

European TrailO Cup, Daugavpis, Latvia and the World TrailO Championships 2017, Birstonas Lithuania

This summer I was selected as a Paralympic competitor for the British team to compete in the World Trail Orienteering Championships, which was held in Lithuania, preceded by a round of the European Trail Orienteering CUP (ECTO) In Latvia the weekend before the World Champs was due to begin. Many of you will know that since April, in addition to the various ailments which had got me reclassified as a Paralympic competitor last year, I'd been severely incapacitated by a trapped nerve in my lower back and the sciatica which developed, and although things had improved, I was still walking with a pronounced limp and I was a little worried whether I was going to be able to get round what were advertised as quite long courses.

Most of the GB TrailO team plus the Team Manager flew into Kaunas airport in Lithuania on the morning of Friday July 7th, having had to get up at 4am to get to Luton airport in time for a 7.30 flight, met up with Tom Dobarra and Charles Bromley-Gardner, who had got there before us, split the group into two car loads, eventually picked up our hire car, and set off on the long drive over the border into Latvia. All went well until we crossed the border at which point we found that the main road was being dug up and reconstructed and a journey that should have taken us three hours on good roads took us nearly five on what were effectively one-way single track dirt roads controlled by traffic lights. As a result, our car load arrived rather late for the first competition and we had to rush to get round before it got dark.

This was unfortunate, because the competition was really good and very difficult and it would have been good to have had the time to do it properly, rather than rushing round ahead of the control collectors! Luckily it did not count for the European Cup itself.

Finally, we managed check into our hotel in Daugavpils at 9 o'clock only to discover that there was a big wedding party, that they had eaten all the food in the hotel restaurant, and we had to go downtown to get something to eat! The hotel recommended a restaurant and when we finally got there, we discovered that the rest of the British team, who were travelling in the other car, was already there. Eventually we got to bed after midnight. It had been a long day.

On the Saturday, we had a lie in before getting to the forest at midday in order to have our lunch before the PreO event began. Instructed by the officials about where they wanted us to park, we pulled neatly off the road onto the verge, only to find our car surrounded by furious insects: it appeared that we had inadvertently driven over a nest of wild bees. We fled back down the track until we found a bee free parking spot for lunch, returning to the assembly area half an hour later and parking in a safer spot.

The ECTO course was suitably tricky, being on a forested area of old sand dunes. Next year, the World Championships are being held in Latvia in similar forests around Daugavpils, so this was an important chance for competitors to become accustomed to Latvian TrailO, as well as a chance for the 2018 organising team to test their systems, including using SI boxes mounted on carousels rather than pin punching on control cards which is still usual for PreO (*see photo*). There are no separate Open and Para classes in ECTO and with most competitors for WTOC 2017 using the event as a warm up, there were almost 150 of us out in the forest. My back stood up pretty well to the strain but a score of 14 points and nine mistakes only left me in 110th place although most of the GB team



other than John Kewley and Tom Dobra struggled in the unfamiliar conditions.

There was another big wedding at the hotel and once again they had asked us to eat out, so it was down to the restaurant in town where we found ourselves eating with the entire GB contingent and also the Danish and Norwegian TrailO teams.

Sunday morning saw the TempO competition, unusually held in a forested area rather than the usual parkland, with six timed control stations each with four tasks: two minutes per station were allowed plus 30 seconds penalty for each incorrect answer.

I struggle with TempO at the best of times: most of the best competitors are under thirty and I'm too old for the game and take too long to answer, even if I get it right. So I wasn't too surprised to find myself well down the field. It was, I told myself, good practice for later in the week. But it was a good & well organised competition, with speedy electronic results processing.

After which, our car load set off rapidly back to Lithuania via scenic country roads avoiding the major roadworks, arriving at our splendid hotel in Birstonas, a pleasant spa town south of Kaunas in good time to be able to unpack and shower before dinner. The hotel was being used as the Event Centre for WTOC 2017 and most of the competitors were staying there.

WTOC Monday July 10th TempO Model day

Monday morning was taken up with admin – registration, accreditation etc, followed in the afternoon by a model event for the TempO competition. Model events are peculiar things. For the competitor, it's supposed to be an opportunity to see the type of terrain, the planning and mapping style being used for the main competition and for TempO, see the procedure being used for the timed controls. For the organisers, it's a chance for all the volunteers to practice their roles for the competitions proper during the rest of the week.

