

Planning the White Course

Introduction

Newcomers to orienteering need every encouragement to enjoy the sport, and the feeling of failure after a lengthy spell lost in the forest is a major disincentive to competitors both young and old. Children in particular are attempting a sport that provides a considerable mental challenge, and the need for courses to match their abilities cannot be over-stressed.

The aim of the Planner should be to provide courses at an event that clearly show a progression in the use of orienteering skills, with each course providing the correct level of technical and physical challenge. This is the first of three articles covering the planning of the White, Yellow and Orange courses (and their equivalent at Regional / National events).

Planning the technically easy courses is often the most difficult task in terms of providing courses of just the right technical and physical level. They must always be taken into account when locating the start and finish of an event to ensure that the courses can be taken through suitable terrain. It is therefore best to start the planning process with courses described as 'Technical Difficulty 1'. Better known to most as White courses, JM1/JW1 courses at Regional Events, and M10B/W10B at National Events. No matter which, they are all in effect the same course, so for the purposes of this article I shall refer to them as the White course.

What are we trying to provide for White course competitors ?

Beginners will have more than enough problems with the map itself - trying to relate all those colours and funny symbols to the ground. For White courses we do not want to add to their problems. The course should serve as a guided tour, allowing them to learn how to read the map. The controls are used to keep them on the route - they should almost fall over them, not have to search for them. If in doubt, make the course too easy - everybody should be successful. Failure on a course at this stage may mean the loss of that competitor to orienteering.

What skills are we trying to test ?

The key planning objective should always be to produce an enjoyable course that meets the expectation of

those competing on it. The technical difficulty of a course is based on the skills needed to successfully complete it, and the White course is trying to test only the very basic ones. The ability to:

- Understand map colours and commonly used symbols.
- Orient the map using compass and terrain.
- Orienteer along tracks and paths.
- Make decisions at 'Decision Points' identified by a control site. (More about 'Decision Points' later.)

It must be possible to complete the course with just these skills. If not, then the course is too hard and needs a bit of re-planning.

How long should the course be ?

Guidance on the White course length is given in two ways. As a ratio of 0.14 of the M21L course (which will usually result in a figure of between 1.4 and 1.9 km) and within the range 1.0 to 1.9 km. For the White course it is more important that the course is of the correct Technical Difficulty than of an exactly calculated length. It will often be the case that the nature of the terrain forces the course length away from the precise course length ratio, hence the guidance as to the range of lengths which are acceptable.

The Start

"The position of the centre of the start triangle shown on the map shall be on a mapped feature and identified on the ground by a control banner."

For the White (and Yellow) courses this feature will need to be a path or track. Furthermore, it should not be at a junction, as this would require the competitor to decide which way to go without knowing where they have just come from. This is not easy, and to immediately cause a child to have to make a decision in full view of everyone is not the way to encourage them to get off to a good start.



Map1 : Poor start location



Map2 : Good start location

Also, avoid the 100m run from the start boxes to the start banner. Not only is this bad planning in general, it can also lead to confusion when the child arrives at the first banner expecting to find a punch there. If you really want competitors to run the 100m from the start boxes to that point, then have the start triangle and banner at the same place as the start boxes, and make the point you want them to go to the first control.

The Finish

"The precise location of the finishing line or point shall be clear to all competitors approaching it."

It is important to ensure that the finish is easily located and that there should be no possibility of a competitor being unable to find the finish after they have visited the last control. This means there are only two options for the White course finish:

- On a path which is easy to follow from the final control (i.e. no different to the rest of the course).
- Along a taped route. At large events it can be easy to forget this and have a long run in across a field or open area where the finish may not actually be visible from the last control. In such cases the route must be clearly taped.

Getting from the Start to the Finish

The route should be all along tracks and paths, with no route choice, including at the start banner. Hence the first question. Can you get from the start to the finish along tracks and paths ? This point should not be compromised (see the later section on what to do when the paths run out). Courses such as White and Yellow may therefore require a separate start (or even finish) in order to allow the technically harder courses into more complex areas.

