

Czechia Tour 2023 – Hebe Darwin

On Saturday the 12th of August, I was thrilled to be one of 19 juniors heading to a weeklong training camp in the Jizera Mountains in Czechia. I was on a direct flight from Stansted to Prague, at a civilised time of day, and the excitement began at my house as five of us piled into one car to limit our exposure to the airport's extortionate parking charges. We were staying in an orienteering hostel in Potkavarna u Havrana, in the north of the country – a place with an impressive orienteering lineage. The hostel hosted the Varsity match this year and have provided a base for training for many different national squads throughout their history.

We had five days of training and one rest day, and since most of us had been at the Scottish 6-days just a few weeks' beforehand, we knew how much energy we'd need. What I hadn't anticipated was just how different the terrain would be from anything I've encountered before in Scotland, the Lake District or Wales. Oh, and what it would look like at 11pm on a (shadowed) night run. It was an amazing trip and I learned so much.

Day 1 Bramberk

Bramberk is an area of mountainous forest, with lots of boulder and tree details – well known by the locals for its cross-country skiing (in spite of the trees!) and orienteering courses. How did the coaches immediately start to build team morale? Cool T-shirts, with names on, in case you don't know anyone, a communal warm-up jog, and a photo opportunity!



The three courses that morning were called by the Czech translations of Boulders, Trees, and Slopes. They summed up the area, really. I learned how to see what was mapped and what wasn't, when there were so many trees and boulders to choose from. A 'man-made water feature' was actually just a manhole cover... Hmm – details are important. The Slopes course was all about practising running on rocky terrain. After lunch, we had our first relay. Many of the training sessions were an imaginative mixture of relay legs and individual legs. We kept having different pairings and learning from each other. The first day's relay was focussed on trying to follow a short straight-line route, regardless of the terrain. That evening, Ben Windsor and Paul Pruzina told us that you have to strengthen your entire body in order to increase your speed and stamina

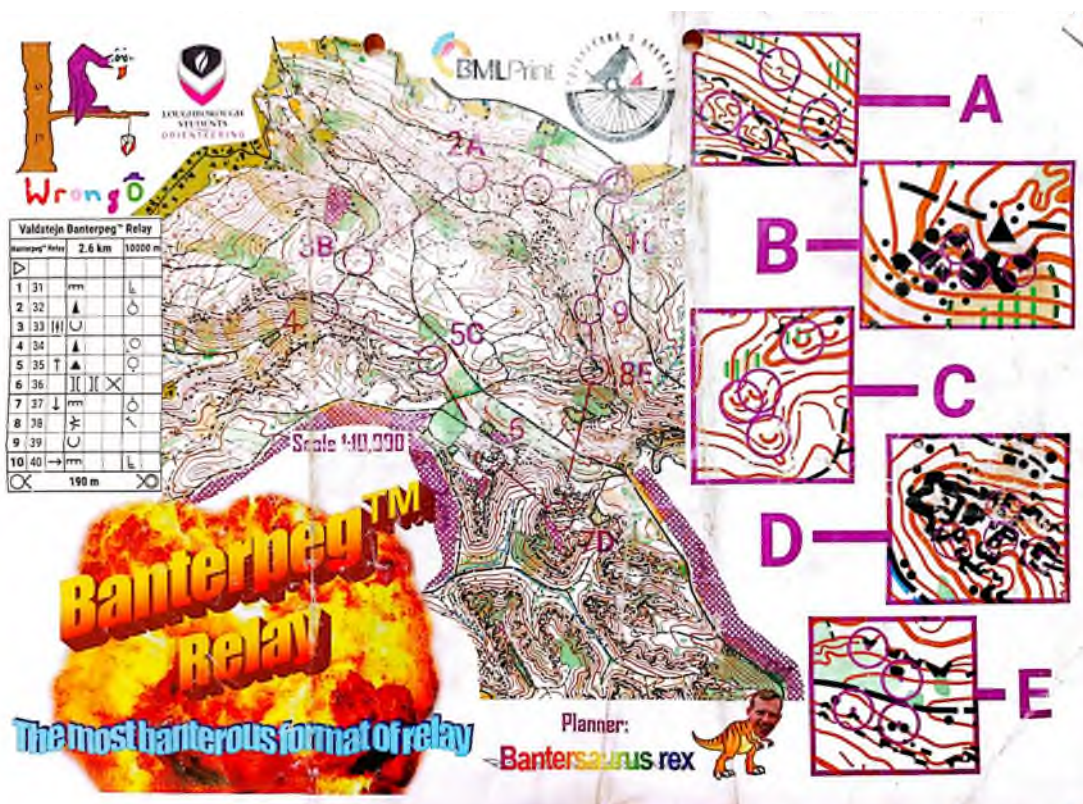
when running over rough terrain. More core training in the diary, then. Thank goodness for BBC I-player as an accompaniment.

