

# Orienteering for the Visually Impaired

by Robin Shannonhouse

When I was first contacted by Dr. Bruce Blasch of the Veterans' Administration in Atlanta about an Orienteering meet for the blind, I had two thoughts. First, that these folks probably weren't seriously interested in "real" Orienteering; and, secondly, that visually impaired folks would need to be led around an O' course by the hand. I was wrong on both counts.

Several weeks later I watched in awe as 30 partially- and totally-blind folks orienteered at Reynold Nature Preserve in Clayton County, Georgia. There was a 2-hour time limit on the adults' 1.25km course, but all were done in 90 minutes. No, they weren't very fast, but there were no DNF's. Success for them, for the V.A., for their mobility instructors, and for Orienteering. They succeeded because they figured out ways to substitute other senses for the sense of sight. And it doesn't hurt to have an "I can do anything" attitude either!

## QUESTIONS

I know the questions before you ask, I had the same ones: How do they read a map? How do they see the controls? How

to they use a compass? The problem with us sighted orienteers is that we have no imagination. Close your eyes and hold a map. Do you see it? No. Do you feel it? Yes! Okay, then, we make a map they can feel -- a braille map. Sort of a sketch map without contours but with raised trails, lakes and control circles. Special paper exists that raises ink-drawn lines when heated. Problem number two: seeing the controls. Let's start where we left off with the map -- feeling them. Blind folks feel where they are going by using a cane. Walking through the woods with a cane, sweeping from side to side, you hit a lot of trees. Enter the sense of hearing. Hit a tree with a cane and you get a nice, wooden "thunk." Hit a metal post and, whoa! Sounds like a metal post! Problem number three: the compass. Did you ever use a braille compass? It's not easy for a beginner. Lets go back to the sense of touch. Put a little arrow on top of each control facing North. Put a relief arrow on the map. Orient the map. Now that those problems are solved, you agree. Blind folks can orienteer!



Those taking part went out in pairs of like "visual acuity" (photo by R. Shannonhouse)

## THE MAP AND THE COURSE

Don't give me credit for figuring all this out. I was madly taking notes while all the tough stuff was being planned by Nora Griffin-Shirley of the V.A. and several very talented instructors from the Center for the Visually Impaired and the DeKalb and Gwinnett County Public School Vision Programs. My big contributions were suggesting a location, pacing the distances to the controls from the attack points (for the control descriptions), and designing a "sighted" White course so that the teachers and meet volunteers could orienteer too.

Nora explained that my map was visual, so a simple tracing would not do. I hadn't mapped the small wooden platforms that bridged the ditches crossing the trails, essential attack points to blind folks. So, I paced and Nora made notes on a copy of my O-map. She later would translate her fieldnotes into the braille map and the control descriptions which would also contain contour information. Nora brought her husband Mike, who is blind, to the course planning session to help determine what works and what doesn't. I explained to him that his job was like that of an Orienteering vetter. As I paced and he tested the clues, I told him about attack points and catching features. Soon he was using these terms like a vete-

