

Coaching Tip #16 – Brain Fade

Orienteering is called “The Thinking Sport.” Thinking is required. And accurate thought processes require oxygen. Therefore, the orienteer must be careful to limit his physical use of oxygen to the amount left over after his brain gets what it needs to read the map and navigate. Many of the mistakes made by advanced orienteers are made when in oxygen deficit. Orienteers call this Brain Fade.

It’s so very tempting to try to push it a little harder, run a little faster, and hope you can still navigate with just a little less oxygen. Sometimes you get away with it, more often you don’t. Sitting around after your run, comparing route choices and mistakes, how many times have you said, “Why on earth did I do that?” You should have known better, you did know better, but your brain wasn’t getting enough oxygen. You borrowed oxygen from your brain and lost a lot of time.

How do you tell how fast you can run, climb or otherwise exert yourself and still allow enough oxygen to get to your brain? Of course, nothing beats physical training and raising your fitness level. But once you’re at the meet, you’re stuck with the body and training you brought with you. So, here’s how to find your optimum orienteering speed. Start your next course by walking briskly on the first leg. If you feel you have navigated 100% accurately to that control, break into a slow trot for the next leg. 100% again? Speed up just a tad. It’s necessary that at each control you stop for a few extra seconds, take a couple of deep breaths and evaluate how well you orienteered that leg. You should notice that as you speed up, your 100% accuracy slips a little, maybe only to 95%, and then suddenly dips to 80% or worse. WHOA! You just passed the point of oxygen deficiency. Drop back to the last speed you orienteered 95% and try again for a couple of controls. Still okay? Speed up ever so slightly. Trouble? Go back. And as you tire, watch those later legs, you’ll probably need to go more slowly toward the end of the course.

It’s not just physical fitness. With orienteering, all kinds of things can influence your optimum speed, hilly terrain, weather, complex legs and especially how much sleep you got the night before and your hydration. Most successful orienteers don’t have one constant speed. When they look at a leg, making their route choice decisions, they are also making speed decisions. A little faster here, take it slower there, really slow until I see that, then speed up there. It’s all part of good orienteering navigation. And I like to remind folks that, if the map doesn’t look right, stop and take a couple of deep breaths. It’s amazing how much more like the terrain the map looks when your brain gets enough oxygen!

The faster you run, the more likely you will make mistakes. So, slow down a bit and find your optimum speed. Defeat brain fade. Your results will improve drastically.

Robin Shannonhouse
USOF Level 2 Coach