

Splitting the WOC?

An open letter to the IOF Council and National Federations

The World Orienteering Championship is the most important international orienteering event in the world. The event has a very strong position within the orienteering family, being the highest priority event for the world's best athletes and it's also recognized within media and commercial partners. It is the only week during the year, when the international media knows what to expect from an orienteering event.

Even if WOC is a very important and well-established event and product the International Orienteering Federation has done and is planning to make remarkable changes to the programme and the appearance of the event. The newest proposal is to **split WOC into a sprint-WOC and a forest WOC without testing it or proving the consequences thoroughly** before during a World Cup round or similar events.

As the World Orienteering Championship is the most important international orienteering event, changes need to be considered very carefully. In our opinion, it would be better to **keep the status quo than to change something without being sure about the consequences**. The last changes about the qualification scheme and the introduction didn't shake the whole system of WOC, but **splitting WOC will have big consequences for runners, teams, federations, organizers, media and IOF which we cannot predict at the moment**.

Therefore, we feel, that it is too early and radical to just change WOC into two different, alternating events. Here a few reasons to our opinion.

Possible difficulties in organizing the splitted WOC

The reason to split WOC seems to be to get more organizers who are willing to take the challenge and also to find organizers outside the traditional orienteering countries organizing a sprint WOC. **But is it so easy to organize a sprint WOC?** All of us who have organized a sprint-race know that it is much more complicated than a forest race. **Do we want to have a sprint WOC in an exotic place but with the danger of unfair conditions because of maps, hazards in urban areas, time-keeping, etc.?**

In today's WOC, sprint is one of the races, but in the sprint WOC, everything would be focussed on sprint. And we all know, that there often are big discussions about sprint races. There have been several WOC sprint races with complaints and protests, not to talk about World Cup-races or smaller sprint-events.

Are the traditional orienteering countries ready to organize a forest WOC without the "show event"; the sprint? Are they ready to organize and finance a forest WOC with good TV-productions in forest disciplines? Is it possible to get sponsors for a forest WOC?

If we want to increase the number of places and countries, **we need to give the know-how to these countries, unless if it is urban or forest.** There would thus be a need to build a group within international orienteering to provide quality and fairness in all international events, this operation being very expensive for the IOF. To organize an international orienteering event is not a simple task and needs lot of experience. But at the moment, there is not enough professional quality assurance at the events and knowledge is not going further to the next organizer as it always is a new country and a new organizing committee.

If we dream of WOC in New York, Hong Kong, Paris and Sydney, there is always an exciting forest in 1-2 driving hours nearby. So there's no need to just concentrate on sprint, but these organizers need probably help from experienced orienteering organizers. We have a very good example with WOC 2014 in Venice and Lavarone. So it's even possible to organize a complete WOC in two places.

Too compact?

The idea of the "split-WOC" in the future is to include 3 medal races as well as maybe an additional qualification race. That means that the medal races can be held within 3-4 days. This is compact, **but most likely too compact for media and spectators.**

If WOC would only last 3-4 days (qualifications are neither interesting for spectators nor for the media), it's too short to attract. The resources for interested TV-companies to broadcast the events are too big only for 3 events and media companies with lower orienteering background will realise that WOC started, when it is already over...

What about the spectators? Is it probable that there will be many international spectators joining WOC when it lasts from Thursday until Sunday with a crowded programme and maybe only 1 or 2 public events?

What other risks do we have when splitting WOC?

- Talking about sprint, we often think that there are much more nations and favourites in this disciplines. Since sprint was introduced in 2001, 12 different nations won a gold medal in sprint, 10 different nations won a gold medal in middle distance. It's even so, that **in sprint often the favourites get the podium places.** In middle-distance, bigger surprises are possible more often. If we compare the relays, it seems that in sprint-relay only few countries with two world class women and men can build a competitive team. In the forest relay, there is a bigger chance for surprises and new nations on the podium.
- Thus a sprint-WOC maybe attracts only few nations and only the favourites. **Is it really worth travelling to e.g. Beijing for just 3 races?** It will be much more expensive than a forest WOC. For athletes, spectators and media.
- As WOC is the window to the media world, **it is very important, that all the best athletes are at the start.** Nowadays, it is no problem if a top-athlete refuses to run sprint or long, because she/he is still part of the team and runs in the other races. But imagine if Thierry Georgiou says no to a sprint-WOC. What about a WOC without the most successful athlete of the last 10 years?

- A sprint-WOC seems exciting. But is it worth to sell only this excitement? Sprint is mostly an elite-discipline, but - for most orienteers - orienteering is about navigation mainly in forests, but of course also in urban areas. **Do we really want that orienteering (biannually) gets the urban touch and gives away the feeling of adventure?** A WOC with all disciplines always gets an impression of the whole orienteering skills.
- There are several WOC the last years (e.g. Trondheim, Chambéry, Lausanne) where the host cities supported the organizers. **These host cities hosted the sprint in the middle of the town.** They wouldn't apply for a forest-WOC without the chance to get a visibility through the sprint race. So it will be difficult to find hosts for a forest-WOC without a sprint race even in the traditional orienteering countries.

Conclusions and further proposals

Because of all these reasons and explanations, it seems the wrong way to split WOC and shorten it to only a few days of competition. In every case, this **remarkable change should be considered and proved thoroughly**, surely not make a quick decision just to make it easier to find a host for WOC 2019. We feel, that this decision should be thoroughly proved and the opinions should be widely asked before making the final decision.

To improve the sport of orienteering and to get more attendance, visibility and excitement, WOC should not need to be shortened and separated. To show the fascination of orienteering widely, properly and annually - it is just the other way round: WOC should actually last 8-9 days, including two weekends. **WOC should be a real orienteering festival and a window to our sport, showing all its characters.** Placing this argument, the reaction is often, that it gets too expensive for the participants. But is it really expensive to stay 1-2 extra days? Travel costs are much more significant.

With a WOC lasting 8-9 days, we would have good chances to get more attendance. We can place the competitions according to wishes of spectators, media and TV.

Exciting competitions like sprint and relays can be placed on the weekends, long and middle can be held during the week. And there would still be place for a forest qualification - which should be back at WOC - and maybe any new ideas (tested in World Cup first!). A good possibility would also be to alternate the programme and e.g. make a long mass-start or a chasing-start every second year.

Rather than splitting the WOC, we'd (in case of difficulties in finding a WOC-host annually) rather see WOC organized biannually and simultaneously much effort to be put on rising the status on EOC and World Cup

More time is needed to consider the future of international events

The World Orienteering Championship is an exciting event and should not be splitted into two absolutely new formats which we do not know if they are working or not. Just because we have no organizer for 2019?

The risk to lose the fascination of our best event is too big!

We hope, that during the next 6 to 12 months, a wide discussion would be carried out in different forums. Only after that, a thoroughly considered decision can be made, for the best possible future of orienteering.



Per Forsberg
Sweden



Simone Niggli
Switzerland

Brigitte Grüniger Huber
Switzerland



Radek Novotný
Czech Republic




Daniel Hubmann
Switzerland

Bruno Nazário
Portugal



Tom Quayle
Australia



Matthias Niggli
Switzerland



Janne Salmi
Finland