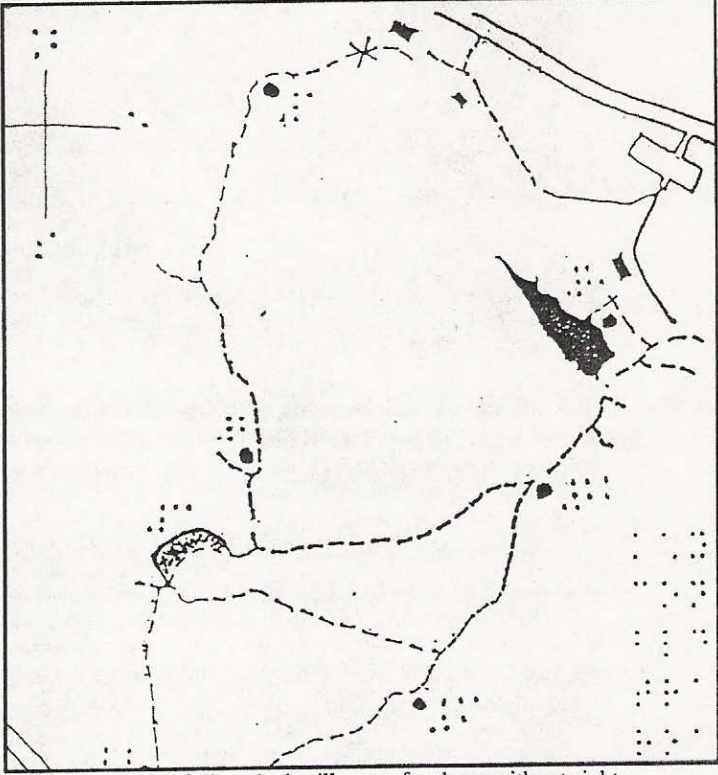
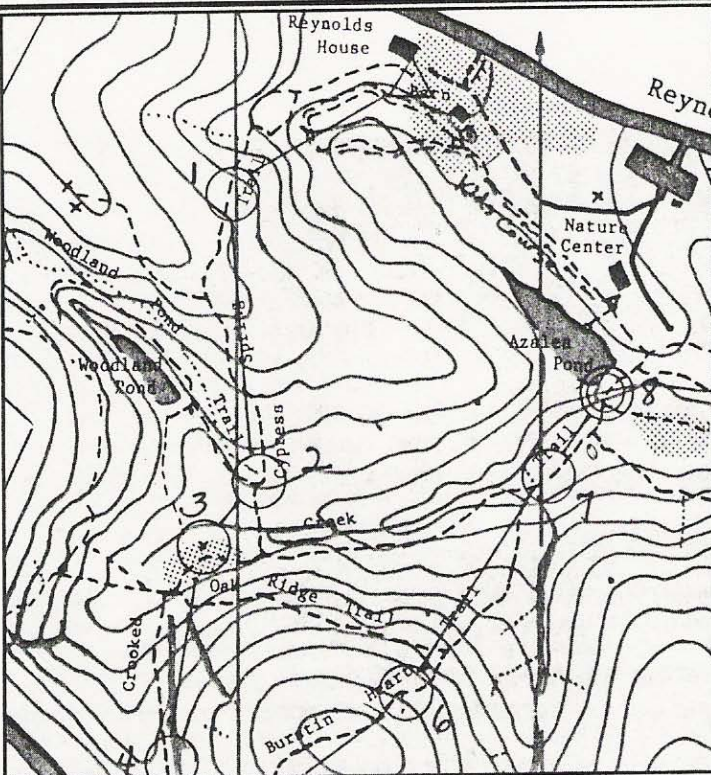


String-O was easy for the kids (photo by Robin Shannonhouse)



Using a well-developed sense of touch (photo by Robin Shannonhouse)





Map of William Reynolds Memorial Nature Preserve near Atlanta, GA, for sighted folks; the braille map for those without sight

ran orienteer. Mike uses a guide dog, a Boxer named Precious, and she had no trouble with park trails and was able to follow verbal instructions Mike gave her amazingly well.

**THE CONTROLS**

The controls were similar to lots of Trim controls being used: metal fence posts with an orange numbered plaque. The tactile arrows pointing North were 2-inch long arrowheads mounted on top of the plaque. The numbers on the plaques were 5-inch raised numbers, the kind most folks have on their front porches to show their house number. These raised numbers make it easy for blind folks to touch and identify them and are large enough for those with low vision to read them. So the design is good for both Trim-O and for those with vision impairment. This made me wonder how many beginner-level Trim courses have similar controls and can be adapted to the visually impaired with a relief sketch map and braille clues. The little North arrows on top of the controls might be a good idea to adapt to all Trim courses, where many users might not have compasses.

