

SOA Development Conference, 19 June 2010

Representatives of all orienteering clubs in Scotland were invited to this conference, which was held at Fordell Firs, the Scottish Scout HQ near Dunfermline, whose grounds buzz with fun and activity. On the day we were 24 strong: Malcolm Dingwall-Smith from **sport**Scotland and Steve Vernon from British Orienteering adding to the various club representatives. Only 4 clubs hadn't managed to send a representative.

Our aim was to share success stories and to pass on information helpful to club development.

Malcolm Dingwall-Smith, Partnership Manager at **sport**Scotland and very occasional orienteer, had the unenviable task of opening proceedings by advising how we can maximise success in getting external funding. Malcolm encouraged us to emphasise orienteering's unique characteristics, straddling the fun vs. competitive divide, providing sport for the non-sporty. We must ensure a friendly welcome to newcomers at events, and have local regular club sessions to provide the immediate link for schoolchildren. He provided a very useful handout with details and guidance; copies are available on request from the National Centre.

Next up was **Anne Hickling**, who described the various strands of GRAMP's activities which had combined to gain them British Orienteering's Club of the Year title. GRAMP achieved an impressive membership increase of 56 new members during 2009, and they seek to involve as many of their members as possible in the running of the club and its events. Anne stressed the value of club cohesion in providing a sense of community as well as simply enabling the sport to happen. GRAMP have put significant effort into attracting adults, not just focussing on recruiting children. The club produces a lively, colourful newsletter every 2 months, available in hardcopy and electronically. One area of difficulty was press coverage – the Press & Journal rarely used reports sent, perhaps because its coverage ranges from the local to the international.

Janet Clark and **Ben Bate** then spoke about ESOC's efforts in recruiting and co-ordinating a strong volunteer workforce. Janet advocated the personal approach, combined with publicity of the event schedule showing vacancies for officials. Planners and Controllers are usually easier to recruit, perhaps because of the clearly defined role and rules/guidelines. Also important is the timing of a personal approach – too soon and the person might be frightened off.

(It was interesting to note that ESOC reported only roughly one-fifth of their members took part in the Scottish Championships – a ratio that is perhaps worth establishing for all clubs. Trends in these figures are anecdotally thought to show a strengthening reluctance to participate in events more than a short distance away, which would emphasise the need for increased numbers of local events.)

Mike Rodgers spoke enthusiastically about the range of activities Moravian have undertaken to attract both children and adults to the sport. Short, local events held regularly on Saturday mornings, and a co-operative local press gave an injection of life to an ailing club. Having raised awareness and built a reputation, Mike hopes the payback will follow. His attitude of "Just do it!" led him to try novel formats and challenge conventional thinking. The Primary Schools O Competition has grown across the past 3-4 years, and most local primary schools now include

orienteering, with many teachers having attended the Teaching Orienteering course. Active Schools Co-ordinators are key; each has a nominated club member as mentor.

The club claims a “modest” increase in membership; again there is a reluctance to travel far for events, though with the likes of Culbin and Darnaway on the doorstep, is that surprising?

Moray 2013 will provide the focus for the next phase of development.

Dougie Condy (AYROC) described his work in Ayrshire schools, again giving hundreds of children an positive and meaningful early experience of the sport and an annual competition. As elsewhere, however, this has resulted in no noticeable growth in membership. It was noted, however, that despite Dougie’s limitless enthusiasm, there were certain risks inherent in dependence on one individual. Some teachers have attended the Teaching Orienteering course and they are being encouraged to become more self-reliant.

The final session before lunch involved some serious effort with physical co-ordination, not to mention extreme hilarity, as **Steve Vernon** introduced us to some of the running drills and physical training ideas included on British Orienteering’s Strength and Conditioning DVD, a copy of which is being supplied by SOA to each club.

Dougie Condy and Tricia Woodward also let participants experience a couple of their warmup activities that suit all ages and abilities, and are greatly enhanced by use of SI.

Roger Scrutton then gave a thorough and scientific analysis of various aspects of development within Scotland. Our number of clubs and events, as well as levels of membership and participation, all comprise a significantly higher proportion of the UKC total than would be expected from our proportion of total population. In both 2008 and 2010, there were three successful Scottish applications to British Orienteering’s Development Fund. Roger encouraged clubs to focus on realistic development plans that would bring greatest benefit to the club or community (remembering that “community” can be a geographical entity or the wider orienteering fraternity). Successful funding applications often covered more than one topic, but training courses, electronic punching and mapping featured strongly.

Steve Vernon’s second appearance was a talk about Participation Clubs and the twin concepts of “Community O” and club nights. Community O (low-key events in familiar areas) has been going on in various parts of Scotland for some time, and several clubs have indoor training sessions, but Steve’s talk provoked much thought about the effectiveness of these models for recruitment of members. There was also consideration of the “product” that is being sold: many stalwart orienteers are simply not tempted by indoor sessions, and of those newcomers whose first involvement with an orienteering club is via such indoor sessions, how many go on to do what we might call “proper” orienteering? Do we risk gaining new members who will always choose the gym in preference to the forest? Participation clubs in England pay coaches to lead these indoor sessions, which leads to a much wider consideration of what aspects of orienteering we are willing to pay for.

Terry O’Brien and **Blair Young** described the Scottish Schools Orienteering Association’s efforts across the years to bring together the many schools who do include orienteering in their activities. There will always be a distinction between competitive orienteers who are still at school, and school

children who do a bit of orienteering; the first challenge is to attract the latter to convert and become the former. It's difficult to find out exactly what – in terms of quality as well as quantity – is going on under the label “orienteering” in schools. Many teachers had a minor experience at college of something called orienteering, which in many cases was far from true to the sport. Our second challenge is to open their eyes to the reality of the sport of orienteering.

The **breakout sessions** involved three groups discussing one topic each, aiming to identify 5 key points:

- promotion, publicity and sponsorship
- school/club links
- development for existing club members

Feedback from these groups will follow shortly.

Hilary Quick gave the last talk, a brief description of the range and number of courses run at the National Centre. The schedule for 2011 is now available on the website, and is updated throughout the year, particularly with courses and workshops to be run locally. Materials are available for Controllers' and Planners' courses, Condes workshops and others that can be run locally by clubs. Clubs are invited to contact Hilary with further requirements or suggestions.

Throughout the day many strands of informal discussion took place, few of which are recorded here. No doubt they will emerge in due course in one forum or another.

Hilary Quick