

A Personal Reflection of John Disley's Contribution to British Orienteering

Background to John Disley the Olympic Athlete

John attended Loughborough University studying Physical Education. He competed in the 1952 Summer Olympics held in Helsinki in the 3000 metres steeplechase where he won the bronze medal. Together with Chris Brasher he also founded the London Marathon, the first of which was held in 1981, after running the New York Marathon in 1979 and being very impressed by its success. For eight years he was vice-chairman of the UK Sports Council and is a member of the Welsh Sports Hall of Fame. He is survived by his wife, Sylvia, two daughters, Emma and Kate and five grandchildren.

The start of John's involvement in British Orienteering

One should not underestimate John's contribution in enabling our sport of orienteering to take root and to flourish in the UK. At an event in Sweden in 1955, he stumbled across an orienteering race. He took part and, although he finished well down in a field of 60, was hooked. When he was at Plas y Brenin he tried to set up competitions in Snowdonia but found few people were prepared to pay for a new ordnance survey map for each race. Only when photocopies became readily available did the sport become viable. He later introduced orienteering to his athletics friends, including Chris Brasher and Roger Bannister. Though John was certainly not the first to attempt to get orienteering off the ground within the UK, his enthusiasm and organisational abilities did ensure success. There had been reports of orienteering activities around the UK but these were often in isolation. However, this was not true in Scotland where members of the Swedish Orienteering Federation had initiated orienteering competition in 1961 with the backing of the Scottish Education Department. An event was held at Craig a Barns near Dunkeld that also attracted sportsmen from the North West of England.

However, it was in 1964 that John initiated a series of orienteering events in Surrey when he was working as the Sports Co-ordinator for Surrey County Council. This gave him access to village schools and office support facilities within County Hall. The most notable success was with the invitation to orienteers from the North West and elsewhere to compete at Peaslake in Surrey where he also assembled "thinking" runners to take part and attracted athletes of the calibre of Roger Bannister, Bruce Tulloh, Martin Hyman and Chris Brasher. They got quite a shock when - as John describes in his book - the woods swallowed them up only to spit them out rather later. It proved to be rather tougher to those hardy northerners than they had expected.

By May 1965 John was successfully running a second series of small events and Chris Brasher had published an article in the Sunday Observer about his newly discovered sport of orienteering. That was when I made my own entry. I had read Chris's article and was hooked straight away. I was very fortunate to be introduced to John very soon afterwards.

Another important development that John initiated was when he met Brigadier Wilding of the British Army. The Brigadier immediately saw the potential and benefits of introducing the skills of orienteering into the training for soldiers. He was successful in persuading the top-level to adopt orienteering into basic Army training. Today there is a very successful British Army Orienteering Club (BAOC) that competes in the orienteering calendar and that has produced top level orienteers for British Teams. Apart from internal events there are now series of regular midweek events to which civilians are warmly welcomed.

The Organisational Side

By June 1965 it was obvious that John was already very successful in initiating a new sporting activity that had taken roots and that was obviously going to go somewhere. It was great to find a competitive sport but also to become a part of this new venture. Initially John suggested I try a small event at the Waggoner's Wells, Surrey organised by Bill & Hazel Hill followed by an inaugural event in Richmond Park when the Southern Navigators club was formed. This was followed by a newcomer's event over Box Hill organised by Peter Palmer. It was at this event that Tony Walker, a college student at the Kingston College of Technology, was introduced to orienteering. Tony was later to prove of useful assistance to John in the organisation of what became the English Orienteering Association (EOA) and then BOF. Thanks to John and Chris, money was found to remunerate the first person to be involved in the administration of the orienteering organisation. This was Patricia Norris, wife of Tom Norris, and sister-in-law to Toby Norris who later became Chairman of BOF. Tony eventually succeeded her after a spell when the office services of Bailey & Giffard in Edinburgh were used.

Though it was John who was the driving force it was Chris Brasher who became the figurehead of first the EOA and later BOF. It was said that Chris lit the fires and John dampened them down! John was good at approaching people and getting them involved. Very soon after I joined orienteering John asked me to take over organising a fixtures list to relieve him of that task. This Fixtures role rapidly developed into an England wide operation and then UK wide as BOF was formed.

John and Chris were joined by Gerry Charnley from the North West to be the key officials of the EOA. I joined them in March 1967 to meet representatives of the Scottish Orienteering Association including Bob Climie, in Dalbeattie, Galloway. The meeting outlined the structure of the future British Federation. This was inaugurated in June 1967 with John as Hon. Treasurer, Chris as Chairman, and Gerry as Hon. Secretary. I became the first National Fixtures Secretary and by chance moved to Scotland in July 1967 for 3 years. This helped towards uniting the future twelve Associations.

