

Follow your compass to Boden!

I got the idea of this article when watching the GPS replay of the Swedish Ultra long distance championship some days ago.



The two first men over there were struggling with their running direction in the very final part of the race – a very common mistake in orienteering whatever the level of the runners. How many times I have been writing « compass! » in my own race's analysis, meaning that I had to put more focus on it. I would still say that around 60% of my mistakes are due to inefficient use of my compass; the other mistakes being due to too low map reading frequency or wrong map interpretation mostly.

Consistency

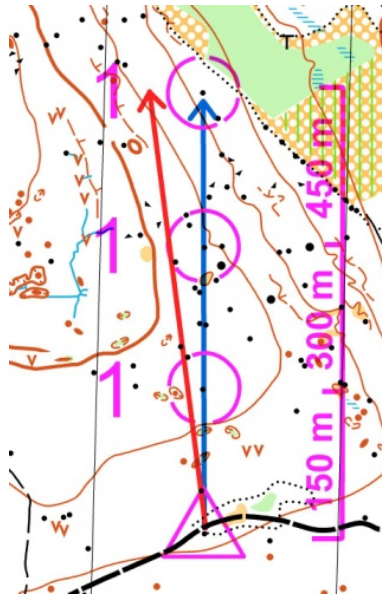
I have heard many Scandinavian runners saying that, even if they were carrying a compass, they almost never looked at it. And I think it became even trendier when the extremely skilled Finn Pasi Ikonen managed to win World Championship without a compass at all in 2001.

Of course, I can see the point, especially in very detailed areas, where contours will give you easily the directions to follow. And I can also remember an experience where I broke my thumb compass right after the start, and still had one of my best performances, being even more focus on selecting the most remarkable features of the terrain for my navigation. But, in France, where I grow up, most of the maps are so less detailed compare to Scandinavia and your only chance to “survive” with consistency is to follow carefully the direction given by your compass. “Consistency”, that’s definitively the key word when we talked about compass!

After I won my first WOC gold medal in 2003, people became interested to hear about my technique and there was some kind of misunderstanding with Skogsport’s journalist as Swedish readers start to believe that I was just following my compass, and not reading the map much. Of course, it is wrong – a high map-reading frequency is what defines my technique the best, compass acting more like a security belt. But I strongly believe that you can’t orienteer with consistency only with the map.

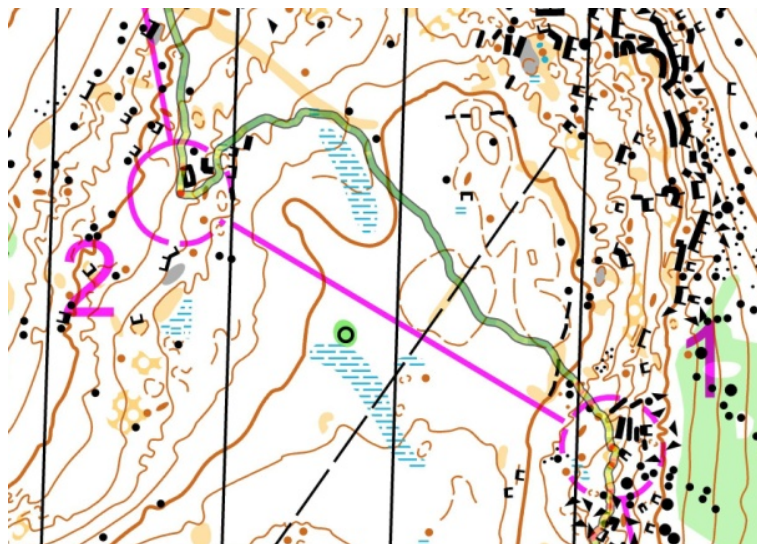
The usual confusion we do when we talk about compass is only to talk about flat or green areas. Of course, that the areas where it is the easiest to lose directions. But I would also highlight that parallel mistakes (the most common mistake among elite orienteers?) can almost happen everywhere and the only way to avoid them with efficiency is good compass abilities.

Staying into the tunnel



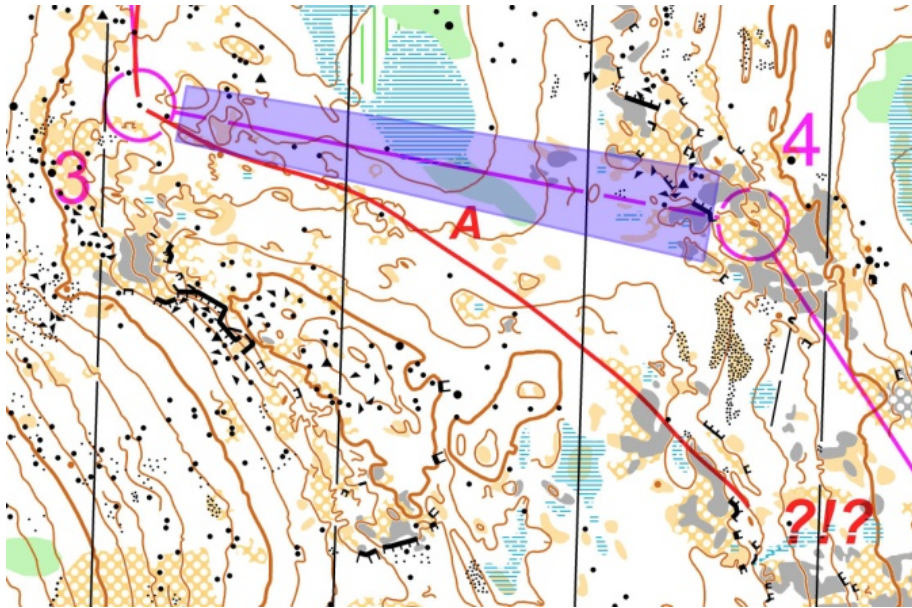
With this map extract, you can easily see that, for a short leg, 90% of the work is already done if you run with an accurate direction. And if you check your compass regularly, it will apply to your whole performance as you will always stay in a narrow tunnel, making the range of possible mistake rather small. Thus, at any time, you should now in which precise direction you are running. Especially nowadays, where the position of the features in the terrain are more and more in their correct location on the map due to the new mapping methods (i.e. lazer curving, gps, etc).

