

Orienteering: A Brief History

International History

This story has been adapted from an original from the International Orienteering Federation (IOF) office in Helsinki using sources listed below. It is correct to the best of the author's knowledge.

Just how old is orienteering? It's not easy to be definite, but it is known that the first public event took place near Oslo, Norway on 31 October 1897. So that can be considered as the birth of orienteering and the sport is now over a century old.

Prior to 1897, orienteering had been practised as a military exercise. In 1886 the word "orienteering" was used for the first time to mean crossing unknown terrain with the aid of a map and compass. In 1895 competitions were held by the military in Stockholm and in Oslo.

Orienteering developed in the Nordic countries as a sport in its own right, but in its early days it was mainly for adult men. After the First World War, a Swede Major Ernst Killander, a youth and scout leader turned to orienteering in an effort to revive the fading enthusiasm of young people for athletics. His idea was such a success that within a few years it had become a major sport.

The first large scale orienteering meet was organized in 1918 south of Stockholm and was attended by 220 athletes. Killander continued to develop the rules and principles of the sport, and today is widely regarded throughout Scandinavia as the "Father of Orienteering."

The first women's competition was organised in Göteborg, Sweden, in 1925. The first race for women competitors in Hungary was also run in 1925.

The sport gained popularity with the development of more reliable compasses in the 1930s. The first international competition took place in 1932 between teams from Norway and Sweden. By 1934, over a quarter million Swedes were actively participating in the sport, and orienteering had spread to Finland, Switzerland, the Soviet Union and Hungary. The Swedish national orienteering society, Svenska Orienteringsförbundet, the first national orienteering society, was founded in 1936.

The Second World War had an adverse impact on the growth of the sport but after a break during the war, a Nordic body for cooperation, NORD, was founded. The Norwegians and Swedes began producing new multi-colour maps designed specifically for orienteering in the 1950s. An international conference was held in Sweden in 1959 with delegations from 12 countries: Austria, Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, DDR (East Germany), Hungary, Switzerland, West Germany, Yugoslavia and the four Nordic countries. In May 1961 the International Orienteering Federation (IOF) was founded at a meeting in Denmark. By 1969, the IOF would represent 16 countries, including the first two non-European member societies representing Japan and Canada.

World championships were held biannually from 1961 to 2003, and are now held every year. The largest annual individual orienteering meet, O-Ringen, has been held since 1965 and

attracts 15,000 – 25,000 athletes to compete in the Swedish forests. There are new variations of the sport, including ski orienteering, mountain bike orienteering, trail orienteering, and radio orienteering that attract diverse communities of athletes.

As of September 2006, the IOF comprised 67 national federations. The youngest members include Mongolia and Somalia.

Australian History

The first events in Australia were held by the South Australian Orienteering club, predominantly in the Mount Lofty Ranges between 1955 and 1960. The Estonian, Jess Jarver is generally accepted as the "Father of Orienteering" in Australia having brought his experiences over from Europe. These early events even featured State Championships and featured extensively in Adelaide's Advertiser newspaper. In 1970 the Orienteering Federation of Australia was formed and joined the IOF in 1973.

Australia was first represented at the World Orienteering Championships by Rod Dominish in 1972 in Czechoslovakia. The first World Orienteering Championship held outside of Europe was based around Bendigo, Victoria in 1985. The first Australian to win a World Orienteering Championship was Hanny Allston in the 2006 women's sprint distance race held in Denmark.

In 2004, Australian Adrian Jackson won the middle distance race of World Mountain Bike Orienteering (MTBO) Championships. This was also the first time the World MTBO Championships were held outside of Europe.

Timeline: A Brief History of Orienteering

Year		Description
1886	HISTORY	The term 'Orienteering' was being used by the military to mean crossing unknown territory with the aid of a map and compass
1897	COMPETITION	31st October - The world's first public orienteering competition held in Norway.
1899	COMPETITION	6th February - The world's first ski-orienteering competition held in Norway.
1919	HISTORY	Major Ernst Killander, President of the Stockholm Amateur Athletic Association, devised a cross-country competition where runners not only ran a course but had to choose their own routes using a map and compass.
1922	COMPETITION	The first night orienteering event was held near Stockholm, Sweden.
1923	COMPETITION	The first regional championships held in Sweden.
1925	COMPETITION	The first ladies events held in Gothenburg, Sweden and Hungary.
1927	HISTORY	A District Relay Championship was organised in Uppsala. Eric Tobe, a member of the winning team, went on to become the first President of the International Orienteering Federation when it was set up in 1961.
1932	COMPETITION	The first international competition, held near Oslo, Sweden defeated Norway.
1936	MEMBER	Establishment of Swedish Federation, SOFT (Svenska Orienteringsförbundet).
1941	COMPETITION	10th November - The first orienteering events in North America.
1945	HISTORY	The first orienteering magazine produced in Finland named Suunnistaja.
1946	MEMBER	The Nordic Committee for Orienteering (NOR, SWE, FIN & DEN), a pre-cursor for

Year		Description
		the IOF was formed.
1948	MAPPING	The first maps drawn especially for orienteering in Norway.
1949	HISTORY	The Swedish Orienteering Association held an international conference in Sandviken in which 11 nations took part.
1950	MAPPING	30th April - The first especially made colour map used for orienteering competition in Norway.
1955	COMPETITION	First competition reportedly held in Australia, in South Australia.
1960	COMPETITION	An open international competition held outside Stockholm in 1960 attracted seven nations.
1961	MEMBER	The International Orienteering Federation was formed.
1962	COMPETITION	The first European Championships held in Norway.
1966	COMPETITION	The first World Championships held in Finland.
1969	MEMBER	IOF member countries now number 16 with first countries outside Europe - Japan and Canada joining.
1970	MEMBER	Orienteering Federation of Australia (OFA) was formed.
1973	MEMBER	Australia, New Zealand and USA join the IOF.
	MEMBER	Orienteering Association of Tasmania formed.
1974	MEMBER	Orienteering Association of Western Australia formed.
1975	COMPETITION	First World Ski Orienteering Championships held in Finland
1978	MAPPING	IOF-Symbols for the control descriptions used for the first time in Norway at the World Championships
1990	COMPETITION	The first Junior World Orienteering Championships (JWOC) held in Sweden.
1994	MAPPING	Electronic punching used for the first time at a World Cup event in Norway.
	COMPETITION	The first official World Masters Orienteering Championships held in Czechoslovakia.
1998	HISTORY	Ski-orienteering held at the Winter Olympics in Nagano, Japan.
1999	COMPETITION	The first World Mountain Bike Orienteering Championships held.
2004	COMPETITION	Australia wins its first gold medal in the World Mountain Bike Orienteering Championships. The event was held near Ballarat in Victoria, the first outside Europe.
2006	COMPETITION	First non-European wins a World Orienteering Championship (WOC). She is from Australia.

The above was collated using the following resources:

[International Orienteering Federation \(IOF\)](#)

[Orienteering History website](#)

[Dandenong Ranges Orienteering club](#)

[Wikipedia - Orienteering](#)