**IT WORKED!**

I expected some excusable changes in Orienteering procedures, but there

were none. Their beginner instruction was quite close to that we do for sighted beginners. They had staggered starts with the adults going in pairs of like "visual acuity". In other words, if you are totally blind, you go out with someone totally blind. If you have partial vision, so does your partner. One pair was composed of a young athletic-looking teenage boy and a very tall, quiet adult man. Both were totally blind. The boy was like most teenagers, in a hurry. The man wanted to go slowly and be careful. The boy kept hurrying the man along and the man held the boy back, so they actually were going just about the right speed. The man had the course clues on his Walkman cassette. He was repeating them to the boy as he read the braille map. The boy was always a few steps ahead, using his cane to keep on the trail and identify the features they were passing. It was a great partnership and they finished the course in about an hour.

Each control was manned by a volunteer and a couple extra volunteers were assigned to roam, keeping an eye out for problems between controls. They were there mainly to give the blind folks confidence that, should they get into trouble, there would be someone to help. The volunteer manning a control would stand close by so quietly that the blind persons did not know they were there until they

actually found the control. Then the volunteer would identify himself and mark their maps for them. This system was used instead of punch cards as it was decided that the participants would have enough to carry with map, clue sheet, and cane. When one of the volunteers had to help someone, the help given was minimal, just enough to enable the orienteer to get back on course.

**STRING-O**

Solving the problem of how to do a course for blind kids was even easier. The kids' String-O was along an existing nature trail built for the visually impaired. It is lined with steel cable held up by wooden 4x4s. It was manned by a Girl Scout troop trained by one of the mobility instructors. The controls were bags hung on some of the 4x4's that hold up the cable. The bags contained various fruits, vegetables and snacks. The punch card was a tiny flip-chart with each page containing a "scratch'n'sniff" sticker of these smells. When the child comes to the "banana" control, he punches the page with the banana smell.

**WHAT I LEARNED**

I learned a lot from the blind folks and their teachers, especially about how

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little a handicap blindness can be. I was apprehensive at first, worrying that I was going to cause someone to trip or run into something or hurt someone's feelings by saying the wrong thing. They were all good natured about my mistakes and taught me some new direction terms I can use even with sighted folks. If you are going to walk along the edge of something, sort of use it as a handrail, you "shore-line" it. Nifty word, huh? I learned to use a braille compass, and now also have one, thanks to Ed Hicks. I draw a crowd everytime I ask any group of orienteers if anyone would care to see how a braille compass works. I would like more sighted orienteers to have the chance to go through such a project, from dread to curiosity to excitement to gratification. It is more than a sense of accomplishment, it's the discovery of knowledge.

#### FUTURE EFFORTS

Where do we go from here? The Veterans' Administration Rehabilitation Research and Development Center wants to use Orienteering to provide visually impaired individuals with the opportunity to enjoy the woods, while teaching them skills such as map reading, to forward their self-mobility. Two of the mobility instructors are planning to do Orienteering at their Summer camp this year. Dr. Bruce Blasch and a couple of others are working on a "how to" manual and Nora hopes to make the controls and equipment assembled for this meet into a kit to loan out. We are also going to try to set up a networking project to get some O-clubs together with agencies for the blind to do this in other areas of the U.S. A lot is going to depend on individual orienteers who may have an interest in getting something started in their communities.

After the meet, one blind middle-aged lady kept saying, "This is fun. When can we do this again?" A sighted volunteer wore a T-shirt that said "Blind Athletes are Out-of-Sight." That sort of said it all.

*Robin Shannonhouse is a mainstay of the Georgia O-Club and its newsletter editor, competing in F40. She is also the executive director of the US O-Federation.*

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tley, to win. Steve Bartok led M45B both days, with Donn Springer and Tom Moran finishing 2nd and 3rd. M60A looked pretty tight after Day 1, with John Charlow 18 seconds ahead of Andy Gagarin, and Jim Plant only 2 minutes farther back. On Sunday Plant led the class to move into first when Charlow lost a few minutes, and Gagarin DSQed. Kent Ringo was 4th. Dave Harvey of Bates College had two good days to win M-Open, with Andy Davis of QOC only 3 minutes behind.

