

Stockholm 2015 by Ella Gilbert

In August I spent 12 hectic days training and racing in Scandinavia. It was my first time orienteering outside of Britain, and a huge learning curve for me. The tour was based at OK Ravinen's club hut, situated just outside Stockholm.

Tuesday 11th: Navigating from Arlanda airport to the OK Ravinen club hut in Hellasgården was the toughest challenge of the day! My first impression of the hut itself was it was very much like a scout hut. Other juniors arrived throughout the day, and once night had fallen, we went out on a group run with head torches and maps. Although night-o is not something I enjoy, it was good to get a taste of Swedish terrain.

Wednesday 12th: The previous evening OK Ravinen had run a training event, and on the morning we travelled over to train on the same course. I was pretty apprehensive when I started, and can't say my performance was up to much. The area didn't feel hugely different to one in Scotland or the lake district - a bit vaguer with fewer obvious features. It was much trickier underfoot, and there were noticeable differences in the way features were mapped, which continually confused me. I wasn't able to pick up the intricate detail needed to hit controls, and more often than not just couldn't see a plan.

Once we'd finished, the group headed straight to our first race - the Melkers Minne Relay. It's a junior relay, and after my first session on Swedish terrain I was really nervous. I feel the pressure in relays at the best of times, let alone on unfamiliar terrain. I was first leg runner, in a mass start of 2 (the second runner being the other team entered from our group!). I started off well, but #7 ended up being one of the worst controls of my trip. Apart from this I was quite happy with how I ran, but unfortunately the damage had been done.

Thursday 13th: On the morning we did a 3km time trial at a local athletics track. While it was interesting to see my pace compared to the other girls (I was the 3rd fastest) it was very tiring. Still, I enjoyed it, and directly after we went to run on some contour-only maps in the surrounding area. I still struggled with getting my head in gear, and despite a good first few controls, the rest were rubbish.

In the evening we went to our first OK Ravinen training event. There were at least 60 people taking part, with a really good atmosphere. It was one of the funnest events of the week, and really exhilarating. The format was a star relay, with two runners in a team. One went to the odd numbered controls, the other to even. I was paired with a Swedish girl, and although we didn't do that well overall, it was an awesome, fast paced little race. The only downer was the large hill I had to run up everytime I set out to do my control - my legs were dead by the end!

Friday 14th: The next day we headed out to an area called Orminge. I ran 3 courses, two control picks and a slightly longer one. I was much happier with my navigation, picking out features a lot better and really feeling more confident in the terrain. After a quick lunch we went swimming in a beautiful lake, jumping off the cliffs which surrounded the water and sunbathing.

Saturday 15th: This was the first individual race of the tour. Despite noticing and improvement in my navigation at Orminge, I was apprehensive. The day was one of the hottest of the whole tour, so

sitting around waiting for my start was more a matter of staying cool. Despite being a relatively small event, there was commentary, catering, and outdoor showers that had been erected especially for the event.

I started my first control extremely carefully, double checking at every path junction until I had to head into the forest. Luckily I nailed my control, which gave me more confidence. For the next part of the course I kept totally focused, making sure I had a rock solid plan, and really working hard to make sure I was picking out the small, easy to miss features I had to. It was exhausting, but I got round cleanly. My time was still slow, with so many hesitations and conservative route choices, but I was delighted to get round without too much trouble.

Sunday 16th: The second race of the weekend took place on the same area, but was a long distance, with 1:15000 maps. After a long walk to the start, I picked up my map and went to orientate it, only to find my compass wasn't on my thumb. After a frantic search around the start lanes, I couldn't find it anyway, so decided to give the course a go without it. It was useless, and I didn't even find the first control. I headed back the way I'd come, hoping to spot my compass. When I got back, I discovered I'd just left it in my rucksack, which made for an embarrassing story. I was extremely paranoid for the rest of the week about checking I had it!

Monday 17th: Halfway through! We ran a middle distance with SI that the coaches had set up, and then after a quick break did it again. My first run was terrible. The first half I just had no idea how to come up with a plan - the contours were so confusing - and the second half I couldn't seem to focus and made lots of errors, most small but some very large. Given the aim was to beat our previous time, I reckoned I'd be able to do that walking. However I never got the chance to give it a go, because 2 controls in I found one of the other juniors who'd badly sprained her ankle, and helped her back to the finish.

After this we did a contour only clock relay, where we had to hang the controls. Even the coaches admitted it was extremely difficult, and nobody actually finished the entire course due to running out of time. I went out second, and took a while to find the control hung by my teammate (he was right, I was wrong!) and then took extra special care to get mine in the right place. By the time I got back, my teammate had gone out, convinced I was still looking for his control. It was one of the hardest exercises of the week - the legs were long and having the contour-only map made it even trickier. I apparently hung all my controls in the right place, which was a plus!

