

Discussion Paper on Future for the NOL Calendar.

Background

Overall, the NOL program is quite successful but improvements could be made to solve a couple of problems which have emerged. The program producing a vibrant set elite competitions between state teams, especially in the first half of the year. Without NOL the national elite season would consist solely of Easter, the Australian Championships and WOC selection trials.

The number of races in a season has crept up over the years, producing a significant travel burden to attend all rounds. Competitors are picking and choosing which rounds they attend, with such poor attendances in August in recent years that this round has now been dropped. August is also when our best orienteers are focussed on the European season and Australian team representation. That leaves a NOL program with relatively frequent events from March to May then a long gap to the Australian Championships carnival in late September so momentum and interest in the competition is lost in the middle of the year.

A second problem is that there is much on during the Australian Championships carnival making it hard to give due attention to any close competitions that determine the NOL winners for the year. The Australian Championships themselves are an honour to win; there is usually an elite test match with New Zealand; and for the juniors there is the highly successful Australian Schools events. So in recent years it has been hard to give attention to, and to celebrate, the NOL competition and its winners.

Other countries have faced similar problems and have addressed them by having a shorter more focussed elite season and one where the final round is not diminished by coinciding with other high profile competitions. Sweden, New Zealand, and Great Britain are examples of this. This paper discusses ways to solve the problems. To inform that discussion some data is presented from NOL participation rates in the last two years. First though we set out the objectives of NOL within the broader strategies of Orienteering Australia.

Objectives

Orienteering Australia has a new [strategic plan](#), two components of which the NOL is aimed at: “increase the attractiveness of orienteering to ... participants” and “maintain strong programs to support teams and squads at the state, national and international level”.

The aim of NOL is to provide a series of high quality elite competitions contested by state teams. This increases the attractiveness of orienteering to junior and senior elites; provides a focus for state-based squads (which can train and be together more effectively than national squads); and produces intense competition that can be used to help prepare and select teams for international competition. More broadly, an more intense national competition leads to more and better elite competitors, more inspiring role models, more coaching, more fun, and more orienteers transitioning from local young beginners to national

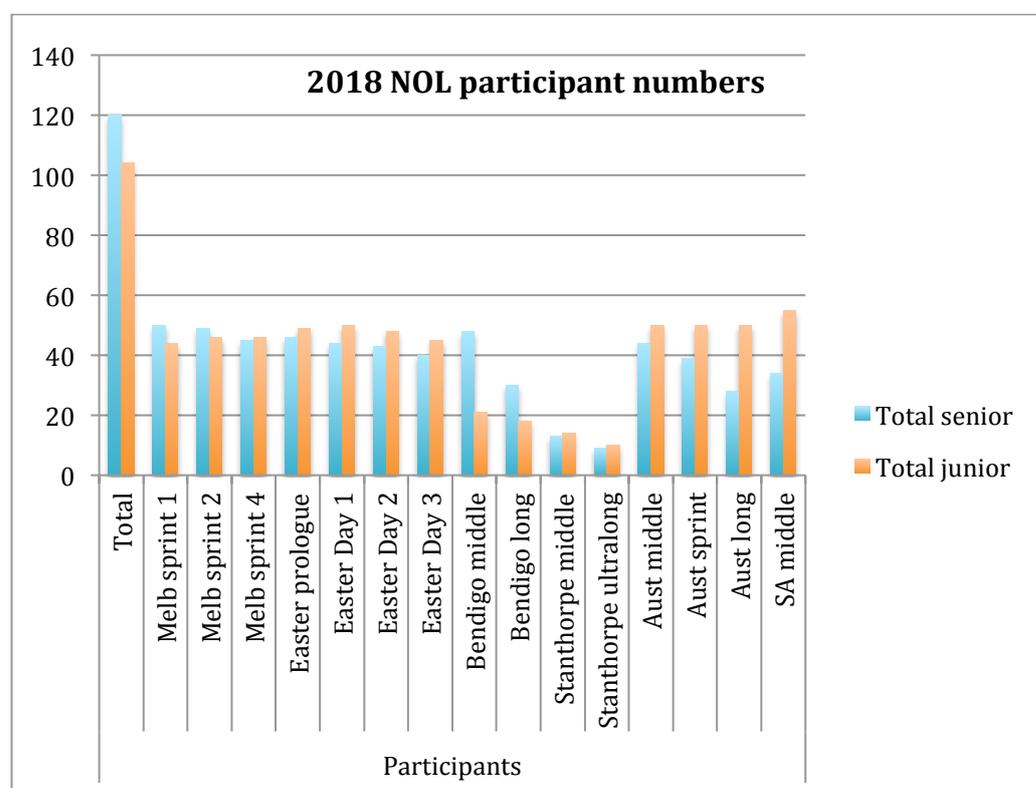
level adult competitors, and from there to masters competitors, volunteers and parents of orienteering families. The NOL supports the athlete development pathway, providing a national structure for the benefit of state teams.