#### THE ORANGE COURSE

Matt Scott came up with two good early season performances to win M15-16A, with Gabe Van Loon close behind. After a so-so Day 1, Craig Murray matched Van Loon on Sunday. Also showing good early season form were Michelle Kuipers in F17-18A and Karen Williams in F15-16A. Another interesting aspect of the Orange course was that there were 82 runners on it. The big lists were in M19-20B and M-Open—no great performances, but maybe in the future.

#### YELLOW AND WHITE

In F13-14A, Rita Becker, averaging just over 10 min/km, had the best two-day total on the Yellow course. In F12A, Hannah Bengtsson used a good Day 2 run to move from 4th to 1st, overtaking Kerry Shannon, Miranda Hillyard, and Abi Durrant. Benjamin Pollok led in M12A both days, while Stephen Brooks was 2nd both days. Patrick Shannon was 3rd on Day 1, but Ben Durrant got by him on Day 2.

#### SUMMARY

West Point lived up to its reputation of running a very good meet, even with the unfortunate problem with the fallen control flag, which caused a Red course to be voided on Day 1. The convenience of staying at Camp Buckner, the thoughtfulness of the arrangements, the super organization, all make this a meet to attend. Then you add some of the best (read: detailed) terrain and most open woods in the US, and you have a meet that O-folks really look forward to. Thanks go to meet director Alan Dodd, his assistant Brian Paxton, and the USMA O-Club members; also to the club's Officers-in-Charge Major Carl Horn (who will be moving on) and Captain Lee Ramseur (who will be in charge now). SEE YOU NEXT YEAR!

## THE PONTIUS ARROWHEAD

by Bob Reddick

Decades from now, as our children's children ponder over the arcane history and lore of their ancestors' rudimentary attempts at Orienteering, questions may arise over the origin of the lonely little mark stuck by itself down at the south end of the O-maps. Well, for those future researchers who locate this hallowed publication, here is the story. It seems that one Ron P., a famous and very fast M21 elite type, a member of the notorious Blue Star Komplex) BSK) and while affiliated with the Nisqually O-club of Olympia/Tacoma (WA), once ran a championship relay at the equally infamous Forest of Nisene Marks venue in California. At an early control, his compass and folded map somehow slipped in his hand, and when he reset them for his next leg, a ghastly 180° error developed! By the time he caught it, all hope for his relay team winning had been wiped out!!

