

Anza-Borrego

Dreams of warm Januaries have lured many a Canuck south to the deserts of Nevada and California, usually to soothe arthritic joints and while away happy hours on the gentle fairways and dazzling greens of so many legendary golf courses. But it was something different that enticed we two touque-wearing, zed-saying Northies into this hot, dry, cactus-infected land of loose rocks, high ridges, and impossibly narrow and twisting canyons. It was promises of unique and challenging orienteering terrain, with loads of races jammed into an extended weekend, with a casual social atmosphere and a “just-enough-to-get-the-job-done-and-no-more” style of organization.

We arrived late Friday afternoon, just in time to have missed the model event but still able to catch first glimpses of the incredible desert terrain. As the last model-event participants returned to the competition centre in the quickly-fading light we got a few hints about running in this desert and a few startling fashion tips. A glove on the non-map-holding hand was sported by one natty orienteer, for pulling out those little cacti that can ‘jump up’ to impale the calf. An alternative to the glove we saw is to stash a comb and use it brush off the prickly buggers.

We were warned that the ground is very soft in some areas, almost like running on bubble-wrap as you might sink a few inches into what looks like solid sand. In other areas we were told the ground is covered in loose stones and when this is on a side-hill footing can be sketchy – and to carry an extra compass because of the chance of falling and breaking one. The primary recommendation though was to run clear of all bushes – even those friendly-looking can have sharp painful needles. With all of this advice swirling around my brain, mixed with glimpses of wonderfully complex terrain I had quite a lot of thinking to do to prepare for tomorrow’s double-feature.

Next morning I approached the day’s first race with significant caution. The terrain had areas of high complexity and also this was my first orienteering in many months. So I reached into my bag of “key words” that help provide me with focus during my races and as always I picked out three. For this race my three keywords were:

1. “D/D/D” – which stands for ‘Difficulty? / Direction? / Distance?’. By using this keyword (which some people might argue is actually three) I make certain that for each leg I am very precise in my direction and distance judgment in order to minimize parallel errors, and that I consciously assess the difficulty of each leg so to be sure to be alert to particularly dangerous legs on which significant time loss may occur.
2. “Three-in-a-row” - I was especially concerned about the first few controls, and the ‘three in a row’ mantra is helpful to ensure I am highly concentrated, especially at the start of the race for the first three controls. It is also a useful refocus keyword following an error.
3. “Be sure” - by using this keyword I take care that I have a well defined route for each leg, that I know exactly what to expect on the leg, and that I will stop immediately at the slightest ringing of alarm bells. It instills a sense of caution which is appropriate in this terrain where relocation is probably quite time consuming.

I ran the race cautiously, enjoying the course setting and the jaw-dropping beauty of the desert terrain. But despite my cautious approach in the end I did lose lots of time (16% error, rather than 10% which is more normal for me). Mostly I lost it to: carelessness such as not reading control descriptions carefully, and loss of focus especially as I got tired toward the end of the race, and my aging eyesight which finds it increasingly difficult to read complex detail on the map. But I also had some fastest legs. On these in general I had simplified the leg – either by finding some high points or a nice ridge to follow, or by finding a simpler “around the detail” route that gave a low risk while only giving up a little bit of time to the faster but more risky routes. See elsewhere for a detailed race analysis.

The second race of the day took place that afternoon using the same start location. The scale was a significantly more readable 1:5,000 ;-) and the sprint-style course was well set and again great fun to run. Fitness was the challenge and only a handful of the elite were able to handle the two-a-day pace and attack the course with true sprint-fervor, while the rest of us struggled and failed to beat the 20 minute mark.

Sunday morning weather was again perfect for orienteering, warm and dry. The morning race was another long event, this time in gentler terrain which allowed some of the faster runners to have their day. The running was again wonderful though this time I did pick up a couple of cacti thorns in my calves and feet, and my arches were blistering badly probably due to bad footwear selection (I ran in normal running shoes, trying to save space in my luggage this trip by leaving the O-shoes at home).

By far the coolest event of the weekend took place Sunday afternoon in “The Slots”. This is an especially special part of Anza-Borrego where the canyons are extra deep and narrow and tight and complex with incredible erosion features. The terrain was so special I decided not to race and simply walked enjoying every minute in that wonderful place.

On Monday, the final day, many people had gone home but those of us that stayed helped pick up controls in the “Scavenger O” event – a score event for one hour using existing controls, followed by a one-hour free-for-all in which competitors get points for every control they bring in. A very fun and very effective way to get in all the controls!