Let's now have a look to some example in O'ringen 2013 terrains. I guess that when you thought about Boden, you mostly imagine those steep slopes and you may rather think that compass won't be really precious. In fact, it is the opposite.



Here is a leg of a course I ran with the students of Älvsbyn last autumn. I suspect the course setters of O'ringen to use a lot this trick: leaving a detailed area, crossing a flatter hill top and going down to pick a tricky control. My execution for this leg was pretty bad when I didn't properly check the direction on the middle part of the leg, and I ended too far on the right. I relocated quickly because luckily no feature was really looking the same in the area I was, but I could have lost a lot more time.

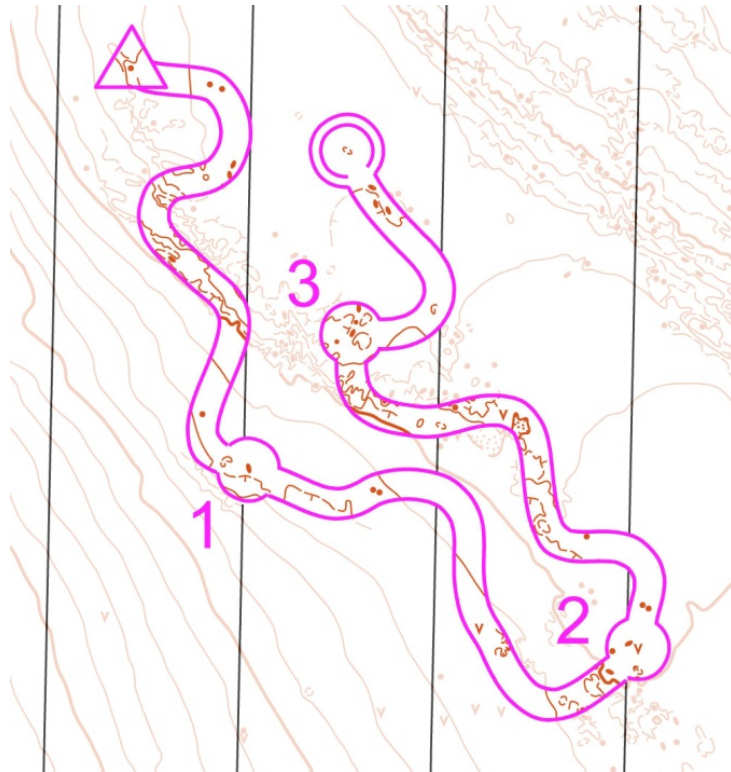
Let's now have a look to a situation where you can definitely lost a lot more time indeed:



Again here, the whole execution is very much dependant on how you handle the middle part of the leg. If you don't properly check your direction when you pass around the "A" area, there is a big chance to start to deviate, little by little, and break the "tunnel". And finally find yourself in an area where your mind will have no difficulty to make everything coincide with where you were expecting to be.

The better your habits are, the better they'll be in pressure situation

I now realize that I have been talking a lot, but not been giving much advises to improve your compass skills. Well, may be because there is, unfortunately, no real recipe. At the beginning, I think you have to force you to have a glimpse at your compass about every 3-5 times you look at your map, meaning you don't spend more than 20-30 seconds without looking at your compass. Slowly, it will become a routine and you won't have to invest energy on this anymore.



But if you want to accelerate the process, you should consider including regularly “corridor” exercise in your training. The goal is to stay inside the corridor of course. But to get the best of it, the corridor has to be as narrow as possible to show just few details (map with only contours works best then), with several bends. You will definitely need to rely on your compass to complete the training. This is my favorite one and the best way I found to keep my compass abilities to an acceptable level.

A hot knife trough the butter!

There is a last point why compass is so important in orienteering and especially in a multiday event like O’ringen. No matter who you are, no matter how good athlete you are, I have always believed that everyone has a limited amount of focus to invest for a race. You simply can’t maintain a very high focus from start to finish, even if the race would last only five minutes. Thus, the key is to be able to understand the dynamic of the race and be totally concentrated when it really matters, like when you are attacking a control in a very detailed area. Your compass is also there to help you to save some mental energy, time to time, while cutting through the terrain like a hot knife through butter!

Thierry Gueorgiou – April 2013