Strategic planning for orienteering in Australia – background paper

It has been some year since we have carried out a full review of our strategies for orienteering in Australia. Any good strategy should be reviewed regularly.

It is important that, as a sport in Australia, we have a common set of strategic goals across the sport, even though the actions which are taken towards achieving those goals will differ between national, state and club levels (and in some cases will be specific to individual states). Our strategy should therefore be cast a plan for the whole of the sport, not just a plan for Orienteering Australia, with actions implemented at the most appropriate level.

<u>Some questions and issues to think about in developing a new plan</u>

- Are we still happy with our primary strategic goals and mission? If not, what do we replace them with?
- How do we want to structure our plan?
- Which activities will help us reach our strategic goals, and which level(s) of the sport should have primary responsibility for these? (this also feeds into consideration of what the fundamental role of a national body, vis-à-vis state bodies and clubs, is).
- How should we measure our performance? (see also the later discussion about internal and external performance indicators)
- What are our objectives on a short (1-3 year) and long (5-10 year) timescale? (where do we want to be in 2025?).
- Which parts of our sport are growing, and which parts are struggling? Does this warrant a reallocation of resources, or do we see potential to revitalise those areas which are struggling?
- Should MTBO be fully integrated into the main plan, or are there aspects of it which require separate consideration?

<u>What is happening in the Australian sporting landscape, and what other large-scale trends may influence our sport?</u>

There are a number of large-scale trends in the Australian sporting landscape, or more specific to us, which are relevant to us. Some of these are:

- There is still a strong interest in physical activity, but a reduced willingness to commit to something specific for the longer term. This means that activities which require commitment for a full season are struggling, but those which can provide opportunities for casual participation at a place and time which suits the participant are doing well. (From our perspective, one implication is that our participant base is likely to grow relative to our membership). The lesser willingness to commit to the long term (and perhaps the greater compliance burdens in the modern era) has also made it harder for many organisations to find board/committee members.
- Successful activities have a high level of social engagement, through social media or more direct contact. One good example of this is parkrun's use of contact lists and social media; social media (defined broadly) has also built broader communities of those involved in physical activity, sometimes purely virtual communities (e.g. through Strava).
- In many sports, an increasing number of events are being run by commercial or external promoters with little or no direct involvement from the NSO or its affiliates. (Athletics is a good example of this, with both parkrun, and many major fun runs, being run by external bodies). It is also increasingly common to outsource aspects of event management – a good

recent example in orienteering being the outsourcing of the main organisation of the Oceania Championships and WMOC in New Zealand to an event management company.

- Technology has meant that the total number of volunteers required to run an event of a given size has declined (there's no need any more for small armies of card-checkers or time-calculators), but that many roles have become more specialised and require specific expertise. In many states, these roles are dependent on key specific individuals who may be difficult to replace.
- Technological developments have potentially made it feasible for us to offer 'anytime' participation opportunities, e.g. by setting 'virtual permanent courses' using mobile phone apps. (The capacity to create maps using lidar and other open-source data sets also makes it possible to offer such activities in places with little orienteering presence). The challenge would remain of how to create a suitable business model for such activities.
- Government funding policy for sport in general (except for Olympic sports), at both federal and state level, is directed primary at building participation (as a means of promoting health outcomes), although there is some level of interest, particularly from state and local government, in supporting major events as an economic development strategy.
- The role of traditional media as an avenue for promoting sport has declined in many ways (although the ability to share content means that coverage in regional media can have a far larger reach than was previously possible). However, online coverage of major events has created the ability to expose orienteering to a far larger audience than was previously possible. Because we have never had much mainstream media coverage outside the Nordic companies and Switzerland, orienteering has been forced to be an innovator in online coverage; many sports are only just catching up. (Increasingly, sports, except for the tiny number which can command large TV rights fees, are also looking to broadcast on their own platforms rather than through external broadcasters).
- Social media is only becoming more crucial, both as a tool for keeping existing participants engaged and as one for attracting new ones.

What is meant by 'participation'?

As noted earlier, a major feature of the changing sporting landscape in Australia is that people are interesting in engaging with sport on a casual basis, but are less willing to make longer-term commitments.

There are a number of different ways in which we can try to measure participation:

- Number of full members (in the sense that we have traditionally defined them).
- Number of registered orienteers, more broadly defined (including attempting to quantify the number of casual participants, the number of people involved in schools programs through an affiliated body, and so on).
- Number of unique participants.
- Total number of participations (starts).

The ASC's focus has traditionally been on the first two, although there are some signs that this is starting to shift towards the third as they recognise the changing trends in sport. (One manifestation of this is their survey of participation in sport, although that is of limited value for sports of our size because the survey sample size is too small to derive reliable information for sports in which less than ~1% of the population are involved). Our most reliable information has been on the first and fourth points.

