

Coaching Tip #14 – Aiming Off

Today I'm going to talk about an orienteering technique called Aiming Off. Although the average orienteer isn't going to use this technique every course, when you need it, it's a real time and concentration saver. Aiming off requires the use of the precision skills – precision map reading and precision compass use, to find a point along a linear feature which crosses your direction of travel.

Suppose you are going for a point along a trail or stream. Not the whole trail or stream, just one spot along it. It might be your control point or it could be the end of a leg segment. It's just one small place along the linear feature, and although the linear feature should be easy to hit on even a rough compass bearing, hitting that target spot along the linear feature might be tough. How are you going to not miss it?

Let's do an example. Say one segment of a leg along your route choice requires you hit a particular trail junction. The main trail runs east to west 200 meters North of you. You know if you take a rough compass bearing North, you'll hit the main trail without a problem. But you want to hit the junction of the main trail and a smaller trail that heads off the main trail to the Northeast. And you want to follow that smaller trail as part of your route choice. You need to find that junction without running up and down the trail searching for it.

You can try to do precision compass to the trail junction, but going for 200 meters using precision compass is pretty far on a bearing and you're likely to drift to the left or right. So, when you hit the main trail and there's no junction in sight, what next? Do you head off east or west in search of your trail junction?

Here's where aiming off is golden. Instead of trying to hit the trail junction dead-on, try setting your compass to deliberately miss it to the left. Be sure to give yourself enough room on your aiming off so that compass drift won't put you to the right of the junction. And, of course, whenever you are doing precision compass, you need to measure and pace, they go together. You also need to do some precision map reading, checking off features as you pass them on the way to the main trail, to keep that compass drift under control. It's a little longer route, but when you arrive at the main trail, you know for sure you are west of the junction and with a quick check of map and compass to be sure you hit the right trail, you need only to turn to your right, you know your junction is east of you along the main trail.

Anytime you see that your control features is along a linear feature, and you aren't following the linear feature, but are trying to hit it from an angle, aiming off should pop into your head as a possible choice of technique to help locate the point along the linear feature. If you've ever run up and down a trail or stream searching for a boulder or cliff, not knowing which way to go to find it, you know this technique is exactly what you'll need to avoid having that happen again.

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