

# Releasing American Orienteering From Its Historical Handcuffs

## *Time to Transform a Compass Game Into the Map Adventure It Truly Is*

Mastering the compass, maintaining a bearing, understanding magnetic fields, compensating for Magnetic declination anywhere on the globe, and learning pace-counting to measure distances can be fascinating scientific exercises. But orienteering done as a compass game doesn't come close to the excitement, self-confidence, and rapt attunement to surrounding terrain that comes from reading and navigating with a map while on the move. Orienteering is a map sport where your brain is at least as important as your athletic prowess, where the race goes not to the swiftest, but to the smartest, most accurate and aware.

So many Orienteering exercises are rooted in using compass and pace-counting that many Americans assume that those skills define orienteering. But did you know that most orienteers – especially those who participate at events throughout the year all around the globe – rarely if ever use their compass while out on a course, and only then for rough directional checking? The assumption that Orienteering is a compass game is purely a historical accident.

Back in the 40's and 50's when Orienteering was being imported from Europe to the U.S., compass companies promoted their product and the sport by teaching compass-bearing and pace-counting exercises. Tens of thousands of children and group leaders were taught that way. While it is relatively easy to mass-produce compasses, it is far more complicated to manufacture a good, detailed map, especially since the map only fits that one area. So for commercial reasons, orienteering became a compass game rather than a navigational sport.

And how unfortunate that has been. Once you've learned to count off 50 paces on a 275 degree bearing and find your target, what else is there? When will you ever use that skill again? When was the last time you left your house and took a compass bearing first thing out the door? In contrast, when was the last time you took down directions and consulted a map to find your way to a place you had never visited before, using landmarks and right / left directions to find your way there? Wouldn't that be a useful skill to learn when you are 8 or 5 – or even 47?

Orienteering as a map sport develops so many skills you will use for the rest of your life. And besides, it's fun! Orienteering is a treasure hunt in the woods. It requires that you become acutely aware of your environment, build competence progressively, that you anticipate and weigh choices before you even reach them, problem-solve on the fly, choose a course of action that suits your particular skills, quickly recognize errors of judgment and find your way back on course. And done in teams, orienteering builds teamwork and cooperative pooling of skills. The list goes on and on. No compass game can compare.

Would you rather count to 183 while walking through the woods on a compass bearing, take a new bearing, and count off another 107? Or would you rather run along the right-hand side of this stream till you reach the big uprooted tree just before you get to a marshy area, and then climb up the valley carved into the hillside to your right and find the second large boulder at the top of it? Which sounds more engaging and challenging? All those features are found on an orienteering map, and make the exercise one that involves multiple skills simultaneously.

And making a map or navigating a course together? It involves the math whiz's calculations, the zoologist's and botanist's habitat analysis, the artist's spatial eye and sense of color, the engineer's precision, the geologist's fascination with land forms and social scientist's intrigue with man's use of them, the computer hacker's deftness with computer drawing and internet resources, the athlete's love of pushing boundaries and competing, the philosopher's and ecologist's appreciation and communion with nature. And the writer (like this one) can reflect about it all. It combines all their gifts into one project.

So while compasses are intriguing technology, repeat after me, "Maps are my friends. They show me how to get from where I am to *wherever* I want to go. Maps are my friends." ☺ Discover how Orienteering can adapt to any group, illuminate any topic, serve any objective. And transform the math exercise into a Map Adventure.

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