Oh, there was another skill that I got much better at over the trip: volleyball, including Czech volleyball, in which you're allowed to catch the ball. It featured in many evenings, as though the running wasn't enough. If you didn't want to do that, or it was too late in the evening, hanging out in the basement was chilled and calming.

Day 2 Valdstein

One of the 2018 World Cup races was held here. I can see why. The slopes were very, very steep (steeper than any I've encountered in the UK), and there were so many cliffs and sandstone pillars! It was an ideal place to understand the value of simplifying your route and identifying the exact location of the control in the control circle. It also helped me to get comfortable with steepness, and to drum home the idea that the longer, flatter route is often better than the shorter, steeper route. That lesson really helped me during the rest of the week. Again, our exercises were a great mix of individual legs and meeting up with other juniors to compare notes before heading off again. It wasn't only the birds that were singing loudly as some of us made our way to lunch that day...

The afternoon's exercise was a Banterpeg™ relay. This is an invention to give variety to each person's route, while having a core circuit that everyone completes. I don't want to reveal all the fun of the event but I was pleased with my strategy of which legs to prioritise. The memorable thing for me was on one of the compulsory circuit: leg 8 to 9. The only 'sensible' way to get to it was to go down 10 contours (5m contours), each of which were only 1mm apart (if that!) on the 1:10000 map. That was a very scary descent; at one point, it looked like the ground just dropped off. I used the best tactic for those scared of heights: bum-slide to a tree...It worked! The rest of the course was just running on bearings – a piece of cake after some of the earlier terrain.



After the mayhem of the relay, we got to swim in Jablonec lake, which was really fun, as there was a pontoon that most people swam to and jumped off. That evening, we were meant to have a talk from Czech national team member, Milos Nykodym, but sadly he was ill, so we just played more volleyball and spent a long time talking in the basement.

Day 3 Kalich, then river swim, then Night-O in Slovanka (next to the hostel)

Day 3 was structured differently, as we had the Night-O in the night (what a surprise(!)). We trained in the morning at Kalich. This was more of a Sandstone City area. We did a warm-up run around a line course – fitting through small gaps in the rocks and going through gorge-like structures. Appropriately, someone saw a snake on the line course!

In the afternoon, we went sight-seeing as a group around the sandstone pillars and caves. We climbed onto the top of some of the rocks – from where we could almost see into Poland. We then went into the caves below the sandstone towers, before walking down into Mala Skala town and swimming in the river, sliding down the rocky weir, and cooling off with ice creams. In the evening, we got a talk from ex-JWOC Gold medallist, Pavel Kubat, who planned the World Cup in Czechia that was 2 weeks before we arrived. It was very interesting hearing about how he needed to work out different routes the athletes would take – and how correct his predictions were.

Night-O extraordinaire

I've never done a proper night-O, despite pestering my parents repeatedly, so I elected to go for the long course, 6km as the crow flies, but shadowed, just in case anything went wrong. I started first at 8.45pm and immediately messed up #1. I ran straight into the open just off the path and took a good half-minute to work out what had happened. That was quite embarrassing! After that, I got my head straight and got to business. The controls had a bit of hi-vis tape on them, so they reflected our headtorches very well.