Avoid any road crossings unless they are manned, and look out for other danger points such as steep cliffs, lakes, rivers and marshes. Think ! Are you happy to allow an 8 year old to run

alone along the route you have given them ?

Decision Points

What is a Decision Point ? "A Decision Point is a point at which you can no longer continue in the same direction, for example being required to turn right at a path junction."

The White course requires a control at every Decision Point. i.e. there are no junctions to negotiate between the controls.

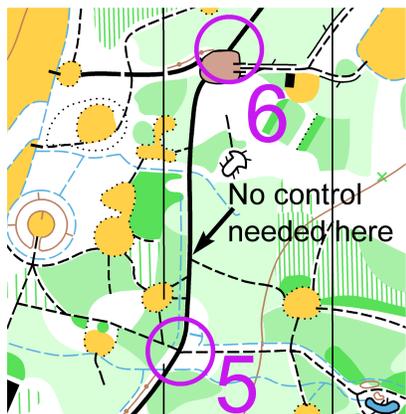


Map3 : Decision Point - Control 3 needed - turning right at a T junction

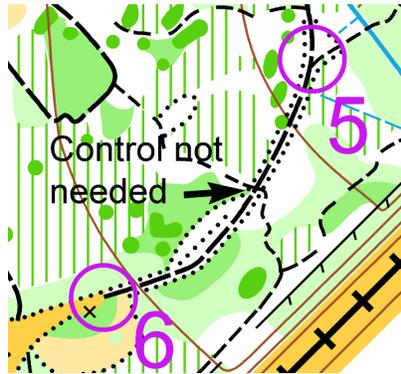


Map4 : Decision Point - Control 4 needed - turning right off a path

Continuing along a large track, with a small path going off to one side, is not a Decision Point as it does not require a change in direction. You may choose to put a control there depending on the distance between the previous and next controls, but it is not absolutely necessary.

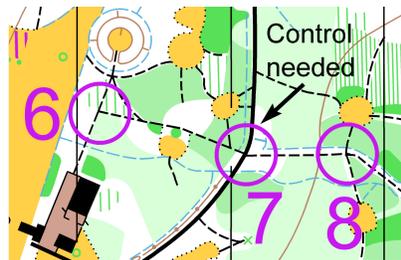


Map5 : Not a Decision Point - Control not needed - straight along a major track with a small path junction off

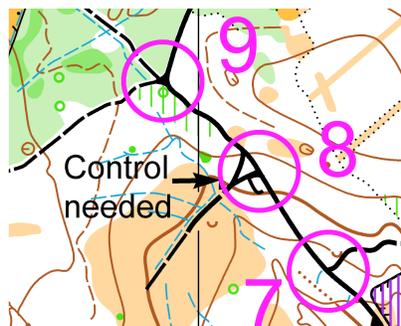


Map6 : Not a Decision Point - Control not needed - straight along a major path with a small path crossings

For White courses I would extend the basic definition to include "or where the competitor might think they have to change direction". Hence, when a small path crosses a large track and the route goes straight on always put a control there to avoid any possible confusion. Similarly, at a junction of two major paths a control is recommended as a reminder to check the map.



Map7 : Decision Point - Control 7 needed - straight along a small path where it crosses a large track



Map8 : Decision Point - Control 8 needed - junction of two major tracks

Control Sites

How many controls should there be ? Controls should be reasonably close together (200m maximum), which means a typical White course will have probably 10 to 15 controls on it. As well as a control at every Decision Point - path and track junctions and crossings - where else should there be

controls ? A 200m track run between Decision Points becomes much more interesting if you have to stop at a control en-route. So use any other features that don't require leaving the path such as bridges, gates, even a path bend, to break up what would otherwise be a boring run along a track. (This also gives a bit of variety to the control descriptions.)

What happens when the paths run out ?