I'd say that Monday marked a turning point in the week. I was halfway through the tour, and didn't feel like I'd made any improvement. The morning exercise had been a disaster, and Sunday had been off the scale in terms of awfulness. I had a long chat with one of the coaches, which really helped me order things in my mind, and from then on I went into each day with a plan. It really helped, and I felt from Monday onwards I began making small improvements.

In the evening, a few of us stupidly decided to join in OK Ravinen's core training. I was still amazed by how much the club organised, and it was interesting to see some new core exercises. Gustav Bergman also attended (bronze medal at the WOC 2013 middle distance) which was our first sighting of a 'famous' orienteer!

Tuesday 18th: On Tuesday we went to an interesting little area, and did a middle distance course and then planned our own course from 12 or so controls the coaches put out. The aim of planning our own course was to design it so that a particular skill could be practised. After analysing my previous results, I'd decided that simplification was basically where I let myself down. I was getting bogged down in all the details, when I really needed to pick out a few key features. I also needed to focus more on knowing what I was going to see, not making the map fit as I ran. I tried to plan a course with legs across vague areas, where I'd really have to focus on my plan and spotting the features I'd picked out.

I thought about simplification on both of the courses I did, and found it really helped. Though it wasn't perfect, and I was still hesitant and under confident, I really felt in contact with the map, and far more confident in my plans. It was definitely the 'breakthrough' day for me.

In the evening we attended another Stockholm-based club's training event. In theory it was a 7.3km course, but only the craziest boys decided to do the whole thing. I did 11 controls, focusing on what I'd been doing in the morning. It was an incredibly complicated, intricate area, but even when I wasn't hitting the checkpoints perfectly, I felt in control. I got shadowed for the second half, which definitely tested me, since I hate the pressure of being watched! It was a good experience to have to focus, despite the distraction, and I got some positive comments despite seriously messing up a couple of controls.

Wednesday 19th: This was a relative rest day, compared to what we'd been doing, since we ran a local event. These are known as Luffarligan's. It was the same area that we'd run on the very first night, and the courses planned by one of the juniors on the tour. We went out in pairs to hang the controls, which were then checked by a coach (I wonder if he ever found mine!). About 160 people turned up, and it was very informal and fun. I ran the shortest course, but got sloppy and kept making mistakes because I wasn't concentrating hard enough. Swedish terrain punishes you if you switch off for one second.

In the evening we went to a training event for the Swedish national championships. The boys had a 9km mass start (yikes!) and luckily the girls only had a 5km middle distance race. I had all the right principles on my first control, but my direction was a little off, which meant I had to relocate, and the same thing happened on the 3rd control. After that however, I really got into it and raced round, feeling really confident in my navigation, and understanding the contours well. The terrain was more similar to what we have at home, with obvious hills standing alone instead of many intricate knolls which is what most Swedish terrain seems to be like. Despite the easier terrain and my early mistakes, I was very happy with my performance.

Thursday 20th: In the morning we went back to an area we'd used on Tuesday evening, and did a training session called a 'fox hunt'. The principle is there's a circular loop made of paths, which a coach walks around with a control. It's like a score, with controls either side of the loop, but after every control you punch, you have to find the coach and punch their control, and then go to the other side of the path. We had 40 minutes to get as many as possible, and the moving control only went around the loop twice.

It was surprisingly difficult to judge where the moving control would be, and towards to end I found I'd run out of controls and had to go to a control miles away since I'd already visited the closer checkpoints. Because there were quite a few people, it was all too easy to end up following people, but I tried to go my own way and not end up in a train. It was really physical, especially chasing after the moving control!

Reasonably happy with how I'd done, we went back to the club hut (after a swim!) and got a talk from Ralph Street, who'd joined us the night before. He talked about his progression (going from not-so-brilliant junior to multiple WOC runner), and answered questions on how he prepared for races (he likes to stay relaxed, and not think about his race until he's in the start lanes) and why he dyed his hair blonde (no definitive answer here!). The girls had to leave halfway through to do some weight training, which the boys had done earlier in the week. It was an interesting session, mainly involving squatting with weights. I'll be incorporating some of it into my weekly sessions. When we got back, we had a quick breather and then had to attend an OK Ravinen interval session. It was on terrain (in the forest opposite the hut) and was three minutes on, two minutes off. Juniors were supposed to do 6 reps, but I stopped after 4 because I didn't want to completely kill myself. It was really fun - I love running in terrain - and much more interesting than the intervals I do at home on an industrial estate!

In the evening I found I was the best girl in the fox hunt! Yay! I now have the marvelous prize of a small bowl in exchange for my efforts.