I had a better stretch of navigation for a while and, in contrast to the forest, the views from the road onto the surrounding villages and as far as Jablonec were beautiful! But the most important lesson I learnt in the night-O is that 'roughly' is not good enough – neither for bearings nor for features. For instance, well into the event, I heard a stream trickling by, so, thinking that it was the one that would lead me to my control, I followed it. I then got in a fight with some 'dark green' which was not clever. At night, the bushes definitely have the upper hand – and it wasn't the right

stream. I lost 10 minutes finding my control that leg. Thanks to some help from Mairi, my shadow, I stuck with the course and, after almost 3 hours, we run down the open fields to the cheers of everyone waiting at the hostel. It was a memorable night!

Day Off – Forest micr-O then a rest

The next day was a rest day, thankfully, and we spend the morning doing a Forest Micr-O sprint. Somehow, I ran this well; I do like a sprint event. Afterwards, we went to the water park to slide down some slides, and to the shops; to shop! As the weather had been unremittingly hot for the week, the water park was really good fun and lots of other people thought so too. It was filled to capacity.

Day 4 Supi Hora

Supi Hora is another steep sandstone area. We used it for long-leg practice, walking the route to practise contouring round the edges of the cliffs, then I did a star course before lunch. The afternoon had a 'vampire' course. This is a neat variation on the old game of 'tag'. Some runners did a score course with old-fashioned control cards while others had to steal them from the innocent victims. Lying in wait proved a better strategy for Hebe-the-vampire than trying to run and find people. I know what to do at Laserquest in future...

After supper, we were encouraged to think about a pre-race plan for the Middles Tour Champs the next day. Volleyball was less popular that night for some reason... My aims were to work with the contours, check the control descriptions and simplify the map... Easy, really!

Day 5 Middle Course Tour Champs - Drabovna

OK, not so easy after all. I went up the wrong re-entrant to one control, got caught at the top of a crag rather than the bottom for the next; spent 4 minutes 10m away from a control without finding it; and finally, had to literally scramble up a crag to find another one. It seems like my Middles Course is staying put for now.



After the Middles, we went to do some downhill-O courses on Slovanka, where some people got stung by some wasps. The nest had fallen out of a tree on to the path, and the wasps weren't happy about it. The antidote? Swimming and shopping before our post-race analysis of the Middle Champs.

Day 6 – Long Tour Champs – Bukova Hora

So, the Long Tour Champs mostly went a lot better than the Middles. My bearings were OK to start with and I went cautiously at times. Then the wasps returned! Two of them were lying in wait for me, I'm sure, and stung me just above the ankle. I ran! Then I tried to get a grip of myself and ignore my ballooning leg. I'm pretty happy with how I finished, all things considered. I really hate wasps... Anti-histamine will be in my luggage in future.

Yet another micr-O at the hostel in the afternoon; we just couldn't get enough of them. We finished off our week with a BBQ around a campfire with the Tour Champs medals being awarded. We then did some karaoke with the coaches providing the music, and then everyone stayed up for a long time because none of us could get to sleep after such a wonderful week.

Day 7 – the return journey

I set an alarm for 5:00am but actually woke up at 5:50, having slept through it. I had only 10 minutes to get ready to leave Potkavarna and yet somehow I made it to the car in time. I was coolly having breakfast in Prague airport as I met up with my mum. We then had a whole day of crowded trains, travelling from Prague to Stuttgart, where we were tourists for a couple of days before our onward travel. I was happily exhausted for a few days.

Overall, I loved the tour and I would recommend it to any junior as a target because it is an amazing experience. I had so much fun with everyone and learned so much from the areas. There's nowhere like it in the UK so it was eye opening, and it was an amazing experience. I really hope that I will be able to get into the Stockholm tour next year and enjoy that just as much.