We knew that the Lithuanian organisation had depended largely on one man, who seemed to have done all the mapping, the planning, taken the entries etc. Now we had the first evidence of the problems that this approach can engender.

All the map segments at a TempO cluster are supposed to use the same map extract, identically rotated so that the maps presented to the competitor are correctly set. Unfortunately, today the maps had all been individually rotated. A small point, but disorientating for a competitor who is trying to solve the problems in the quickest possible time, and something that the Planner or his National Controller or both the IOF Advisor and his assistant should have picked up before the event. There is even a whole page in the IOF Technical Guidelines devoted to getting this right and why it is important! Sadly, this was the first of many instances over the week where this hadn't happened.

At the Team Officials' meeting, all the Team Managers were told that the same mistake had been made in all the maps to be used for the TempO event the following day and in all the maps for the timed controls in subsequent events. There was dissent in the ranks and the IOF Advisor promised that although there would not be time to rectify the error before the TempO, all the other timed control maps in the PreO would be corrected. It proved to be a false promise, but at least everyone now knew what to expect.

In the evening, we had the Opening ceremony, which was held in the grounds of our hotel. Many people will know how much I loathe these things, but in fact this was the one event of the week that the organisers

nailed. We had the usual round of speeches, but there were not too many of them and they were all short. There was as ever, the usual display of children’s folk dancing, but it was short and good, and the entertainment was provided by an excellent magician.

Tuesday July 11th TempO Qualifier & Finals Harmony Park, Vaizgaikiemis

The TempO competition took place at Harmony Park, an equestrian centre and country park with luxury hotel attached, about 30 mins drive away from Birstonas. Each nation is allowed to enter a team of 4, with two competitors in each heat, the best 18 from each heat going through to the final. I don’t make the TempO team, which this year was made up of the three Open competitors, Charles Bromley Gardner (BAOC/SARUM), Ian Ditchfield (MV) and John Kewley (MDOC), plus Tom Dobra (UBOC) selected just for the TempO, and also a candidate for the Relay team. Each heat had five Stations, each with five problems. It was a tough competition, with one station in particular causing problems, and only John Kewley qualified for the final, where he was the oldest competitor at 53 and duly finished last.



Between the heats and the Final, there was a public race, where all those competitors who didn’t get selected for their nation’s TempO team got to have a go. I actually had one of my better TempO days in this, although I still finished just below half way down the field, but at least I got 4 out of 5 correct on the really difficult cluster. *(The map extract shows the solution sheet for Station 5. The Green and Red answers are for the different heats, with differing answers for two different viewing points.)*

The Final began in sunshine but a spectacular thunderstorm soon enveloped us all, and I was reduced to hiding in the car and watching the results appear on the live online results feed which I could view on my phone via the hotel’s free wifi. The prizegiving took place with everyone hiding in the hotel’s large and impressive portico, so that only the medal winners on the podium and the flag raisers were exposed to the heavy and persistent rain. Two Norwegians took Gold and Silver with a Slovak in Bronze position. Martin Waaler, the Silver medallist was following his father Lars-Jacob who was World Champion in TempO in 2016 but this year could only finish in 19th place.

Wednesday July 12th PreO & Relay Model day

On the Wednesday, we had the model for the PreO & Relay courses. This revealed that the terrain would be a mixture of some woodland but mainly rough open terrain with lots of long range controls with flags on the rounded hillsides. There were many single trees which could be used for lining up to fix flag position, assuming that they were accurately mapped. The trouble was most were, but some definitely weren’t.

There was another problem too. This year we were using SI punching instead of pin punches & control cards, but instead of the punches being mounted in carousels as in Latvia, the boxes were all fixed to wooden trestles, FootO sprint race style, so that everyone could see what everyone else was punching. This was obviously totally unacceptable, and this was pointed out, forcefully, to the IOF Advisor during the event. Later that evening at the hotel, officials could be seen cutting up strips of polystyrene ceiling tiles to produce makeshift hoods to cover the trestles. This worked fine as long as you stood in front of the hood to punch, and provided they didn't blow away in the wind in exposed places, as they did on both days of the PreO.

