

Coaching Tip #18 – Micro Route Choice

Several years ago, a recently retired Olympic athlete showed up at one of local meets and asked for a coach to show him how to orienteer. Very smart on his part, but unfortunately I was the only coach available. And I certainly can't keep up physically with a trained athlete. But I agreed to take him around an Orange course with the provision that he understand my physical limitations. I was absolutely astonished to find myself having to keep pausing to wait for him. What was going on? And it wasn't the first time. Once I took a friend who was a good road runner with me to pick up controls the day after a meet. She told me to go at my regular speed (or lack thereof) as if she wasn't there. At the first control, when I turned around, she wasn't.

It took me a while, but I finally figured out what was going on. By paying attention to how new orienteers moved on their courses, I realized that I was more comfortable moving in the forest and wasn't using a lot of energy compared to the newer orienteers. Over my years of orienteering, I'd developed good micro route choices.

Micro route choices are the little decisions you make about the best place to put your foot down on the forest floor and how to move around the tripping hazards and push thru the lightest part of the vegetation. It means you run where it's a little flatter, climb where the slope is gentler and know how to balance running in uneven terrain. And, because your mind and body have developed how to use micro route choices, you use a lot less energy moving thru the terrain.

Check yourself out, are you expending more energy than you need to move thru the forest? Are you correctly making those small decisions of where to step and what pathway to take thru vegetation and on hillsides? Can you improve your comfort level and decrease the amount of energy you use running in the forest? Here are some suggestions:

1. Do your physical training runs in uneven terrain, preferably in the forest, whenever possible. It'll get you used to putting your foot down in the right places and learning a forest gait and balance.
2. While you're in the forest, spend some time thinking about when and why you go around obstacles. And take an extra couple of seconds to look ahead to spot the best micro routes thru the brambles and bushes. Climb on an angle and where the slope is gentler rather than just going up straight line.
3. Especially notice if you are expending a huge amount of energy going thru those areas mapped green rather than around them. Is straight line really faster? Are you using up your body's resources that you'll need later in the course? Can you think well to navigate while you're thrashing and stumbling thru brush and brambles?

4. When following a stream, it's not necessary to actually run beside the stream, look for a more level or clear pathway a few meters away paralleling the stream. Switch to the other side of the stream if it's better over there.
5. Test different shoes in the forest. There's a reason orienteering shoes work better, but they're expensive. If you can't afford the custom footwear, figure out which of your other shoes work best in the forest. Same with your clothing.

The key is planning your ease of travel in the forest and practicing finding the best micro routes that result in less energy expenditure. Boost your navigation by not wearing yourself out when you don't have to do so. Your brain cells will appreciate it the extra oxygen and energy reserves and your muscles and joints will last longer.

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