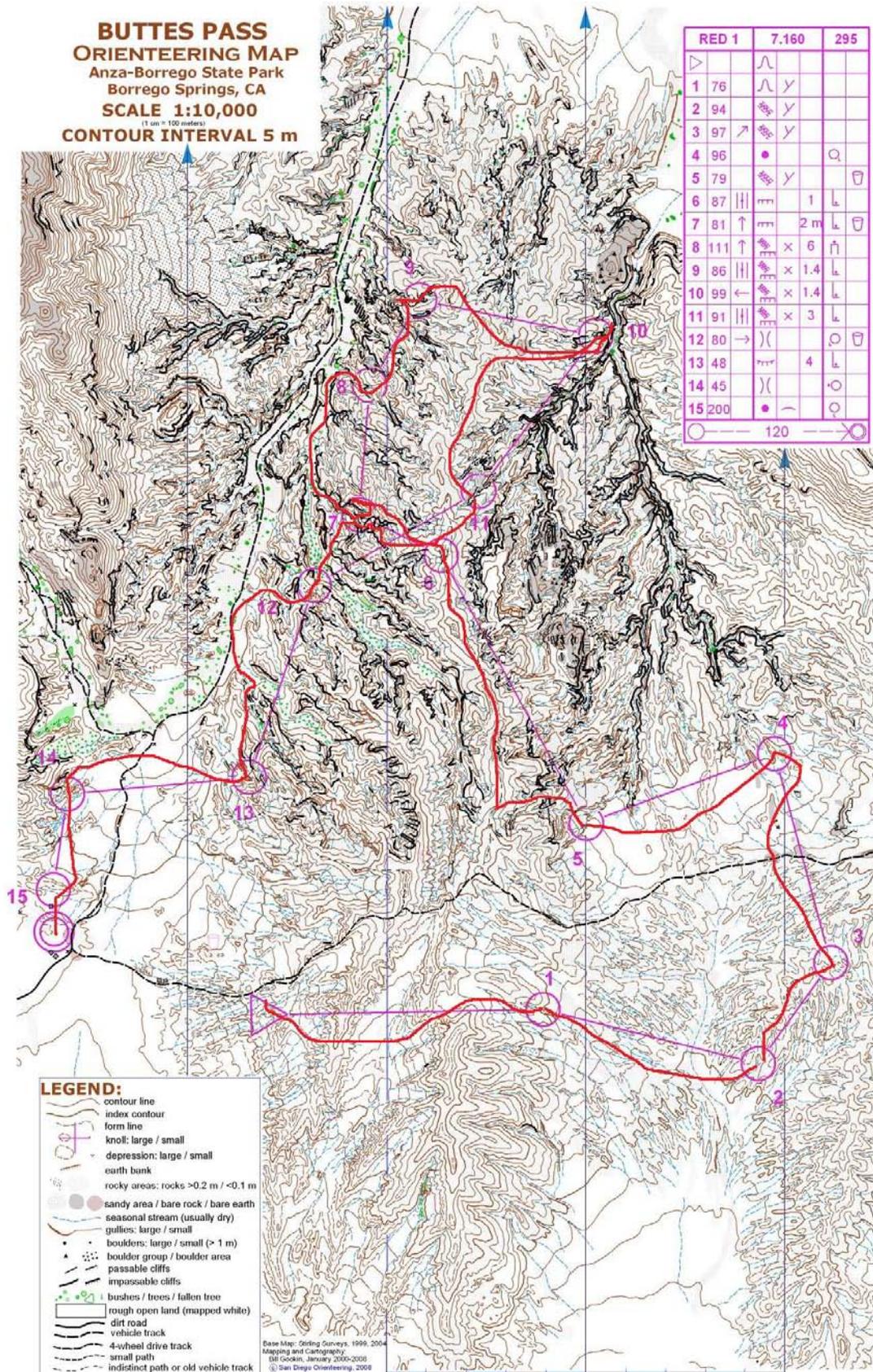
The highlight of this event is surely the amazing desert and its wondrous land forms. But the social atmosphere is also great. All the races were within a short walk of the competition center. Many camped at the competition center in the desert while others of us stayed nearby in the quaint village of Borrego Springs, enjoying a variety of accommodation options ranging from a romantic clothing-optional inn to a more rustic motel (with a live pig staying in the adjoining room). Evening meals were casual group affairs, informally organized at one of the local restaurants or at the camp.

Before coming to this event we’d heard many stories about Bill Gookin meets and about the Anza-Borrego terrain. The event had been built up to “legendary” status in our list of must-do races. It certainly lived up to all our expectations and then some. Two enthusiastic thumbs up.

