

## Why Golf is better than Orienteering

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I have recently started playing the game of golf. Despite being quite a bad player I do manage to enjoy the game, maybe because golf is similar to orienteering in some ways - it is an outdoor sport, played by people of all ages and abilities, it has an enjoyable social aspect, it is a game played mostly against one's self, a game in which mental focus plays a large part, in which 'playing it safe' versus 'taking a risk' is a constant dilemma, a game that takes many years to become proficient, and one very few of us will ever master.

With all these similarities, why is it that golf manages to attract thousands of new players each year, yet orienteering manages to attract only a handful? It is a question I often think about as I sit on a golf course waiting for the slow-playing beginners in front of me that are holding up our game. But I don't get too upset about slow play on a golf course, I just reach into the back of my golf cart, grab an ice-cold beer and then check the in-cart GPS display to see the exact distance and direction to the flag.

At this point in the article I must assume that many readers will think I have already stumbled across the answer: golfers a) get to drink beer *while* they're playing, b) have GPS in their cart that shows exactly how to get from where they are to where they need to get, and c) nobody cares too much about time. Well, I admit that for some people the argument is already finished, but let me try to dig deeper by starting again from the beginning...

Why do more people try golf than try orienteering? How is golf better than orienteering? I think it is at least in part because golf is a kinder, gentler, more forgiving game. Let me tell you what I mean...

1. "I feel good": In golf, one good shot out of 110 bad ones makes you feel great. In orienteering one single mistake in an otherwise wonderful race makes you feel like an idiot. Advantage: Golf
2. Mulligans. In recreational golf if you hit an awful tee shot you can claim a "mulligan" and take the shot again with no penalty. In orienteering more races are ruined on the first control than on any other – absolutely no chance of a restart. Advantage: Golf.
3. "Gimme": In golf, when your ball gets 'close enough' to the hole your friends will accept that one more putt is all it would take you to finish the hole and you pick up your ball and go to the next hole. This saves the frustration of missing short putts. Imagine in orienteering how wonderful it would be for beginners to be 'close enough' to a control saving all the frustration of time lost 'inside the circle'. Advantage: Golf
4. Maximum score: In recreational golf if you are having difficulty on a particular hole it is quite okay (and your friends will even encourage it) to pick up your ball and score yourself a "double par". Wouldn't beginning orienteers appreciate that option on controls they have been hunting for ages?! Advantage: Golf

5. **Handicaps.** In golf when you play against a better player you are allowed certain deductions from your score based on your handicap (your golf handicap is an estimation of how many shots it will take you to finish 18 holes). In orienteering we can all play together on the same course with better and worse orienteers, but there is no way for people at different levels to *really* compete with each other. Orienteering uses age-based categories, golfing uses skills-based scoring.  
Advantage: Golf

Golf is clearly a sport that is friendlier for beginners. It is filled with small kindnesses and conventions that help reduce the frustrations beginners have when learning a new activity. Orienteering on the other hand has none of these things. Our sport is incredibly complex and participants are faced with massive demands of interpretation, decision making, and physical fitness right off the start. If we want to attract and retain more people to orienteering we must keep this in mind and do all we can to present newcomers with kindnesses to reduce their levels of frustration.

Here are some serious and less serious suggestions for what we can change in orienteering to make the sport more inviting. Some possibilities:

1. **Skills-based categories.** The most useful thing I think we can do is implement skills-based categories (and courses) so that beginner orienteers are offered competition at their own level.
2. **Handicap systems.** We should develop handicap systems that allow reasonably competitive (but not necessarily totally “fair”) races between people of different capabilities on the same (or at least similar) courses. There are two general approaches to this:
  - a. **Time adjustment:** FWOOC’s Wednesday night Grand Prix series has experimented with this technique. Each club member is assigned a handicap “factor” based on previous results and their finishing time is multiplied by this factor.
  - b. **Course adjustment:** Several clubs have experimented with this technique. The general approach is to design a single course but require that better and fitter orienteers have to go further and take more controls. For example, each runner has the same course marked on their map along with a number of “extra” controls. Depending on a person’s handicap, they must take a certain number of the extra controls. They are free to take the extra controls at any time during the course.
3. **A new way of scoring** A less serious suggestion, how about scoring orienteering just like golf... as follows:
  - a. set “par” as, say 9 minutes / km .
  - b. In the results, compute the tpk for each runner on each leg
  - c. Score each control: every min/km under par would be ‘minus one’ and every min/km over par would be ‘plus one’.
  - d. For beginners set maximum score as ‘5 over par’.
  - e. Total up the scores for each control, the lowest score wins.
  - f. Although this is a less serious suggestion it does have some merit. It allows beginners to feel good about any ‘pars’ they might get, it limits

their scores on any one control (eliminating big errors), and would generally allow them to focus on their good holes, er, legs.

4. **“I feel good”**. In orienteering mistakes often make us feel foolish, but that is very rarely a fair or justifiable feeling. Everybody makes mistakes, even the greatest athletes make them. So when we make mistakes we should not “feel like idiots”. We should admit we lost concentration perhaps or made a poor interpretation of the terrain, but accept that in orienteering maybe more than in any other sport the demand for continuous concentration is supreme. So don’t let anyone say “I was such an idiot” without correcting them.

If we want our sport to grow we need to attract newcomers, engage them, train them as athletes and officials, and give them opportunities to make orienteering a part of their lives. To accomplish this I believe we must continue to experiment and innovate within the sport, but that most of all we must try to understand better what it is that attracts newcomers to the sport and what turns them off. This probably means making a big effort and actually asking them! So next event, please spend some time talking to newcomers – maybe that in itself will go a long way to making our sport more inviting.

Let’s try to make orienteering a bit more like golf.

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