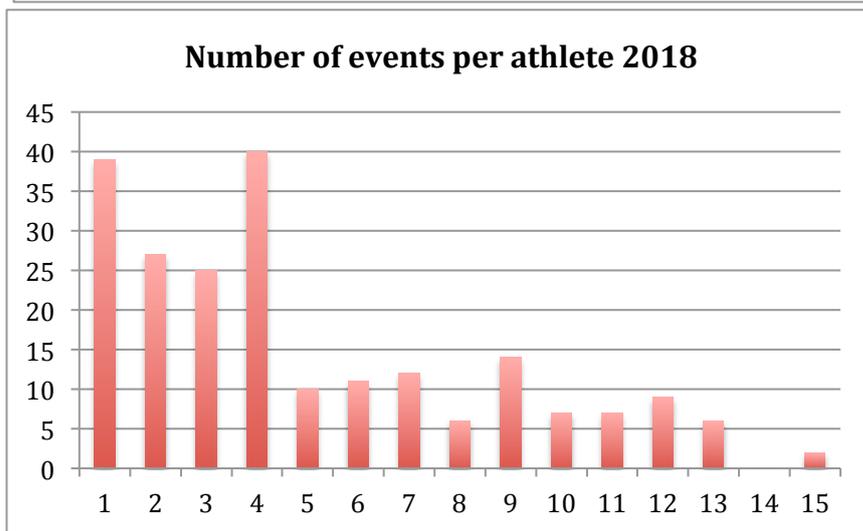
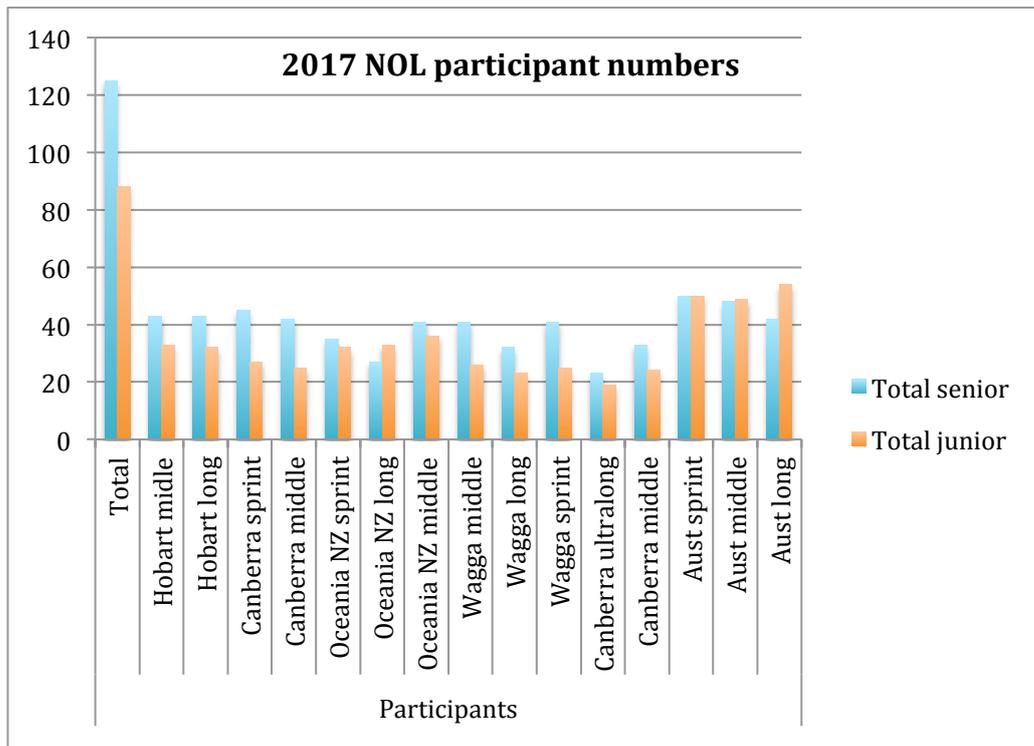
Some have suggested that the aim of NOL is to find the best overall orienteer for the year. This is at best a secondary aim, and one that would not engage many of the competitors making up state teams (see participation data below). To identify and celebrate our best orienteers is important though and it contributes to improving the standard of elites and identifying role models.