At that time John was Vice Chairman of the British Sports Council. This had the benefit of John being able to guide us as to the best approaches for our orienteering organisation to make in order to obtain grants. I always clearly remember John saying, specifically at an AGM, that we should aim to raise our own income to match such Sports Council funding on a one-for-one basis. Sadly, to my knowledge this is not what we have ever achieved. Indeed, today the current grants that we receive from Sport England greatly exceed this broad aim but may well be substantially reduced in 2017.

John wrote the first book in the English language on the sport of orienteering, with good advice and many diagrams and pictures. Before that all were in Swedish. Within the International Orienteering Federation John became a member of the IOF Council from 1973 to 1984.

The Development of Forest Orienteering

John certainly realised that the forest aspects needed involvement and development as well as the organisational structure to support it. Indeed, he planned many of the earlier events in Surrey and was able to book village school facilities to help Planners/Organisers with their events. Using black and white photocopies of the 1:25,000 Ordnance Survey maps produced their own challenge. Actually this really made planning events rather easier than today. John realised that we must use bold features, and, where necessary, features not on the map, but still bold enough to stand out in the terrain. He evolved the use of the definite article for features on the map and the indefinite article for the un-mapped features to be used as control points.

In those early days we had the benefit of help from, amongst others, Jan Kjellström from the Rotebro Club, Stockholm. Of course the international aspects of our sport were certainly not overlooked. When Baron Lagerfelt from Sweden organised the 'Euromet' competitions based upon city teams rather than national ones, John was quick to take up invitations by fielding teams from London and Liverpool. He helped to arrange trips to Belgium in 1964 and Sweden soon after. Indeed, John and Chris were involved in importing Silva Compasses which are still used by many members today.

In 1966 John was again a part of the driving force that enthused English orienteers to enter and participate in the first World Championships based near Fiskars in Finland. From this there was the realisation that the international body was clearly seeking a representation from Great Britain. This encouraged John to work towards the formation of a British Federation.

In early 1967 we learnt of the sad death of Jan Kjellström in a car crash in his native Sweden. John was quick to seize the opportunity to cement relationships with Rotebro and other Swedish Clubs, inviting them to attend our first Jan Kjellström competition in his honour. I have written at greater length about the early JK competitions as a part of celebrating the 50th anniversary of that event.

Later in June 1967 the first British Championships were held in Hamsterley Forest near Hexham, Northumberland with Gordon Pirie becoming the first British champion. John competed and explained how the cunning aspects of our sport came into play for him. The Men's Race basically traversed one side of a valley and returned on the other. So John saw the opportunity to stop during the early legs and sketch the forest rides not marked on the OS map on the other side of the valley to help him gain time on the return route. After all we did use the term "Cunning Running" at that time!

World Championships 1976 & Election to Vice President of British Orienteering

Along with Chris Brasher, John realised that a splendid way to boost the development of British Orienteering was for us to apply to stage the World Orienteering Championships in the UK in 1976. I clearly remember them putting the arguments for doing so to the Executive Committee in the early days of the fledgling organisation. Of course the cynics tried to resist, but the go ahead was duly given. In practice our first three Chairmen, Chris, John and Bob took the organisational roles at that time and I had become the fourth Chairman from 1975. I clearly remember John thanking me, as Chairman in 1976, for having risked the future of the organisation in supporting their efforts! The organisation team hid away in Scotland planning and organising the Championships. Thanks to the support of the Earl of Moray they procured the use of the Darnaway Forest on his estates. However, the Findhorn River splits the main forest areas that they wished to use in order to get a sufficiently long course for the Men's Race. They realised that crossing this river could be dangerous if a flash flood occurred. So not to be deterred they approached the British Army in Scotland to bridge the gap. This resulted in an army training exercise that erected a suspension bridge over the river – a feature that drew wide acclaim!

That foresight proved invaluable as the Federation was able to build on the undoubted success, with our membership doubling over the period 1975-8. We owe a great deal to John and his entrepreneurial foresight in having the faith to conceive and grow the early years of British Orienteering. John and Chris were both decorated with the CBE for services to sport. The Federation elected them both as Vice Presidents. A fitting recognition of what John and Chris had achieved.

It has been a great privilege to have known and worked with John for which I will always be grateful.