

Orienteering Fashion – a major oxymoron

Three rants (by Adrian Zissos, Calgary, Canada)

A few months ago I became interested in an email debate about why there are very few young people being attracted to our sport. The arguments raged - not enough competitiveness in our programs, too much competitiveness, we must do more in the schools, doing programs in the schools is a waste of time. And so on. I couldn't help thinking the debate was missing the point – we've tried all these variations but yet on the whole we keep failing. And I think I can tell you why... The following is a series of "Rants" I wrote on the issue which I feel is at the core of the problem – Orienteering's complete lack of Cool, its utter nerdiness.

Rant #1. Tone – attempted humor, somewhat offensive

We all have concerns and opinions about orienteering's low retention of young people but most of us are at a loss about what we personally can do to help improve the situation. Well, I've got a suggestion ...

What can you do to help attract younger people to orienteering?

Throw away your nylon orienteering suits!

Now I don't want to get off on a rant here, but ... orienteering suits create an awful image for the sport. They are so incredibly uncool that no self-respecting youngster would voluntarily wear one or want to be associated with people who do wear them. The materials are outdated, the colors are ugly, the designs are hopeless, and the style is non-existent. Hey, I'm no fashion expert but even I can recognize the outrageously uncool when I see it.

You can do your bit to "cool" the sport by getting yourself a modern technical shirt - something like a dri-fit top from Nike. These shirts survive orienteering through tough bush, they wick away sweat keeping your body's core temperature down, they're comfortable, they're readily available in a variety of styles at reasonable prices. And best of all, they are cool. (Unfortunately you'll still need a pair of nylon pants - plain colors of course, black preferred).

So do yourself - and the sport - a favor: burn those nylon pajamas. It'll be just one small step for an orienteer, but a giant leap for orienteering.

Of course, that's just my opinion, I could be wrong

Rant #2. Tone – conciliatory, repeating main points with better manners

My previous rant was published to a few orienteering email lists and it generated a great deal of comment: over thirty email responses and easily twice as many verbal replies. Well over 75% of the responses were in agreement with the main argument that modern styling and materials (such as driFit or CoolMax) have many advantages over the traditional nylon O-suit, including creating a better image for the sport.

It is illuminating to summarize the categorize the response according to age and experience:

Category	Percent of category that agree
Under 30 years old	100%
Over 30 years old	50%
New to orienteering	100%
Three years or more experience	50%

From this table one can easily see that younger people and those new to the sport are most strongly of the opinion that the traditional suits are - to put it mildly - not cool. The strength of this feeling might surprise some long time orienteers. Here for example are excerpts from emails...

"I hope you're being serious because these are my sentiments exactly."

"I agree 100%. My adventure racing team teammate is in marketing and says that the sport will NOT attract athletes of great numbers until it changes its image (i.e. no more Pajamas)."

"Way to go!!!! Orienteers are an incredibly nice group of people but it's high time we admit we have an image problem! You are right on track to fix it."

"clown suit" (ouch)

"Whenever I bring a friend to an event they always raise their eyebrows at the clothing. I understand how practical it is but, hey, I've never worn anything but my leggings and dry-fit and I come back relatively in one piece."

"As a middle-aged female orienteer I find the nylon suits to be hot & disgustingly clingy, and frankly smelly, as nylon reacts to sweat somehow and never lets go of it even with persistent washing and treating. I can't stand the suits for that reason and because they're ugly in design and color. While the men may not care, I find them embarrassing. Thanks for expressing what I've always thought"

"It's hard to see how O-suits have evolved [at all] over the last 30 years, and not everyone wants to look like a European sports aficionado from the 1970s... Note that none of the adventure racing crowd would be caught dead in an O-suit!"

Of course, I'm not suggesting that if every one of us wears a Nike driFit shirt we'll be instantly swamped by new members; but I do think that updating our clothing habits will enhance orienteering's image and thereby play a role in attracting and keeping younger people in the sport. And for whatever social reason, this will be a surprisingly powerful change. For us old-timers the new clothes are better anyway, being more comfortable, more durable, more stylish, more readily available, usable for non-orienteering activities, and cheaper.

Rant #3. Tone – gentle, final points, a wrapping up of the argument

Responses to the previous two Rants were frequent and passionate and continue still. Several additional comments, suggestions and arguments were made against the traditional orienteering costumes and in favor of a new, cooler look for the sport. Here are some of the most interesting points made, for and against, along with a couple of extra fashion tips.

1. Wearing tights or leggings is pretty good alternative to nylon O pants (but males, beware - not too tight tights please)
2. Gaitors should be worn inside the pants if possible.
3. Orienteering suits tend to be used only for orienteering, whereas a fashionable hi-tech shirt with orienteering logo would be worn for jogging, training, biking, and other activities providing exposure that helps promote the sport.
4. It was pointed out, sometimes with photo examples, that *a very few* people (specific examples were given) do in fact look very good in their nylon O suit.
5. Using mainstream clothing and equipment makes our sport more attractive to sponsors. Currently it is hard to get sponsorship from clothing suppliers since we don't use any of their products. And it is hard to get sponsorship from the few companies that do supply our clothing (Trimtex, UltraSport, etc) because that is all we buy from them. Making large purchases (such as club shirts) from local suppliers will open the door to much better sponsorship opportunities. A good example is Axis Gear's (www.axisgearcompany.com) sponsorship of the 2003 Axis Gear Sprint Invitational race, a fund-raiser for the Canadian National Team.

6. In a non-scientific durability survey of shirts used in competition, drifit tops were found to be extremely durable. While many had small snags, only one had any tears. The shirt with tears was mine. It has two small 1/2" tears after more than three years of wear. In contrast a nylon O shirt I bought last year ripped the second day I wore it - with a new opening 4" long.
7. DriFit-like material is available in many varieties from many companies. Some may be more durable than others.
8. Some things in Orienteering are extremely cool such as sophisticated electronic timing, amazing maps, and a wickedly challenging sport in super-cool terrain. But our clothing unfortunately isn't.
9. At least one manufacturer, Trimtex, is making O suits out of a CoolMax material. And this isn't just because the material looks good – it actually helps your performance by keeping your body core temperature lower.

So this season do the sport a favor and put on a nice hi-tech shirt for all your orienteering events. And next time your club gets team suits, get something hi-tech.

Wearing more modern clothing of course is only one part of updating Orienteering's "Image". There are many other aspects of the sport in need of a serious makeover. But I don't want to get started on the subject of those nasty lame outdated orienteering logos...



Tore Sandvik, 5th best in Norway, ranked 32nd in the world, wearing a new-style O suit. (photo by Olav Nipen)



Can you imagine kids wanting to look like this? (photo by Adrian Zissos)