Improvements to better meet these objectives are discussed below. First some data on NOL participation is presented.

NOL Participation

The numbers of elite competitors in NOL events over 2017 and 2018 is summarized in the graphs below.





Several observations are made from the data:

- Over half of the athletes participating in NOL in 2018 attended 4 or less events. Individual rounds are composed of 2 to 5 events so many athletes are probably only attending one or two rounds. They are choosing which rounds to attend during a season.
- Only 24 out of 215 athletes in total attended 10 or more events out of the 15 available. This suggests that many competitors find the full season too long or onerous, or at least they don't take advantage of it.
- There is a large range of participant numbers among events in 2017 and 2018. The best attended events are ones where there are several events as part of a weekend or carnival; where it is a long weekend; where travel costs are low; and where there is a history of the event being prominent and of high quality.
- The August ultralong weekends have quite low participant numbers. The major national carnivals of Easter and Australian Champs have high participant numbers even when in locations distant from where most

competitors live. The first round, before Easter, also has high participation. Events in the middle of the year have lower participation numbers.

- Junior participation is slightly higher at the Australian Championships carnival than at Easter probably as a result of the Australian Schools Championships.
- Senior participation across the Australian Championships is also influenced by whether athletes have holidays or take leave that week. Many senior athletes work full-time and not all universities have holidays between the two weekends, thus some athletes choose just one weekend of the Australian Championships to attend.

Discussion and options

The participation data suggest there are more NOL events than the majority of competitors are willing or able to attend. The data suggests athletes are weighing up the costs and effort against the number and quality of events in a weekend and choosing the best weekends for them. Factors other than an event being part of the NOL season probably determine participation from elites.

In 2019 and 2020, the August round of NOL has been dropped. In August, national team members are either overseas or having a break after returning from overseas. Dropping the August round produces a four month break in the NOL season and the final round is not given much attention being lost in a much bigger carnival. Some senior elites also are only able to attend one weekend of that carnival. Thus the NOL seasons tapers off rather than its conclusion being a highlight of the year.

One option to solve this problem is to have a NOL season that runs from March to May or June. This keeps the focus on the most popular events and enables us to have a final round where the main attention is on finding and celebrating the winner of the competition. With a final round that is designed for NOL (rather than a national championship) new and exciting event formats could be used such as a chasing start, or for the teams competition a relay format. This could also help athletes prepare for the intensity of world level competition.

The June long weekend is an almost national long weekend not used at present for NOL but which could be used in future.

It is likely that the Australian Championships will be well attended even if it is not a NOL round, especially by juniors. It is a major national carnival with a history of high participation that precedes it being part of NOL. For the best athletes there will be a test match against New Zealand, to which more attention can be given. The elite classes make up about 10% of total participation at the Australian Championships.

A hybrid option is to finalise the individual NOL competitions in May or June but finalise the teams competition at the Australian Relay Championships, especially if other relay events are not offered during the year. A focus could be put on one weekend of the Australian Championships carnival rather than expecting senior elites to travel on two consecutive weekends. The teams competition could also focus on the most popular events reducing the

travel burden on remote states and allowing them to compete on a more equal footing. New Zealand is doing that with their revised national competition.

Naming and celebrating the best orienteer over the whole year could be achieved through the current national the elite ranking system, using points from this system to identify and celebrate the best orienteers. That system has appropriate weightings for the importance of different events. It can also compare performances from overseas events and domestic events to find the true best Australian orienteer in each class not just the best domestic orienteer. More could be done to celebrate the best orienteers of the year.

If the Australian Championships is to be kept in the NOL then solutions need to be found that highlight and promote the finalisation of NOL during that carnival. Attempts to do that in the last two years have not been successful.

Summary of options

1. Have a shorter NOL season running from March to May/June, with purpose built events.
2. Have an individual NOL season from March to May/June and a team season concluding at the Australian Relay Championships.
3. Keep the current NOL season but find ways to bring more attention to the final round and the winners.
4. Regardless of options 1 to 3, use the Australian elite ranking system to identify and celebrate the best orienteers over the year in each elite class.