Thursday July 13th PreO Day 1 The Open-Air Museum of Lithuania, Rumsiskes, Kaunas

The first day of the PreO was held at the Open-Air Museum of Lithuania, a collection of ancient farm buildings and village houses from all over the country, collected and rebuilt in a parkland setting similar to that at Singleton near Chichester. It was a spectacular setting for a PreO event but was marred by two major problems.

Firstly, the weather was awful. The competition had started half an hour late in light rain, which rapidly became heavier so that by the time I started, twenty minutes later, it was coming down in stair rods. This persisted, alternating with merely heavy rain, for the rest of the competition. Our course time allowed was 165 minutes and I needed almost every one of them to get round my course. I haven't got so wet at an event since the British Schools Champs that WIM hosted in 2007.

Secondly, the controlling was lax and there were several official complaints which then became official protests with teams paying the €50 fee. The jury was sent out onto the course to inspect and in the end, two of the twenty-one controls were voided, (most competitors felt it should have been three, possibly four), one because the map was a work of fiction at the control point, and one where there were three flags out at a cluster A-C, but the control descriptions showed A-B (two flags) and the trestle only had three boxes, A, B & Z. The protests of the two sites where compass and pacing or different sight lines using trees or the corners of building gave different answers were rejected by the jury. They also disqualified a Russian competitor for deliberately going out of bounds. Despite all this, the GB team had a fairly satisfactory day, with Charles Bromley Gardner in 11th place, only one point behind the leaders, and John Kewley 17th, whilst I was 19th in the Paralympic class.



The picture shows the writer (left), the boxed in SI units, (centre) a couple of ancient barns, and the rain.

Friday July 14th TrailO Relay The Capitals Golf Club, Pipiriškes

Friday was originally scheduled for the second day of the PreO, but a month before the event, the organisers had been forced to switch this to Saturday and hold the Relay on the Friday, because the new owners of the golf course where the relay was to be held claimed to be unaware that the previous owners had arranged for WTOC to use the course on the Saturday, and had arranged a for a golf tournament to be held over the weekend. Some PreO competitors, who were not involved in the relay, had already arranged to fly home on the Saturday and had to rearrange their travel arrangements were not happy about this.

The Relay day turned out to be a disaster from beginning to end, and a major embarrassment to IOF, although from reading the official report on their website you wouldn't know anything went wrong. Golf courses are often excellent areas for TrailO, and the spectacular Capitals course, one of only six golf courses in Lithuania, was in theory a superb venue, with the club house providing an excellent viewing area for spectators.

For a start, the organisers had been unable to put out the flags before the day of the competition, presumably because the golfers wouldn't let them. Competitors had had to get up early, breakfast at 07.00 with a 40-minute drive from the hotel to the course, in order for everyone to be in the quarantine tent for 08.45 before the scheduled start of the first leg at 9.00 am. But the flags weren't in place for a long time after that and the competition didn't get under way for the best part of two hours.

The relay course had 27 PreO controls, with the first leg runner doing any 9, before returning to base to hand over to the second leg runner, before doing two Tempo style timed controls. The second leg runner then chose another 9, leaving the third legs to do whatever was left, all in a total time of about four hours. The first leg was given a control card which they could punch the controls they had visited before handing it on to the next leg so they could see which controls were left: they were not allowed to write on the card, because it would be possible to pass messages (or answers) to their other team members.



Those supporting team members not selected for the Relay team like Ian Ditchfield and I, sat in the opulent club house watching the impending disaster slowly unfold in front of our eyes.

Once the first leg runners had returned and done their TempO controls they were able to talk to their team managers and supporters. It appeared that in their haste to put out the flags a number of them had been put in the wrong place without being corrected. In addition, the general opinion was that the map was not accurate in some areas, with single trees used for siting lines giving conflicting answers. Furthermore, there was one control with insufficient SI boxes on the trestle: a problem with three flags A-C, but only two boxes, A & B plus the Zero box. The second leg runners reported similar problems.

The third leg competitors, having been confined in quarantine in a fairly small marquee for four hours before they got out onto the course, then found that they were expected to return to a second, cramped quarantine in the golf pro's shop, before being called to do their TempO controls in full view of the spectators, in reverse order of finishing with the teams currently in the lead being the last to compete. In theory, this adds to the excitement of the event. In reality, it means a lot of hanging about for the third leg competitors whilst the necessary calculations are carried out for the order to be determined. Then they discovered they had an over-difficult and unfair control cluster, with two problems which could only be fairly solved by getting out of the chair and walking around, which of course you aren't allowed to do at timed controls.

