

Coaching Tip – Catching Features

This week I'm focusing on Catching Features. A catching feature is a large or linear feature on the far side of a control which, if you happen to miss the control feature, stops you from going too far beyond a control site. Although these can be found on any course, an Orange course is required to have a catching feature for every control.

Really? So, that's why some folks find those controls so quickly....

Catching features are part of what we call Rough Map Reading. In other words, you are looking at the map in an overall-way, sort of pulling back and looking at the "big picture." You are saying to yourself, "If I miss the control, what will I see that tells me to stop and go back?" If you pay attention to what's out there beyond the control, you should be able to find a catching feature that's practically a safety net that stops you and bounces you back to your control.

Typically, a catching feature will be linear and lie across your direction of travel, something like a trail, stream or fence. It can also be a large feature, such as a lake or clearing. You have to look at the terrain on the far side of the control, maybe 50-100 meters beyond, and see what lies across your travel path. And, since you will need the catching feature only if you miss the control site, realize that your travel path is more of a travel triangle, because the reason you miss a control is most likely because you drifted to your left or right. That's why a good catching feature is linear, it's long and can handle your drifting off a bit.

Okay, so let's tie catching features into your overall navigational plan. If you're going by C-A-R, the catching feature you will need to be beyond the control as seen from your chosen attack point. In fact, you might even want to pick your attack point for a control based on the presence or absence of a catching feature on the other side of the control. That way, you can go fairly fast from your attack point to the control, knowing that if you miss it, there is something to stop you.

So, let's practice looking for catching features. This exercise should work best if it's an Orange course, but it'll be interesting to try for the other levels as well. Pull out those maps you used to practice for attack points, the ones where you put an "A" by each attack point on the course and circled the "A" you thought would be the best. Now you are going to look at those attack points you picked in a new way. For each attack point, see if there's a catching feature on the far side of the control. If you find one, put a "C" beside it. Then, after you've looked for a catching feature for each attack point you found, ask yourself, "With the extra knowledge of where the catching features are, would that change my choice of the best attack point for me? Remember, there is no right or wrong answer, it's a balance between your map reading skills, physical abilities, the route choices, and what's really available out there in the way of attack points and catching features. But if a catching feature works, it's makes those 20-minute errors into 5-minute errors.

For those on advanced courses - You might try looking for some really subtle catching features, like a change in slope of the hillside, a vegetation change, or a presence or lack of other features you expected to see. To me, that's one of the most fun parts of map reading on the course, finding what the course setter hoped I didn't see, subtle catching features beyond a really difficult control point.

So, what happens when you miss a control and hit a catching feature? Do you turn around and go back? Sometimes, but it's best to find another attack point. Look for something distinct along the linear catching feature and use it as an attack point and try again. But this time take it more slowly, do a bit more precision map reading, and don't forget to measure and pace. And, of course, look for a catching feature on the far side. It saved you once, it could save you again.

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