

Coaching Tip #17 – Critical Decision Points

One of the hardest map reading skills to master is the habit of looking for backup map information to support your primary route choice plan. For example, you have a plan for getting to a control and you have decided to use map simplification. Your plan is to go along the base of a hill to the 3rd reentrant after crossing a trail, then go up the reentrant to a rootstock near the top. Yet, when you get to the 3rd reentrant and climb it, there is no rootstock and no control flag. Now what?

You can help yourself by adding to your route choice plan some extra map reading at selected places and a touch of “if that doesn’t look right, then....” And overcome errors at critical decision points before they happen.

1. Look for extra features on the map at critical decision points such as direction changes. Using the above mentioned example, see if there is anything on the map that may help to determine which reentrant is the 3rd one. Is the reentrant aligned in a different direction than the others? Does it have any distinctive bends or shape? Is there anything across from the mouth of the reentrant on the next hillside over that will help you determine which reentrant is which? Whatever is out there is usable and shouldn’t take much extra time to notice.
2. Is your route choice safe or chancy? Instead of counting reentrants, is there another approach with a more unique or distinctive attack point than “3rd reentrant?” If the route choice seems too easy for the course level, be skeptical and have a Plan B.
3. Get in the habit of pacing whenever you are moving thru terrain that has many similar features, even if you are doing rough map reading or rough compass. If you know that 3rd reentrant is also 150 meters past the trail, and you count 3 reentrants after only 100 meters, that’s a pretty good clue that you need to go check out that 4th reentrant 50 meters further along.
4. Learn to judge which features are mappable and which aren’t. Minor ditches, short boulders, deer trails and contour features less than the contour interval may not show up on the map. A reentrant 2 meters deep on a map with a 5-meter contour interval may be only a slightly noticeable bend in the contour line. When you counted to the 3rd reentrant on the map, maybe you didn’t see little indentation of the small reentrant mapped between the first 2. So you climbed one reentrant too early.

There are going to be misunderstandings between you, the mapper and the course setter. In the above example, the route choice plan was possibly too chancy, even tho’ it looked perfectly fine, because either the mapper or the course setter, or both, had a different interpretation of the terrain than the orienteer. The route choice plan should have worked. But it didn’t. But if the orienteer realized at the critical point of turning to go up what he thought was the 3rd reentrant that wasn’t the right one, he wouldn’t have made the error that was lying in wait for him. A little extra care and some extra map reading at critical decision points can prevent an error from happening.

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