So the end result was a lot of very unhappy, if not furious competitors. Lots of official complaints were lodged, and after competitors compared notes with each other (for example, the GBR team eventually didn't put in a protest after discovering that there were already identical protests from other nations) these were boiled down to no less than seven official protests. The results were not officially announced and the prizegiving ceremony was deferred to the following day.

Everyone departed for the hotel in high dudgeon except the poor jury members and their car loads. The jury got into a couple of golf buggies and set off to investigate, returning two and a half hours later to write their report. The jury members and their various car passengers got back to the hotel just before 22.00, which was a little late to be ordering and eating dinner, but fortunately the hotel was ready for us.



In the end, the jury confirmed the decision of the organiser to disqualify three teams, the Latvia and Poland Open class teams for writing on their control card (despite having been told not to at the Team Leaders' meeting), and the Russian Para team for taking a golf buggy (without permission) and driving onto the course to inspect some of the controls before the competition was declared over (understandable but against all the rules).

The jury also voided three controls for various faults. Unfortunately to add to their woes, the IOF advisor had managed to lose a further protest from Slovakia (maybe it blew away on the buggy?) which had it been considered would almost undoubtedly have been upheld and which would have further changed the medallists.

Eventually, in the Paralympic class, Ukraine were declared the winners, followed by the Czech Republic and Norway. In the open class, the Winners were Slovenia, followed by Norway in Silver and the Czech Republic took Bronze, a second and a half ahead of the Slovak team in 4th who were a second ahead of the Finns in 5th place.

The Norwegian team's second leg runner, Sigurd Daehli, made orienteering history. Having won World Championship medals in SkiO and FootO in previous decades, he became the first orienteer to achieve a championship medal in three separate disciplines. There is no truth in the rumour that he is in training for next year's MTBO!

This year was also notable for the rise of the central European nations and the eclipse of Sweden who finished 10th.

As for the British team of Tom Dobra, Charles Bromley Gardner (who was affected by illness) & John Kewley, they endured a difficult day, before eventually finishing in 14th place.

But it seems unlikely this will be the end of the matter with appeals to the IOF over the result probable. Also as a result of all this, two members of the Slovenian team withdrew from the second round of the PreO the following day in protest.

The TrailO relay is a relatively new event on the WTOC stage, but in the two years since it became part of the official program, plus the two demonstration events which preceded it, the event organisation has varied between shambolic, as this year, and over long and inefficient and the IOF needs to get a grip on things which this year reflected very badly on both the Lithuanian organisers and the IOF appointed advisors, and which left an experienced jury in an impossible situation in trying to resolve so many legitimate protests.

The high entry fees for the event, and the extra day's costs for food and accommodation, which in many cases come out of the competitor's own pockets, demand a higher level of attention to detail than we had at this year's event.

Saturday July 15th PreO Day 2, Aukštadvaris, Lithuania

The second PreO course, held on the Saturday, in a mixture of woodland and rough open terrain near a go kart track at Aukštadvaris, was the final day of what had been an eventful week. Thankfully the sun shone, the course was generally excellent and testing, and after the adventures of the previous day's relay, the controls appeared to be largely in the right place and although the penultimate control was definitely 'dodgy', for once there were no official protests at the end of the competition.

The British team had a very satisfactory day overall. In the Open class, Charles Bromley Gardner, still unwell but hanging in there, held on well to finish in 10th place, one of six competitors with 43 points and the best GBR placing in the Open class since Ian Ditchfield's podium place in Scotland in 2012. John Kewley with a score of 41 was placed 21st and Ian Ditchfield, on 40, was placed 29th.

In the Paralympic competition, I had a mixed day, dropping three places to finish in 23rd place. Considering the problems I'd had with my mobility before the event, I was fairly happy with this. I really struggled on both days with the last third of the course, when I'd already been on my feet for over two hours and the sciatica began to play up and my concentration began to lapse.



The writer, failing to solve the mystery of control 20

Tom Dobra (UBOC), who had been selected for the GBR Tempo & relay teams but not the PreO, won the Public PreO competition over the championship course with a total score of 42 points.

