

Coaching Tip #13 – Control Descriptions

At some point before you start your course, you're going to be given a chart of control descriptions for your course. Commonly called the "Clues," these control descriptions are the details of what's in those control circles on your map.

So, what's in the Clues? Each control circle has a row in the chart. The first column in the row is the circle number. As you know, each control marker has a unique code with which the orienteer can verify that he has found the correct marker. This code is found in the 2nd column of the clue sheet chart. The rest of the columns give you specifics on the feature the control is on, not only the what the feature is, but where in relation to the feature the marker is hanging, the size of the feature, and whatever other information the course setter deems important so that the marker is found by navigational skill, not luck.

The International Orienteering Federation (IOF), the world-wide governing body for the sport of orienteering, established a set of symbols and a methodology for displaying control descriptions in this clue sheet format so that no matter where you orienteer, you have the same symbolic clues and can orienteer without knowing the local language – provided, of course, you can get to the start line! But even if you never orienteer outside the USA, they give you a quick, definitive description of the control point in a visual format that is instantly recognizable once you've learned the symbols. Orienteering shorthand, so to speak. It's important that every orienteer learn them.

Beginner courses (White and Yellow) in the USA have written-out control descriptions in addition to, or instead of the chart format. But once on the Orange course, the orienteer is expected to know the control description symbols. At GAOC events, we have a "cheat sheet" for the clues on the back of the paper punch cards, and you can request to have one when we use electronic punching if you wish. But it's a good idea to learn the control description symbols anyway, so that you can instantly recognize, even upside down, the description of what's in the control circle. It's really not all that hard, they're very similar to the symbols on your map.

I recommend that you make reading the control description for each circle part of the "C" step in your C-A-R (Control – Attack Point – Route) decision-making step. There's nothing like a little extra knowledge about the control to help you plan how to find it. And you might even want to choose your attack point based on the information in the clue. For example, if the control is a cliff, you might have a different approach to it if it's at the foot of the cliff rather than on top of the cliff. Or if the control is on the west side of a boulder in a field of boulders, approaching the boulders from the west side will give you a better chance of spotting it quickly.

The complete explanation and methodology for control descriptions is on the IOF website as a PDF at:

<http://www.orienteering.org/i3/index.php?/iof2006/content/download/830/3903/file/Control%20Descriptions%202004%20symbols%20only.pdf>

It's a big file, so while it's good to look it over and understand it, memorizing your clue symbols from it might be a little intimidating. But there's a fun online interactive quiz to help you learn the control description symbols at <http://www.fortnet.org/icd/index.html> . Don't skip the Map Skills Test at the end, it's really tough, even for the most experienced orienteers!

Look over the PDF on the IOF website, play the quiz, then try this exercise. Take a map from a course you've run recently and hide or fold back the clue sheet. Draw a grid and, looking at the circles on your course, make up your own clue sheet, then compare it to the one done by the course setter and see how many of the symbols you got correctly.

If you don't already know your clue symbols, learn them. And see how much of a difference it makes in your navigational efficiency out on your course.

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