Nonetheless, as long as the ASC's focus is on the first two forms of affiliation, we need to have strategies for increasing the number of people who have some form of affiliation.

An interesting side issue to this, which has become apparent during the course of Government consultations on the National Sports Plan, is that one can think of the Australian population as being divided into three groups:

(a) Those who engage in sport as part of a formally organised activity under the auspices of a formal sporting organisation.
(b) Those who undertake physical activity on at least a semi-regular basis but do not have any formal affiliation with a sporting organisation or participate in activities organised by one.
(c) Those who do not regularly undertake physical activity.

The principal objective of government investment in sport is to increase the level of physical activity in the population, i.e. to move people from group (c) to group (b). However, most of the effort (both within ASC and within most sporting organisations) involves moving people from group (b) to group (a). If the Government does want to put significant effort into engaging the currently physically inactive and sees existing sporting organisations as playing a role in that, then a suitable business model will need to be found to make it worthwhile for those organisations.

<u>Do we structure the plan with a number of key strategic areas, or with participation as the principal strategic area with other areas supporting that?</u>

The existing strategic plan has a number of different areas. Participation is one, but other areas are identified separately (high performance/athlete development, administration and governance, media, sponsorship, and technology).

If we regard strengthening participation as our principal strategic goal, then there is a strong case for having participation as the primary strategic areas, with other areas subsidiary to that.

Having high performance as a strategic area in itself made sense in the era when much of the ASC funding we received was for high performance activities and we had key performance indicators relating to high performance. Now that these are no longer the case, it may be appropriate for high performance to be a strategic area supporting participation. I see high performance as supporting participation for a number of reasons – partly because high-level athletes give us exposure, but more significantly because having a credible high performance program is critical in the retention of young people (the change in 15-18 retention rates after the introduction of JWOC and the Australian Schools Championships in 1989-90 was dramatic), and because, all other things being equal, the more successful someone is at the sport, the more likely they are to stay in it. (It is also important in giving us our next generation of leaders; for example, most State schools teams have at least one former, or sometimes current, WOC team member in their coaching team).

<u>What do we mean by 'high performance' – and do we need a new name for it?</u>

'High performance', as defined within our current plans, covers a very wide range of activities, spanning the full reach of the 'athlete pathway', from coaching at relatively introductory levels through to high-level international competition.

I would see one of the principal objectives of our programs in this area as being to provide the opportunity for every orienteer who wants to to maximise their performance potential in the sport – whether it is the World Championships aspirant, or the person who entered the sport as an adult and

made the top half of their age group in the Australian Championships for the first time after a decade of trying. (Apart from this being inherently a good thing, all other things being equal, the better someone is at the sport, the more likely they are to stay with it in the long term).

The high performance area is one which has often attracted controversy – partly because many members of the orienteering community (seeing it as being a much narrower program than it actually is) do not see it as having any relevance to them, and partly because it is one area in orienteering in Australia where much of the implementation activity, and hence the bulk of spending, happens at national, rather than state or club, levels.

The question therefore arises: is there an alternative name which would better reflect the breadth of our activities in this area?

Performance indicators – internal and external

Our current strategic plan contains a number of performance indicators. These are geared around reporting to ASC, and are chosen in such a way that we expect to see regular improvement (e.g. we do not choose indicators which we would expect to be cyclical, e.g. major event attendances which will depend on where the event is). They are also geared towards the measures which the ASC emphasises when measuring participation.

As a sport, it is in our interests to be tracking good quality information about a broad range of our activities, as well as to be aware of what is happening at a finer range of detail than what we are reporting to ASC (for example, which types of events are performing well and not so well). We may therefore want to consider what our key performance indicators should be for internal use, in addition to those which we use for reporting to ASC.

The role of states in meeting existing performance indicators

Our existing performance indicators, as agreed with ASC, contain numerous areas where we need the engagement of State Associations and/or clubs for us to achieve them. Among these are:

- Increasing the numbers of full members and those with other forms of affiliation.
- Increasing retention and following up of non-renewals, including maintaining contact with them – we don't want to cut people off from channels of communication as soon as their membership expires. (NSW have a separate e-bulletin for non-members which is directed specifically at promoting events).
- Increasing Sporting Schools participation through direct marketing to schools in potential catchment areas.
- Increasing numbers of coaches and controllers through ensuring that courses are run regularly (preferably annually).
- Ensuring that Group A controllers provide reports, from which relevant learnings can be collated into a newsletter or other form of communication.
- Increasing social media presence, e.g. through consistent posting of event photographs (some states and clubs do this very well, others are less advanced).
- Commence an annual survey of members (through Eventor) to incrementally improve the sport by seeking feedback on potential improvements.

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