BUTTES PASS
ORIENTEERING MAP
 Anza-Borrego State Park
 Borrego Springs, CA
SCALE 1:10,000
 (1 cm = 100 meters)
CONTOUR INTERVAL 5 m

	RED 1	7.160	295
▷		∩	
1	76	∩	∩
2	94	∩	∩
3	97	∩	∩
4	96	•	Q
5	79	∩	∩
6	87	∩	1
7	81	∩	2 m
8	111	∩	6
9	86	∩	1.4
10	99	∩	1.4
11	91	∩	3
12	80	∩	∩
13	48	∩	4
14	45	∩	∩
15	200	∩	∩

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- LEGEND:**
- contour line
 - index contour
 - form line
 - knoll: large / small
 - depression: large / small
 - earth bank
 - rocky areas: rocks >0.2 m / <0.1 m
 - sandy area / bare rock / bare earth
 - seasonal stream (usually dry)
 - gullies: large / small
 - boulders: large / small (> 1 m)
 - boulder group / boulder area
 - passable cliffs
 - impassable cliffs
 - bushes / trees / fallen tree
 - rough open land (mapped white)
 - dirt road
 - vehicle track
 - 4-wheel drive track
 - small path
 - indistinct path or old vehicle track

Base Map: Grilling Surveys, 1999, 2004
 Mapping and Cartography
 Del Gookin, January 2000-2008
 © San Diego Orienteering, 2008

Race Analysis: Anza-Borrego “A Meet” Day 1

Adrian Zissos, Red Course

Leg 1: leg time: 5:49 (4th), 5:36 fastest. Elapsed: 5:49 (4th)

A very cautious start. I ran to the spine of the first major spur, aware that the steepness was pushing me down the slope, too far to the south. Reaching the spine I stopped and spent about 20 seconds looking carefully at the map and the terrain and fortunately it seemed to ‘click’ for me. I was able to see all the way to the hill slightly NW of the control and so was able to run the middle section of the leg quickly, then follow down into the re-entrant to take the first control with growing confidence. One in a row.

Leg 2: leg time: 3:43 (3rd), 3:34 fastest. Elapsed: 9:32 (2nd)

I immediately rated this leg as ‘very difficult’ with huge potential for time loss since the terrain suddenly was filled with smaller contour features – easy to misinterpret one small contour for another. I carefully pace counted (really) down to the north-south running dry stream and was encouraged that I could actually distinguish it from the rest of the desert. As I ran I kept my eyes up and was able to distinguish the two-contour hill SW of the control and used it as my attack point. Two in a row.

Leg 3: leg time: 2:41 (1st). Elapsed: 12:13 (1st)

Another leg to strike fear into the heart of any cautious orienteer. I headed north along the ridge out of control two. From there I followed the high points, pace counting carefully. Three in a row! I was feeling quite happy, but very aware that intense concentration would be required to continue this low-error navigation.

Leg 4: leg time: 3:41 (8th), 3:08 fastest. Elapsed: 15:54 (1st)

I rated this leg as relatively easy and ran quickly to the road and relocated precisely using the bend and the rocky grounds. I took a bearing and spied a series of hills and ran to the one I figured the control was on. Sadly my bearing had been careless and I was at the wrong hill ☹️ But it was simple to relocate here and so I lost only a small amount of time. I felt lucky to have gotten away with a small penalty for my first lapse of concentration.

Leg 5: leg time: 3:33 (1st). Elapsed: 19:27 (1st)

This leg seemed again quite simple. Clem was running in front of me and although he wasn’t on my course I felt there was a good chance we were headed to the same control. No matter what anybody says, it is always going to be faster running with someone else – even if you don’t “follow”. Sure enough, Clem ‘pulled’ me along by inspiring me to run faster and I was able to make good time on this leg.

Leg 6: leg time: 7:10 (2nd), 6:51 fastest. Elapsed 26:37 (1st)

Wow, this was a monster leg. I studied the route choice for many seconds before choosing to climb up and then follow the ridge. Once I saw this route I felt it was obviously going to be the best since the navigation would be simple once I'd reached the top of the ridge. But reaching the top was physically tough. On the top I was able to move quickly and had time to enjoy the wonderful views.

