

2021 Chairperson's Report

Mary O'Connell

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General

2021 was another difficult year as Covid continued to dictate what activities and engagement were permitted and feasible. The rollout of vaccines meant that it was possible to hold events from June onwards. While there was a slow return to orienteering events, gradually we have returned to regular events. A number of regional championship events were held in September, October and November 2021. New protocols and systems were introduced during 2020 and 2021 to ensure that events could be held safely, and all efforts were made to minimise the risk of infection at events. Some of these systems, e.g. online entry, are beneficial for participants and organisers of events. They are likely to remain a feature of the sport, although at some events, there will still be opportunities for entry-on-the-day.

Fortunately for orienteers, orienteering is a sport that lends itself to physical distancing. As an outdoor sport it has inherent advantages in managing the risk of infection, which meant that we were able to get back to hosting competitive events as soon as restrictions on sports events were lifted.

During 2021, a number of initiatives were trialled to encourage orienteers to get out and continue orienteering even when it was not possible to hold organised competitions. This included MapRun activities and having tagged controls in areas for a period with maps available for download.

The nature of lockdowns and the need for physical distancing meant that schools events were seriously impacted and did not take place during 2021. However, the schools' events are now back up and running.

International Teams

We had senior and junior teams competing internationally despite the challenges of Covid. We had a senior men's team at the World Orienteering Championships in the Czech Republic in July. We had a junior team competing in the Junior World Championship in Turkey in September and another junior team competed in the European Youth Orienteering Championships in Lithuania in August. In October, a team of 21 junior athletes travelled to Guildford for the Junior Home Internationals. There were some fine results and the Irish team beat the Welsh to win the Judith Wingham trophy. It was terrific to see our elite athletes competing in international competitions after an enforced absence from organised competitions.

MapRun Activities and Local Sports Partnerships

Orienteering received significant support from Sport Ireland late in 2020 and during 2021 which enabled us to do a lot of work with the Local Sports Partnerships (LSPs) to create maps of many urban areas. Many of the LSPs are very keen to promote orienteering as they recognise the physical and mental health benefits that accrue from participation. It was also a sport that was relatively easy to promote during lockdown thanks to the availability of MapRun maps, which meant that people could participate at a venue and time of their choice adhering to all the restrictions which were in place.

There has been substantial engagement with LSPs throughout the country. The objective of this initiative is to introduce the general public to orienteering and to encourage them to participate in orienteering events. Much of this work is happening in areas where there is little or no local club presence, thus helping us to promote orienteering more widely.

Education

There was an Instructor Level 1 course run in October. There were numerous Ready to Go courses held during the year even though this proved challenging as Covid has a tendency to re-emerge as courses are scheduled to take place. These courses were provided to LSP staff and teachers so that they would have the skills to introduce novices to the sport of orienteering. The Ready to Go courses were adapted so that they could be delivered partly online and partly in person – this has been very successful.

In addition, there were numerous on-line courses including mapping, planning MapRun courses, Purple Pen course planning workshops, and a navigation course for novices, which was based on courses delivered to the juniors during the lockdown of 2020. The delivery of online courses has been a very positive outcome of the work done over the past two years.

A planner's course has just been delivered to a group of aspiring planners and some very experienced planners. It is planned to continue to establish a regular schedule for courses, which can be delivered online to orienteers, to teach the skills of planning, controlling and navigating.

In addition, a controller's course was delivered by NI Orienteering which was well attended by members of both associations.

The ability to deliver online courses has been of major benefit to the orienteering community. There has been excellent collaboration with our colleagues in Northern Ireland to assist members of both associations to develop their skills.

Governance

During the past two years, much work has been done by Orienteering Ireland to consolidate its governance and the structures underpinning the organisation. We believe that our systems and policies are very robust and appropriate to the size of the organisation and the funding that we receive. We will continue to work to ensure that we meet the standards that would be expected of a national governing body in receipt of significant funding from Sport Ireland. There is a governance sub-committee which reports into the executive committee of Orienteering Ireland. This sub-committee has done sterling work on the governance of Orienteering Ireland over the past few years. Some members of this committee have been asked by Sport Ireland on a number of occasions to present to other national governing bodies on the work that has been done within OI. The presentations have always been very well received.

Child Protection

Work has continued to ensure that we have appropriate policies and protocols in place to ensure the protection of children and vulnerable persons in orienteering. All clubs have completed their safeguarding self-assessment audit with the support of the National Children's Officer. It is imperative that the clubs and the association are aware of their obligations and comply with the guidelines outlined in the Code of Conduct and Good Practice for Young People in Orienteering. This document is available for download from the website.

Communications

At the AGM in 2021, the membership agreed to change the name of the association from the Irish Orienteering Association to Orienteering Ireland. All legal and tax formalities have now been completed. We also have a new logo which will be visible on the maps and signage at the Irish Orienteering Championships. Completing all the changes on the website may take a little longer but we would ask everyone to bear with us as we continue to work on this.

We have also completed two videos to promote orienteering, one of which can also be used by people to learn how to use MapRun.

Each year, we continue to increase the presence of Irish orienteering in our social media channels, which include Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and there is also a separate Twitter account for the Ready-to-Go programme.

Administration Team

Orienteering Ireland was fortunate to secure additional support from Sport Ireland which enabled us to build our administrative team. We are delighted to have recruited Déirdre Ní Challanáin and Mark Stephens as additional resources to provide support to Aine Joyce. Both Déirdre and Mark are experienced orienteers and coaches, they bring a wealth of experience and personality to the team.

Conclusion

I would like to thank all members of the committee for their commitment to the association and for the work that they do, much of which is not visible to the members. There is a great team in place, and I am very grateful. We are also grateful to:

- Barbara Foley Fisher, Child Protection Officer;
- Colm Hill, the Data Protection Liaison;
- Rob McEvoy, Anti-Doping officer; and
- Gavan Doherty, Orienteering Ireland webmaster.

I would also like to thank Aine Joyce who makes sure that the IOA continues to operate smoothly and gives us a gentle reminder when necessary. Aine has an in-depth knowledge of the sport and the various challenges and opportunities that need to be addressed. She is always helpful, patient and diplomatic. Thanks Aine.

In 2019, Colleen Robinson took over the position of Officer responsible for Junior Affairs. Approximately 6 months later, Covid 19 pandemic ensued. Colleen did sterling work with the juniors to keep them engaged during this period. She was also very effective in helping with MapRun projects and Women in Sport initiatives. Due to professional and personal commitments, Colleen stepped down from these roles last year. I would like to acknowledge and thank Colleen for the contribution she made while working as an Officer of Orienteering Ireland and the additional projects.

Finally, I will not be putting myself forward for election as the constitution requires that the Chairperson steps down after a maximum of three years. I sincerely thank everyone who has provided support over the past three years whether at national or local level. There are too many people to name individuals, but you are all appreciated. Without the volunteers and tireless workers, we could not enjoy the fantastic sport of orienteering. Thank you, I thoroughly appreciate the work that is being done throughout the country.