

Coaching Tip #15 – Parallel Errors

Every course setter has a lovely set of pitfalls he builds into every course in order to be sure the competitor is always on his game. And one of the course setters' favorite tricks to test the orienteer is to design a leg or two with a strong likelihood that a distracted orienteer will make a parallel error.

Ever run down a spur only to realize that you thought you were on the next spur over? Yep, that's a parallel error! Then of course, you either have to go back up the spur and over to the next one, or cross the reentrant between, either of which is time consuming. And all the while you're telling yourself what a dumb mistake that was. But it really wasn't so dumb, you just let the course setter lull you into thinking you were doing great, so you didn't pay attention.

Pretty much every mapped area has duplicate terrain structures – not only does this spur look just like the next one over, there are plenty of reentrants, trails, streams and ridges that look just like the next one over too. And a crafty course setter is going to take advantage of that. And to assist the course setter, we sometimes see what we want to see rather than what's really there. Some orienteers call it “creative landscaping” – looking at a feature that's sort of like the one you want to be on and ignoring the fact that it's going slightly the wrong direction or not exactly the right size. Maybe the hillside is steeper than it looks? Or you want to find a ditch and that gully might have recently washed out a little deeper than when it was mapped, right? No, no. Don't lie to yourself. If it's not right, it's not right.

So, how to do prevent parallel errors? Well, first you have to make a few, just to learn from your mistakes. And, of course, you have to keep yourself from wishful thinking. But mostly, you have to recognize the places on the map where there's the potential of making parallel errors. Part of this is scoping the map before you run, if you can. Look for areas of the map where there are several similar terrain features near each other and going more or less the same way. Spurs and reentrants are the most common parallel features, but parallel trails and streams should also set off some mental red flags, warning you to be careful in those areas. And the worst of all is the dreaded parallel ridges. It's quite discouraging to find yourself hundreds of meters and many contour lines away from the correct ridge on another almost like it.

There are 2 really good skills that will help you avoid making parallel errors. I learned the most important one from a then-U.S. Team coach – whenever you hit any linear feature – trail, stream, ridge, spur, etc. – always glance at your compass to be sure it's laid out in the direction the map says it should be. There's a lot of difference in NNW and NW. A couple of seconds of precision compass and map reading can save you from mis-identifying that linear feature.

The 2nd skill that will help prevent a parallel error is thumbing. Thumbing means keeping your map oriented and folding it so that it's easy to carry in one hand with your thumb on your location on the map. As you move along and identify a feature, you

move your thumb to that feature. When you look up to identify the terrain, and then look back at the map, your eyes go right to your thumb and not to that parallel feature, so you don't misplace yourself on the map.

Time to get out an old course map and practice. Look for the parallel error potentials on the course, the places where you needed to be careful to get on the right spur, pick the correct reentrant or gully to go up or down, hop on the right trail or follow the right stream. And especially look for those parallel ridges and large parallel reentrant systems. Especially note the ones that you mis-identified when you ran the course. Then pretend you're the course setter and see if you can find others on the map and how you would have used them if you were designing a leg on a course. It's all about learning to spot the potential errors by spotting the parallel terrain structures and knowing which ones are which.

Orienteering is a concentration sport and nothing says you lost your concentration like making a parallel error. So if you're finding yourself making parallel errors, slow down and use a bit more energy on the mental side of the sport – especially precision map reading, and you'll find that your orienteering speed will improve as your errors decrease.

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