Leg 7: leg time: 4:04 (18th), 2:17 fastest. Elapsed: 30:41 (2nd)

At the beginning of the race, waiting for my start, I had studied the control descriptions and noted a run of several consecutive cliffs in the middle of the race, with the unusual feature that one of these cliff controls was actually 'on top of' the cliff, rather than the more usual 'at the foot of'. At this point in the race for some inexplicable reason, without looking at the control descriptions, I decided that this had to be the 'on the top of cliff' control. So I stayed on top of the ridge, enjoying the wonderful views, until I reached the circle and saw *way* below me a small cliff with my next control. For a person very afraid of heights, the steep slopes down to the control created a bad situation. I did manage to scramble down but I was very uncomfortable and really needed to catch my breath at the control.

Leg 8: leg time: 4:15 (2nd), 3:57 fastest. Elapsed: 34:56 (1st)

Following the *Scary Incident at the Seventh Control* I decided I needed a break to settle my nerves and regain my concentration. This leg provided the perfect opportunity. I saw an easy route, following the canyon floor. It was well off the direct route but it was simple navigation and easy running and this relaxing route allowed me the opportunity to re-gather my wits.

Leg 9: leg time: 5:21 (16th), 3:25 fastest. Elapsed: 40:17 (1st)

This leg also had a canyon floor route, but this time the simpler running option offered no simple attack point, so I decided to go straight. I arrived at the correct re-entrant, but had not aimed off and was unable to read the detail well enough to relocate. I guessed that I was too high and went down the re-entrant. Guessing you are too high is almost always the wrong guess – and not surprisingly I lost a few minutes. I was frustrated at not being able to read the detail and wishing I'd brought a magnifying glass with me.

Leg 10: leg time: 7:08 (17th), 4:00 fastest. Elapsed: 47:25 (2nd)

My frustration led to me rushing out of the control carelessly and I found myself heading out of control #9 in the wrong direction. I calmed down a little and then was able to follow the high-points to the high rocky ground west of control 10. At this point I was unable to pin-point my position and was not certain which spur I was running down. And again the detail was too complex for my eyes, so I was having a hard time relocating. I managed to run right past the control without noticing it, and ended up at the end of the spur overlooking the major cliffs. I spent a few moments to confirm my position then returned up the re-entrant finally seeing the

control and wondering how I'd not seen it the first time. The frustration unsurprisingly remained.

Leg 11: leg time: 6:27 (1st). Elapsed: 53:52 (1st)

Looking at this leg I was overwhelmed by the complexity of the direct route and by the 'left' route. Only the right remained as a viable option for me, so I headed on a rough bearing up to the ridge that I had just come from. Reaching the ridge I found the route quite simple and was able to use the cliffs to the NW as a solid attack point. One in a row.

Leg 12: leg time: 8:35 (4th), 8:00 fastest. Elapsed: 62:27 (1st)

This was a very complex leg with no easy route. I decided to go directly south and take the control from the wide valley to the east. However as I reached the vicinity of control #6 fatigue dragged me down the slope and I ended up heading down the canyon that I didn't really want to go down right then (but that I should have gone down on the way to control #7!). I was very tired at this point and the last few hundred meters were made quite difficult by my poor concentration. Two in a row – kind of.

Leg 13: leg time: 5:47 (1st). Elapsed: 68:14 (1st)

I started this leg on the direct route taking the wing-and-a-prayer approach that is popular with very tired orienteers. Luckily even the small climbs were intimidating me, so I was forced to re-evaluate my route. On sober reflection I noticed a simple, flat route involving going out to the road and then following the ridge up to control #13. Three in a row?

Leg 14: leg time: 4:25 (17th), 2:58 fastest. Elapsed: 72:39 (1st)

Fatigue had truly set in. I ran well wide of the control, trying to use the contours to lead me in. However I got confused and lost time. In retrospect it is not easy to see how I went so far right of the obvious control feature.

Leg 15: leg time: 2:03 (1st). Elapsed: 74:42 (1st)

Once again I found Clem in front of me and he 'pulled' me along to the finish chute.

Finish: leg time: 0:34 (6th), 0:26 fastest. Elapsed 75:16 (1st)

Post-mortem

My mistakes came not surprisingly mostly from a) errors in reading the detail terrain, and b) poor change of pace as the course moved from heavily detailed areas into more vague & smaller features. My best legs were when I was able to simplify the detail and maintain a high level of concentration. Though disappointed with the number of errors I made I took solace in having limited the damage of each to no more than 2 or 3 minutes.

Following the run I was talking with Christina and she showed me a magnifying glass attached to her thumb compass. I tried it out and the details I had difficulty reading during the race sprang out and were so very easy to read. I told her I wished I'd had the compass during my race - then I remembered I had actually carried one in my pocket the whole time. Duh!