

Orienteering champ uses brains and brawn

Runner Louise Oram taps mental acuity for success

BY MEGAN STEWART, VANCOUVER COURIER OCTOBER 26, 2011



Louise Oram, Canadian orienteering champion, is completing a master's degree in computer science at UBC.

Photograph by: Dan Toulgoet, Vancouver Courier

Before she crossed the finish line with blood dripping over her ear and down her chin from a gash on the back of her head, Canada's champion orienteer faced a challenge she'd not tackled before.

"I ran uphill, in the sand," said Louise Oram, a 27-year-old Vancouverite with the Greater Vancouver Orienteering Club who won the Canadian Orienteering Championships middle-and long-distance courses this summer in the Yukon.

"I knew-and I'm not used to running in sand-that it'd be slow," she said, describing the 30-metre scramble up a sandy slope, sometimes on her hands and knees. "I could have gone around. But it was a lot straighter to go through the sand."

Straighter and slower or longer and faster? Go around or go through? These are but a few of the constant, minute and urgent decisions Oram makes between controls, those soft, orange and white cubes that serve as checkpoints, which she must find in the wilderness using a map and compass.

"I think it was still the best route choice," said Oram, who gashed her scalp on an unseen branch as she ducked under a fallen tree. "There is a part of you, when you're crawling up that sand, that asks,

'Oh god, I don't know. Should I have gone around?'

Orienteering demands as much mental acuity as it does physical intensity, a sport that prizes faultless use of a topographical map and tactical navigating as much as muscle strength and endurance. Courses aren't charted for distance because each racer will make different decisions and opt for a different route, but general recommendations for those at the top of the field state the sprint course will take roughly 12 to 15 minutes, the middle-distance 30 minutes and the long-distance 75 to 90 minutes.

The world's best orienteering racers hail from Europe. This August in France, Oram was edged out of the final.

Outdoor adventure racing isn't limited to elite racers who desire to combine offtrail running with over-land navigation.

Charlotte MacNaughton, the executive director of Orienteering Canada, said the sport is popular with families and retains participants throughout their lifetime.

"We are a huge sport for life," she said from Calgary, noting they very recently added a 75-plus age category because of senior racers' requests.

After Orienteering Canada lost its government funding in the mid-'90s, organizers worked for a decade to grow the popularity and awareness of the sport. They also bolstered their long-term athlete development model and this summer, Sport Canada announced it would reinstate funding. "It really made us take a good look at how we are developing athletes and how we can do that to keep encouraging athletes in this sport or in any sport to avoid drop out and also help develop better orienteers and the elite level," said MacNaughton.

Oram is the face of orienteering in Canada. Her cross-country stamina put her atop the women's podium in this year's gruelling Knee Knacker Trail Run, a North Shore right-of-passage for backcountry abuse that scales 8,000 feet over 30 kilometres. "Louise is the best female orienteer in Canada," said MacNaughton. "And on any given day, potentially the best in North America."

In addition to her evident strengths as a long-distance trail runner, MacNaughton praised Oram's savvy navigation.

The decision to go around or go through (not to over-simplify) can be likened to computing, a field Oram knows well. The Point Grey graduate is completing her master's in computer science at the University of B.C., where she also trains with the cross-country team.

"You can think about the route choice as an algorithm," she said. "What's the optimal way?"

For Oram, it's likely the winning way.

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The Greater Vancouver Orienteering Club hosts the Lynn Valley Adventure Run Nov. 6. Registration at 9: 30 a.m. All participants and all ages welcome. Competitors can run, walk or chose the duathlon, which is on foot and bike. Beginners can arrive early for instruction. Visit orienteeringbc.ca/gvoc.

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Previous

Next



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