

## **Coaching Tip #12 – Choosing the Right Course**

Sometimes we think of ourselves and each other in terms of which course we run. A person might say, “I’m an Orange course runner.” He means, of course, that he usually runs the Orange course. But is that the right course for him? Or is he zipping through it too easily – or having too much trouble completing it within a reasonable timeframe?

It’s very hard sometimes to decide what course you belong on, or what course you should advise a friend to try. Maybe a beginner isn’t really all that new to topo map reading, so are they ready to jump right to Orange? Maybe, maybe not. What if you’ve been running the same color course for a year, is it time to “move up?” That depends.

Choosing a course is pretty personal, and it can be very difficult to sift through all the colors trying to figure out what course is right for you. And emotions and ego come into play as well. So, for those that are concerned, here’s what each course color means and a bit of advice on making that personal decision as to the right course for you.

**White** – White is the basic beginner course and the competition course for orienteers age 10 & under. It’s designed to teach basic map reading skills and to minimize navigational mistakes. White courses are usually 100% handrails – trails and streams mostly – and there should be a control marker at every decision point. This is a great teaching course for parents starting out with their kids, for folks who have no previous topo map experience and for anyone who wants a pleasant walk in the woods but doesn’t really want to get into any challenging navigation. Average time to complete is 30-45 minutes.

**Yellow** – Yellow is the advanced beginner course and the competition course for ages 13-14. It’s designed to follow handrails, but the controls are off the handrails so that the orienteer has to decide when to go “into the woods” but can return easily to the handrail if uncertain and/or when he is ready to continue on to the next control point. I usually recommend starting on Yellow for those who at least understand topo maps. It’ll get you comfortable with the specific features and map scales of an O map, or test if you are ready to move into the harder navigation courses if you’re not sure. Yellow is a great level for the meandering sort of non-competitor who wants just a little challenge.

**Orange** – Orange is our intermediate level, the best one for most people. The Orange is where the orienteer develops his map reading and route choice skills and gets off the handrails for most of his course. The control markers are on major terrain features but fairly far off the handrails. I recommend this course for those coming into orienteering with good topo map reading experience, like adventure racers and SAR professionals, and for orienteers who are developing their repertoire of navigational skills. This is also the first course at which an orienteer should spend a significant number of events because there’s a lot to learn on Orange courses that is best learned from experience. Many folks will find the Orange course is the best course for them to stay on forever, especially those that are primarily recreational orienteers.

Brown/Green/Red/Blue – The advanced courses are, contrary to many people’s assumptions, all of the same navigational level, the only difference is in length. These courses are only for those who have excellent topo map reading skills and much experience with route choice, attack points, distance estimation and contour reading. The advanced courses have few handrails, fewer collecting and catching features, and control markers are on minor terrain features in intricate areas of the map, all requiring advanced map reading skills. They are primarily designed for competition for experienced adults and older teens and, except for Brown, for those in excellent physical condition.

I usually advise folks to “move up” to the next level course when they find the navigational challenges of the course they are on to be too easy. If you are not making mistakes and want more challenge, you’re on the wrong course and will find a more difficult course to be more satisfying. If you’re not making mistakes and like the course you are on, by all means stay there. But if your elapsed time is more than 30 minutes behind the winner and you’re making lots of mistakes on a regular basis, you’re probably not on the right course for you and need a strategic retreat to a course where you can develop the navigational skills you need.

The age categories you see published for courses at national or regional meets are competition age categories. That means that if you already have good navigational skills, that’s the right course for your age group physically. But look for those M-[color] and F[color] courses if you’re still learning your navigational skills. Those are the Open age categories and you’ll find lots of orienteers who are mutually helping each other learn the ins and outs of that color course.

We call orienteering “The Sport for All.” We have a course that’s just right for you. And always will.

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