

Coaching Tip - Rough Compass

When I give beginner instruction at local meets, after I teach map reading, the next step is map orientation. This is a pretty simple step of having folks look at their compass needles to determine North, then turning the map to line it up to North. I say they have now oriented their map, and they must keep it oriented at all times. Once they've oriented the map, the rest is just map-to-terrain identification. And I tell them map orientation is such an important step that we named the sport orienteering, because keeping the map oriented is the most important thing we do. That's pretty simplified, but true.

Of course, there's always someone in the group that insists that I need to teach them the 3-step setting-the-compass routine. I will ask them to wait until the instruction session is over. And when I say "now I'm going to help the person who wanted to know how to set a compass, so if you want to stay, feel free. Otherwise, go have fun!" Usually all but one or two head toward the start table.

And then orienteering stops being fun, because even tho' I talk them thru it 3 or 4 times, the correct method of setting the compass is hard to understand and even harder to remember. And no matter how many times we go over it, I know it's double the chance that they're going to get out there and "do a 180," go the exact opposite direction, because there's twice the chance of messing it up as there is of doing it right.

Shortly thereafter I see these folks leaving the start table, stepping to the side, and spending 30 seconds or more twisting their compass housings and turning around a couple of times, usually frustrated because they've seen everyone else leaving in one direction and their compass is telling them to go the exact opposite way. And I know they're not going to do much map reading, because their mind-set is compass bearings and they aren't going to give up on it.

[Sigh!] As you might suspect, the moral of this story is map reading and map to terrain comparison is not only more fun, but a lot more accurate than following a compass bearing.

More accurate? How can that be? Well, ya'know, there are trees out there and you can't walk thru them, and every time you go around a tree, you drift a bit to one side. Gosh, do you think maybe that's why you wind up 30 meters or so off? Yeah, think about it.

So, how exactly should you use your compass? The most common use of the compass by the best orienteers is what we call Rough Compass. Rough compass is simply using the compass needle to orient the map, then keeping the compass and map oriented, move quickly thru the terrain as you read it on your map. Orienteering is a map-to-terrain navigation sport, the compass is used to keep the map **ORIENTED**. I think the last time I took a 3-part bearing on a course was when I was in brush over my head in Washington State 15 years ago. So, yes, there are circumstances when 3-part

compass setting might come in handy, but if you can see the terrain and compare it to your map, that ain't one of them.

Another method of using rough compass is when you need to get somewhere fast and you only need to keep to a general direction to get there. For example, you've got to run generally Northwest to a trail, stream, clearing or other hard-to-miss feature. Of course, while you're running on rough compass, what you actually are doing is keeping your map oriented "roughly" and you're still doing map to terrain ID, but you're moving fast and seeing only the map's "big picture." If you don't have to be super careful about seeing every little map feature along the way, just make sure you do enough map reading to hit your target feature. Think "catching feature" only without it being behind a control.

So, to summarize, the skill of rough compass is used 3 different ways:

1. to orient your map,
2. to keep your map oriented as move thru your course doing map to terrain comparison,
3. to run fast in a general direction to hit a large or linear feature on the map.

Okay, time to haul out one of your stash of orienteering maps and do another one of my little exercises. This time, run your course mentally, as you remember running it, and put a little "r" next to where you used rough compass. Then go back over the course again and put a capital "R" next to where you should have used rough compass and didn't. Then sit back and look at your R's and r's and see if you want to change any compass use habits.

The proper use of rough compass can greatly improve your time, help maintain concentration by not distracting you away from map reading, and, if you can quickly identify when you can use it to really zing along to a mid-leg "catching feature," you can leave your competition far behind.

Robin Shannonhouse
USOF Level 2 Coach