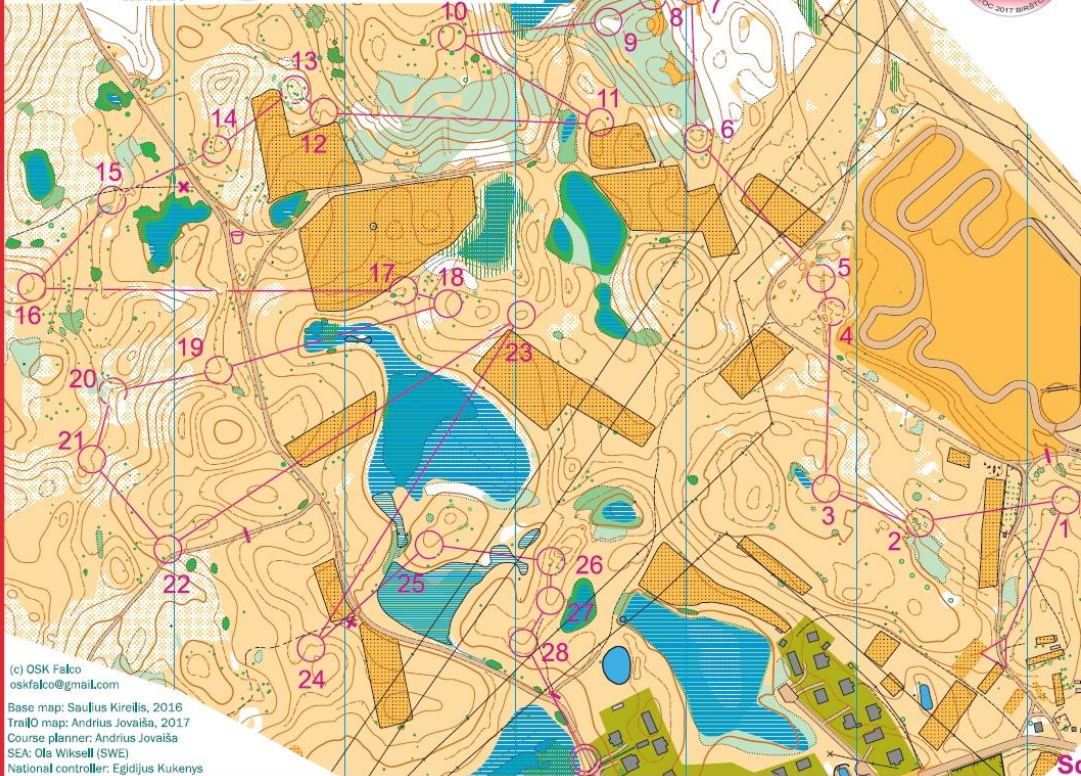
Finally, in the evening there was the farewell banquet. In keeping with the chaotic organisation we'd experienced, the venue (the Birstonas Cultural Centre) was not published in the event programme, there weren't enough tables and chairs for everyone to sit down, and the wine had already run out when we arrived there at the advertised starting time! After that it was early to bed before getting up at 4.00 am in order to get to the airport and drop off the hire car, before a 6.30 check in.

My grateful thanks to both WIM & SWOA for their financial assistance towards the costs of travel and accommodation.

All photographs courtesy Donatas Lazauskas Photography Full results, map, and lots of photographs on the official website www.wtoc2017.lt and its associated Facebook page.



Aukštadvaris



WTOC 2017					
PreO 2	2,35 km				
1	A-B			Y	↘
2	A			○	
3	A				
4	A-C			○	
5	A			T	
6	A-B			○	
7	A-C			○	
8	A-B				
9	A-C				
10	A-C			○	
11	A-C			○	
12	A-C			○	
13	A				
14	A-C			○	
15	A				
16	A				
17	A-D			○	→
18	A-D			○	
19	A-B			○	
20	A-B			○	↗
21	A-B			○	↗
22	A-B			○	
23	A				↗
24	A-D			○	
25	A-B			○	
26	A-D			○	
27	A-D			○	
28	A-C			○	

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Base map: Saulius Kirellis, 2016
TrailO map: Andrius Jovaiša, 2017
Course planner: Andrius Jovaiša
SEA: Ola Wiksell (SWE)
National controller: Egidijus Kukenas

Time limit OPEN 155 min
PARALYMPIC 180 min
Scale 1:4000 h=2,5m