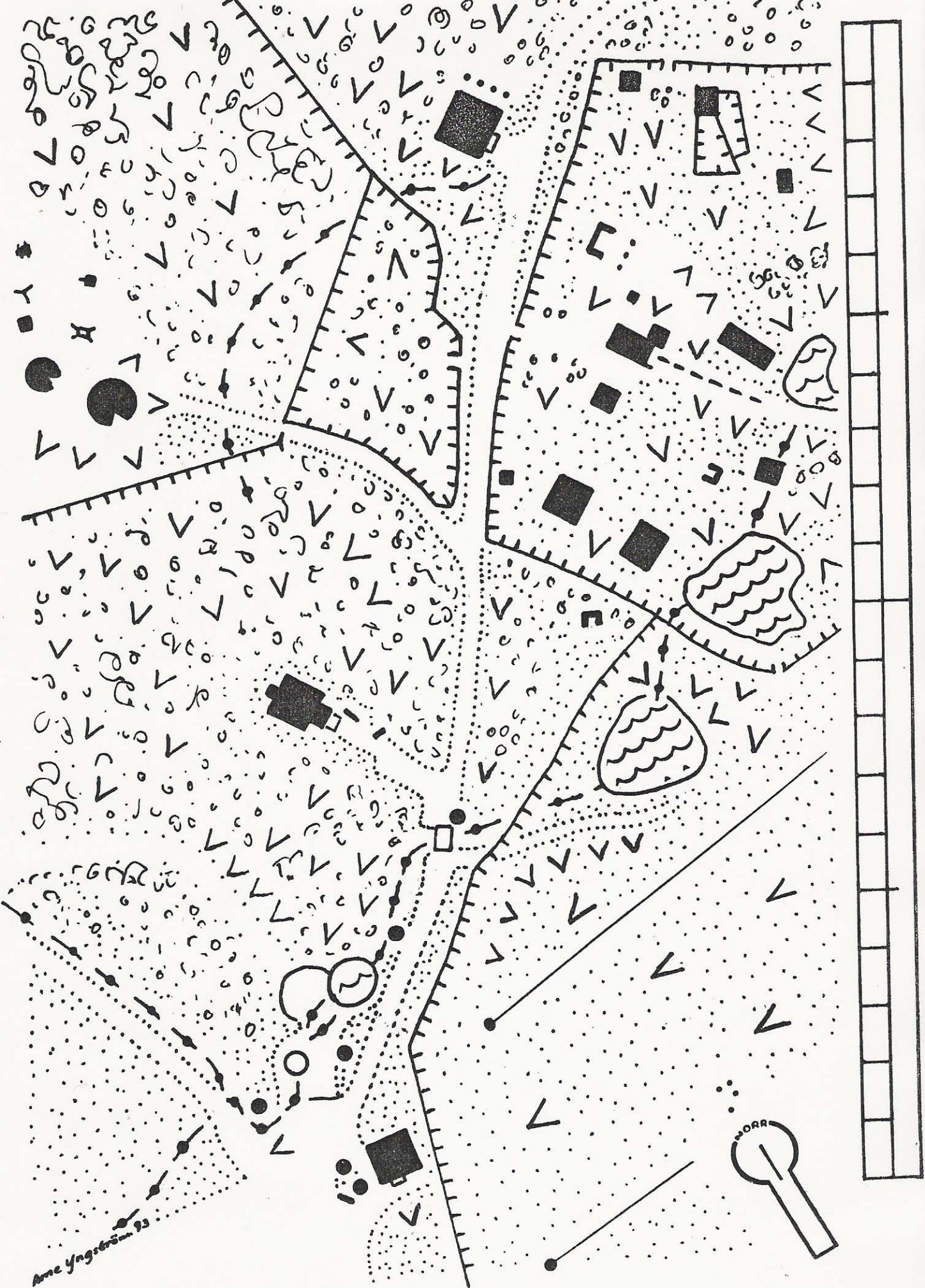
All for the lack of a visible arrowhead? Yes, it's true! If this could have happened to an Elite, imagine what the rest of the world's orienteers were doing, after folding up those big maps to manageable size or to grasp neatly with a thumb compass on top! The magnetic north lines are usually carefully drawn spaced across the map, and names are right-side up for "North-Up", but those arrowheads and lettering often disappear from sight as maps are turned and folded. Thus North becomes South, but only at the most inopportune time! (Murphy never heard of this one!)

Some astute orienteers had for some time been placing supplemental arrowheads here and there on their maps during events, but it occurred to this author, hearing Ron's sad story while making my first map, that a little arrowhead or two belonged down at the South end of those lines, at some likely spot(s) which would remain visible if the entire North end of the map got turned under.

Well, the rest is history! Sure enough, other Northwest US mapmakers adopted this simple convention, and little-by-little the thing spread, and the Pontius name stuck! Eventually it finally won IOF approval (after several decades). No one ever heard of Ron again, but his namesake THE PONTIUS ARROWHEAD has made him immortal!

*Ron Pontius now lives in North Carolina, and was just married to Chae-Im Santos.*





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