fact this is the first British Orienteering Coaching Conference session (in recent history at least) that has addressed this or any other similar topic. By bringing the topic to the fore we have an opportunity to broaden understanding and work towards making the sport proactively inclusive.

### With that in mind

The majority of participants in the conference session would not consider themselves to be expert in this field and most will have had little or no training in working with people with Additional Support Needs (ASN). Current orienteering coach education does not include any training in ASN and there are no published guidelines or best practices within the sport. At the same time, anyone who has been coaching for any period will have encountered people

with ASN and will likely have developed their personal skill set in terms of how to work with different people, including how to adapt processes, sessions and materials to meet their needs. Sharing of these experiences can be viewed as a first step towards achieving better coach education on inclusivity in orienteering.

The conference workshop was planned to facilitate informal discussion. Three short presentations by invited contributors were used to set the scene and present some individual experiences of working with athletes with special needs. This was then followed up by breakout room discussions in small groups, where everyone was invited to contribute their thoughts and experiences to address a set of basic questions.

### Invited Contributions

Helen Errington opened the presentations by providing an overview of the difference between physical and learning difficulties and disabilities and outlined some common examples of each that are likely to be encountered. Important points to note in this are that the variation in needs is huge and that athletes with special needs may be capable of performing competitively at a top elite level or may have some severe limitations, either mentally and / or physically, that will restrict the level at which they may enjoy participating in orienteering.



Helen then went on to discuss three case studies of young people with differing needs within her club. These examples sent a strong message about understanding each individual’s particular needs in order to support them and help develop their orienteering skills. A key element of this involves awareness raising with the relevant coaches or helpers and good communication with family members of the individuals with special needs. Helen’s examples also illustrated how different people can enjoy being involved in the sport in different ways; for some people being involved as a helper may be a more meaningful and fun experience than actively participating.



Suzanne Robins-Bird presented some practical examples of adaptations that she had made to orienteering materials to work with young people with Autistic Spectrum Disorders. Some key messages in this were the fact that pictures and symbols can be much easier for some people to understand and relate to, compared with written text. In addition, if the pictures are linked to items of

interest to the young people then they are more likely to engage with the whole exercise. Understanding of maps can be developed through use of pictorial images alongside map representations, and by building piecemeal understanding of how different objects are represented on the map.

David Robertson discussed some case studies of different groups that he had worked with to deliver orienteering activities, noting differences between situations where you have one or two people with additional support needs within a larger group that you are coaching, and the case where you are working with a group of people all of whom have additional support needs. In common with other coaches, David has found that within almost every group of, for example, an after-school club there will be at least one person that will require some form of differing support, and that very often a coach will not have been given any prior notification of the needs. The key thing for coaches, then, is to anticipate this in advance and to be prepared with ideas for how the session and exercises can be adapted to meet any unexpected needs. Sometimes this can be as simple as pairing people up to work in twos, or else ensuring that materials can be produced in different formats, for example blowing maps up to larger scales. When working with groups of youngsters all with some form of additional needs, flexibility is even more important, in order to be able to individualise the orienteering experience to meet the differing needs of each. Involvement in larger “events”, such as World Orienteering Day, can be a good way of achieving engagement, is easily rewarded through presentation of certificates, and can give people great satisfaction and pride in being part of something bigger.



These presentations all gave some excellent insights and tips for coaching orienteering to people with additional support needs and provided excellent food for thought to be carried forward in Breakout Room discussions.

### **Breakout Room Feedback**

Seven different breakout groups were each allocated a particular topic as a focus for discussion and given 20' to share ideas and experiences before feeding back three key points to the full group. The following is a resume from each group:

1. *How can we make orienteering more inclusive?* (led by Hamish Willis)
  - Better marketing to tell people that the sport can be inclusive.
  - Coach education needed to empower coaches and helpers with better knowledge and suitable skills.
  - Develop appropriate reward / certificate schemes (star awards) that can be individually tailored to track skills progress, providing motivation and

incentives for participation. Important to keep family involved and aware of skills progress.

2. *What could our sport do to attract more participants with additional support needs? How do we sell the sport to them?* (led by Kirsten Strain)

- With publicity, people need to see themselves represented in the images that the sport and clubs present. Ensure diversity is included and especially work to showcase any special needs sessions that are held. Could make some case study videos covering a range of different types of people
- Build relationships and partnerships with external organisations that specifically cater for special needs. This could be a good way to help develop specialist skills within the sport
- Ensuring that people with special needs are welcomed and offered an appropriate experience at events. Need to make sure there are enough helpers available. One nice idea from N Ireland is to have a cones course / maze with proper timing available in the assembly area. This is something which is safe and accessible for anyone to try and gives an opportunity to assess skills and identify suitable next steps for any newcomers.

3. *What could your Club do to attract more participants with additional support needs?* (led by David Robertson)

- Consider targeting certain bodies - schools or groups and offering some introductory sessions for them
- Publicity - use targeted social media posts through FB, use of hashtags etc., specifically advertise activities as “autism friendly”
- Reward scheme to encourage people to come back again

4. *How do we retain participants with additional support needs and help them develop?* (led by Nicola Melville)

- Need to treat participants as individuals. Listen to individuals and family and use their feedback to adapt sessions as required. Encourage them to participate as a family if that works best for them.
- Make sessions progressive and challenging but achievable for individuals. Sometimes this may be faster than the group as a whole and sometimes slower. Thinking about adaptations to the star award scheme is a good idea.
- Importance of social interaction element. How can you help people to be part of a group?
- Activities and support often drop away in the move from child to adult services and for youngsters with additional support needs could be usefully extended to the "transition" period of 18-25 years and beyond.

5. *How can we adapt coaching activities to better suit participants with additional support needs?* (led by Suzanne Robins-Bird)

- Avoid too many words as many people need time to process auditory information. Use alternative multi-sensory approaches such as visual and modelling aids as well. In general, symbolic descriptions are likely to be better than textual.
  - Make special effort to ensure that suitable progression is planned and that no steps are skipped.
  - Social inclusivity is important. Also remember that different people come to the sport with different aims and as coaches we should recognise and respect this.
6. *Are there any reasonable adjustments the sport of orienteering could make to better support those with additional support needs?* (led by Helen Errington)
- More mapping of local parks and accessible areas which may be better for people with mobility or social / emotional issues compared with traditional “quality” orienteering terrain.
  - Arrangements at start / finish areas can sometimes be quite crowded and noisy - Covid adaptations with increased social distancing may be much more suitable for some people with additional needs.
  - Allow for team category entries and shadowing at local events
  - As a coach, ask in advance about any additional support needs and as a planner consider how you might be able to make your white course buggy / wheelchair friendly if possible.
7. *What factors should be considered in coaching high performance athletes with additional support needs?* (led by Hilary Quick)
- In a high performance context you are most likely to be working with mental rather than physical difficulties, such as autistic spectrum disorder, ADHD, OCD, dyslexia, auditory processing or mental health issues.
  - In most scenarios you will be coaching 1:1 and will need to get to know your athlete, which potentially makes it easier to identify and support their specific needs.
  - People who are highly driven and focussed on success may be more likely to have mental health issues, so as a coach you either need to know how to handle this or appropriate support services to direct athletes towards.
  - In a group situation you may be spending more time with an athlete who has special needs. This can cause group conflict which the coach needs to be aware of.

## Conclusion

Thanks to everyone who participated in the workshop for such enthusiastic and constructive engagement. Special thanks to those who made individual presentations and helped to chair the breakout rooms. There are many useful suggestions which have been put forward and

these will provide invaluable material as a first step towards developing coach education for supporting additional needs in orienteering.