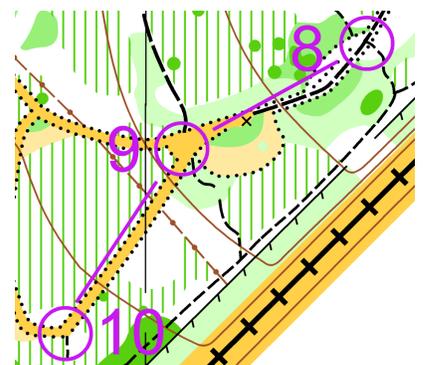
It is inevitable that on some areas at some point the paths just won't join up to make a nice course. So what options are there ?

- A taped route across a piece of forest - either continuous tape, which is easy to follow; or streamers hanging from branches, which are not always as easy to see (don't forget the competitors may only be small). Details of taped routes (and how they are marked) should always be included in the final details and on the control descriptions.
- In open areas walls and fences on the map will often have paths down the side of them, even if they aren't on the map. These may connect path networks together. With care these can be used. However, if you are going to use these, do provide information in the final details and on the control descriptions.

Location of the banner at the control

A few things to think about here.

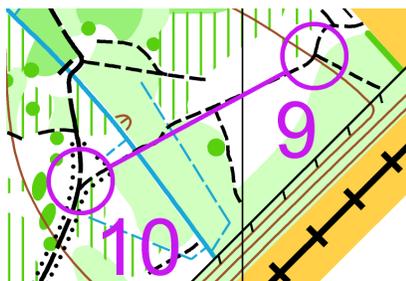
- Consider the child's eye view of the banner. Can they see it clearly from their height ? (Try kneeling down for a child's eye view of the world). And if they can see it, can they reach the punch / box without treading through nettles or brambles ?
- As mentioned earlier, the course should serve as a guided tour along the paths. The location of the control banner and punches should automatically guide competitors onto the right path for the next leg by being positioned in the direction of the next control.



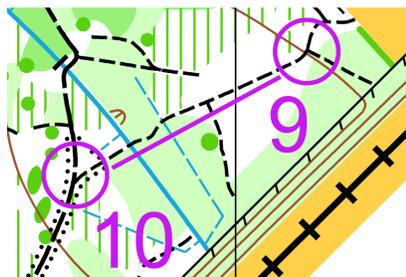
Map9 : Multiple paths at one junction. Make sure the banner and punch at control 9 are placed on the ride leading to control 10.

Course Overprints

The White course requires as much attention to detail as any other course when editing the automatically produced course overprints from OCAD, CONDES, etc. With controls often close together, numbers need careful positioning to avoid confusion. Another regular problem is lines that obscure paths. These will need to be offset from joining the centres of the circles in order to make the path visible.



Map10 : Poor overprint - red line obscures path.



Map11 : Edited overprint - with the red line now offset the path becomes clearly visible.

Control Descriptions

Don't worry if the control descriptions look boring - path junction, path crossing, path bend, etc.

Most children are more interested in getting round the course than reading the descriptions, and don't do much more than checking the control code.

Pictorial or written control descriptions may be used, depending on the status of the event. However it is usual to provide written descriptions as an option even when pictorial is the norm for the other courses.

Control Codes

Don't use sequences as this will cause problems if for any reason a control has to be added or removed late in the planning process. (It can also cause confusion if the Yellow course uses

several of the White controls.) This is where to get competitors into the habit of checking their control code at every control from the day they start, so use random control codes throughout the course.

End result

If your White course follows all the principles outlined in this article then you should have some very satisfied customers, who, after a few successful results, will move on to the Yellow course which I will cover in more detail in the next edition.

Credits:

Map extracts courtesy of Bruce Bryant and Mike Hampton

References:

- Course Planning by Graham Nilsen
- BOF Rules
- BOF Appendix B - Course Planning

all of which can be found on the BOF web site under Events / Regulations.

Author:

Barry Elkington. October 2006.
Octavian Droobers Orienteering Club.