Scottish 6 Days Orienteering: Reflecting on Deeside and Planning for the Future

If you were at the 6 days you will know that we had an incredible week of orienteering! And if you weren't hopefully you've heard good reports. Of course we were lucky with the weather and especially lucky that storm Floris visited the following week! But you largely make your own luck and the event was a tribute to the Scottish clubs and members who contributed to making the event such a huge success.

Deeside provided some wonderful settings each day – the view of Glen Fearder from the walk to the starts was particularly stunning. Unfortunately beautiful highland scenery also has it's downsides and heather, bracken and tussocks featured in many discussions. It also raised some interesting questions about the 6 days and what we want it be like as we go forward.

Thank you to our stakeholders

However, before considering the future we should recognise the many stakeholders who contributed to the success of the event.

The landowners, farmers and locals were incredibly supportive - we couldn't have staged the week without them. The key players are mentioned in the final news article on the 6 Days website and reflect the diverse nature of the communities who we work with to make these major events successful. These include:

- Large estates such as Invercauld, Dunecht and Glen Dye. We have to recognise that we have an impact on their businesses and are very grateful for their support and goodwill.
- Tenant farmers who we rely on for arenas and parking. We pay for car parking but have to recognise that we interfere with their work - asking for sileage to be cut early, fields to be cleared of livestock, fences to be lowered, and often having an impact on their cultivated land as we park hundreds of heavy vehicles;
- Local residents and business who sometimes have concerns about the impact we have during the middle of the holiday season. Some are represented by Community Councils and Trusts and sometimes we have to deal with individuals.

It helps when we have clubs and members in the community, and we are heavily dependent on the local clubs like MAROC and GRAMPOC on Deeside for allowing us to embargo and use some of their best areas. On Deeside we were also lucky to have a mapper (Jon Musgrave) living in the heart of the area.

Although the organisation is largely voluntary we do have some paid support. For Deeside we employed Nic Crossley in November 2023 as Event Coordinator. She had the unenviable task of getting permissions for forests, streets and fields, sorting out traffic management, finding and managing contractors, looking after social media and did a great job working tirelessly to keep the whole show joined up before and during the event. Finding someone who can fill this role isn't easy – it's a daunting task for someone familiar with the 6 days and the orienteering community let alone for someone without an orienteering background.

We also employed a number of contractors. Jon Musgrave & Pat Blashill updated the maps while we were especially lucky to have a first class Event Services Team from George Walker Event Management who provided very professional infrastructure each day, and an equally professional First Aid team from Avium. Eddie Speak provided essential support to the computing teams while Amplified Sound, Holly Stodgell, and Katherine Bett provided some great commentary to add atmosphere on Days 4 and 5 when we had the World Ranking Events.

And of course without the incredible support of many of you as volunteers the event would never have happened. As usual you pulled out all the stops. Each day had an experienced pair of day organisers from the Scottish clubs who expertly coordinated teams of up to 100 volunteers to run the car parks, arenas, starts, and downloads. In the forest the two planners and two controllers each day planned a total ca. 120 courses, placed & checked nearly 500 controls and scrutinised over 13000 maps. In addition to the day teams there were many people behind the scenes who made a huge contribution. We had a Central Organising Team of ca. 20 volunteers from across Scotland, supported in turn by their own teams. In some cases they worked for 2 years ahead of the event. Thank you!

Even with this amount of volunteer support the event has a sizable budget with a turnover of ca. £300,000. We set entry prices so that they are in line with those of other major multi-day holiday events. This is sufficient to cover the costs and allows us to distribute a modest sum to clubs to recognise their support. We also give a grant to the SOA to help support the governance that is needed to secure over £100,000 pa of development funding from Scottish Government. All in all this is a tricky balancing act that makes it difficult to

pay for much more professional support without increasing prices or reducing support to Scottish Orienteering.

So where next?

Well the simple answer is Perthshire from 1st to 6th August 2027, based in Aberfeldy. Perthshire will mark 50 years since the first 6 Days in 1977 and while it would be wrong to describe the 6 days as at a crossroads but it's a sensible time to take stock. The are a few aspects that we need to consider:

Areas – it's becoming harder to find competition areas for a number of reasons: pressure from increased recreational usage, re-wilding and conservation activities, storm damage etc. We can no longer pick a location and assume that we will find enough suitable areas which means that we need to do more preparation, even years ahead. This is why we've already said that we're going to work on going back to SW Scotland in 2029 for the first time in over 30 years.

Some competitors also commented that the areas seemed much tougher than they remembered. Sometimes there seems to be an expectation that we should pick more runnable areas but we have to work with what we have. Hopefully the technical nature of Scottish forests together with great courses more than compensates for the toughness but maybe we should do more to encourage competitors to run on short courses, or maybe we should adjust the format e.g. 3 longs and 2 middles.

Organisation – is quite demanding for a largely volunteer team. Should we:

- Use more paid help and increase entry prices?
- Rotate the COT round the Scottish clubs rather than have a Scottish COT composed of many of the same faces?
- Simplify and standardise in some areas?

Changing demographics – the most popular age classes at the 6 days are now M60/W60. At the World Masters last year it was M65/W65. The trend is clear but for whom should we cater?

- Families?? Drives us to have a holiday atmosphere with good traders, finishes in the arena and convenience – parking, arenas and string courses close together, flexibility with start times.
- Elites?? Drives us to hold WREs to attracts more younger runners but adds complexity to the organisation.
- Competitive recreational orienteers? Puts courses and areas at the top of the agenda but can lead to remote finishes and distant starts

The reality is that we want to cater to orienteers with different demands but we have to find the right balance.

These are interesting challenges that are hugely important for Scottish Orienteering. If you want to help shape the future of the 6 Days please consider joining the Scottish 6 Days board. We are always looking for new board member who can make a contribution.

Finally we were very sad to hear that Dick Carmichael passed away just a few weeks before Royal Deeside 2025. Dick was involved in all aspects of orienteering but, in particular, he was heavily involved in the 6-day series especially in the early days. He planned, controlled and was technical coordinator on several occasions and, for 15 years, he was on the 6-Day Board or its predecessor and was Chair for 6 years. He will be sadly missed and our thoughts are with his family and friends. We're sure he'd want the event to continue successfully for another 50 years.

David Kershaw, Chair Scottish 6 Day Event Company

Richard Oxlade, 2025 Event Coordinator & Technical Director Scottish 6 Day Event Company