Friday 21st: I'd been looking forward to Friday pretty much since the tour started for two reasons. One, sprint training! And two, Gronalund. In the morning we went to a school, and were sorted into teams of two for mixed sprint relay training. Each runner had 3 loops to do, handing over to their partner after every loop. I stayed with the pack on my first loop, which I didn't enjoy much. Mainly because I wasn't focused on my navigation in an attempt to keep up, but also because over half the course was in forest, and I hate forest sprints with a passion. The second loop I was on my own, and it was completely urban, so I really enjoyed it, and the same went for the third. Overall a good morning.

In the afternoon we went to Gronalund, a theme park in Stockholm. I've not really been on any big rollercoasters, so after a few 'warm up' rides (this was adrenaline training after all) the people who had been last year conducted me to the biggest ride. I really enjoyed it, though my favourite was one where you sat in a ring around a tower, and then shot up, before dropping all the way back down. It was awesome! I enjoyed every minute, and it was nice to have an afternoon off without any pressure.

Saturday 22nd: The weekend saw the start of another pair of races. This was a bigger event than the previous weekend, which was good, especially for the better people in our group who got to compete against the best Swedes. It wasn't very encouraging to see the reactions of the people who had attended the tour last year when they heard where the race was being held. Apparently it was the hardest area they'd been on, and many tales of getting horrifically lost were told. Because of this I went into the race promising to take it as slowly as necessary to get round cleanly.

When I picked up the map, I have to admit I panicked. It looked awful. We were on 1:15000 again, and the contours were just tiny blurred lines, with no obvious features at all. I found the first control by pure

luck, still wondering how I was actually going to get round. I took ultra conservative routes from then on, but hit them fairly well, which boosted my confidence a bit. #6 was a massive leg, which I took the paths on until the last 400m. I got the my AP perfectly, but then my direction was off. I finally went back to my AP, realised my problem and nailed the control. In some ways I'm most pleased with this control, because it was so close to being really good.

I was horrendously slow the whole way round, and my mistakes on #6 made me even slower. But after that first control, I felt much more confident - even when I didn't hit the control perfectly, I knew roughly where I was. I focused on finishing my plan (I have a habit of only planning half of a long leg, and making the other half up) and picking out really obvious attack points. I felt like I was close to understanding how to navigate on Swedish terrain. On the way to the very last control before the finish, I jumped over a ditch, and managed to smash into a dead branch which was sticking out from a pine tree. Luckily for me, it hit just above my eyebrow, and while it hurt I didn't think much of it until I felt blood pouring into my eye. Apparently I made quite a sight on the run in, with half my face covered in blood! I made my first ever trip to first aid, and got cleaned up. The cut was disappointingly small, but I did have an awesome bandage for the rest of the tour, and regaled people with my war story.

In the evening we had a 3 course 'date night' and the tour awards. I won most improved (perhaps an acknowledgement to how bad I was when I first arrived!) and Harry Potter look-alike (thanks to my injury, although as my brother pointed out it's on the wrong side).

Sunday 23rd: It was hard to believe we were on the last day. We had a great pre-race motivational talk from Tamsin Moran (one of our coaches) who read out Claire Ward's speech from JWOC the previous year. It helped me focus myself ('spend seconds to save minutes' was the gist of it) and despite yesterday being, on paper, an appalling run, I felt so much more confident in my navigation and really was motivated to focus 100% and end the tour on a high.

The race was another middle, meaning 1:10000 which I'm much more at home on. I put a lot of effort into every leg, really making sure I picked out the best attack point I could, and having a picture of what I would see on the leg. I did make a couple of mistakes, but they were unimportant in the great scheme of things. I was more relieved than anything when I finished. Firstly I finally felt like I could navigate, and secondly I had plenty of time to hitchhike to the nearest station, and get to the airport in time to catch my flight!

I loved the tour. There's an amazing sense of camaraderie, and it's such good fun. I did feel very pressured and stressed a lot of the time however. My navigation wasn't good enough, and constantly let me down, which meant I was always worried about getting back in time (using public transport meant we were often limited time wise) and felt the eyes of the coaches constantly assessing me (and probably wondering why I was there!). I wish I'd orienteered abroad before, because I learnt so much there, and now that I've ventured outside of Britain, I will definitely be going back as soon as I can. I haven't raced since I got back, but I'm really looking forward to doing so, and seeing how I can apply what I learnt over in Stockholm to race's back here.

Analysing our orienteering was a big part of what we did, and though I do cursory analysis after races, I've been going over and over my maps since I got back, seeing what I did well and what I did badly,

and it's given me a real insight into my navigation, and how it changed over the week. I feel I understand my strengths and weaknesses a lot better.

Some of the other juniors on tour had great results in the races, which was good to see, and they won some pretty impressive prizes (I myself won some duvet covers for my performance in the Minnes Melker relay - my team was 2/2).

Things other than the orienteering were what made the tour fun. Gronalund was amazing, and one night we went to watch one of our coaches run in Midnattsloppet, a 10km race held at night in Stockholm with over 30,000 participants. Thanks to our cheering, Tom got a new PB!

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