

Volunteering at WOC

Yep, I'm a semi-professional orient-tourist. Running round an IKEA store in Sweden? Yes, please! Running round Antwerp social housing in the dark in light snow? Sign me up! So, a home World Orienteering Championship in Edinburgh was always going to be a no-brainer. Then the call went out for volunteers to help and I liked the idea of getting really close to the action. I ended up volunteering on all three WOC days: sprint finals, sprint relay and knock out sprint. (I also ran four out of the five WOC Tour races that were open to all so it was quite a busy week.)

I had no illusion that I was going to get a cool job but was hoping to at least be out on the course, seeing the action first-hand. Prior to the events the information coming through to volunteers was, ah, sketchy but we were eventually assigned shifts and got information about timings and meeting points. First on the schedule was to visit the event centre the day before everything started to pick up accreditation and uniform (t-shirt, bucket hat and high-viz). Some were also given hoodies; I think probably because they were working early shifts in the cold.

Marshals' briefing:



For the on-course volunteers there were three main categories: barrier marshals, safety marshals and control guards. And there were a lot of volunteers needed: for the sprint finals alone, there were around 200 on-course marshals! Each group had a team leader who was responsible for making sure each team member was in the right place and knew what they were doing.

Barrier marshals set up the barriers that physically block streets, allow pedestrians, cyclists and cars through, and report any competitors who cross the barrier (but not stop them from crossing). Happily, I wasn't ever a barrier marshal as there seemed to be too much potential for aggro from the public.

I was a safety marshal for the sprint finals and sprint relay. Our job was to keep pedestrians out of the way, explain to members of the public what was going on if they asked, and in some cases, to blow a whistle to warn of runners approaching. We weren't allowed to speak to the competitors except to warn them of any danger. So, there was no cheering for any runners! Boo.

For the sprint finals I was stationed in a narrow alley at a junction with access to the courtyard behind the Virgin hotel on Victoria street, which runs down to the Cowgate. That the courtyard was open to run through would have been a surprise to competitors as it would look out of bounds to anyone geeking on Google maps. I had to blow a whistle: one blast for any runner turning left out of the hotel (or going back into the hotel), two blasts for anyone turning right. The alley was very narrow: I could stand in the middle and touch both sides. Happily, there weren't many pedestrians using the alley, although a group of four lost Spanish tourists dragging their bags looking for their Airbnb were very resistant to moving on!

One whistle to the left, two to the right:



I did see most competitors, and some twice: it all depended on route choice. Seeing everyone up close was really great, and the pace of racing was really exciting. Not all the excitement was good though: Cecile Calandry from France came past me in tears after a catastrophic mistake.

What I learnt from day 1: there are lots of people running the course before the race: race commentators and pre-runners. This gives the marshals the chance to see the routes runners are likely to use which is really useful. Live tracking on the website is about a minute behind reality. So don't rely on it to see when a competitor is coming. They cover a lot of distance in a minute and can catch you out. And after the race, coaches run the course to get the athlete's viewpoint.

The next event I helped at was the relay. The racing moved from central Edinburgh to the Heriot-Watt campus at Hermiston. I was a safety marshal again, but with the race being on an out-of-town university campus on a Sunday there weren't the crowds of tourists that there had been in central Edinburgh. I had a beautiful spot at the edge of campus buildings, looking over lawns and trees. I was on a slightly less than optimal route, but with perhaps easier navigation than the optimal route. So, I did see most runners, and quite a few that I hadn't seen in the sprint finals from nations whose runners weren't fast enough to qualify for any final. I possibly passed the curse of SMOC onto Tove Alexandersson as she came past me in the lead on the final leg and mispunched just a few controls on.

My lovely view, and Tove:



My final volunteering stint was the semi-finals of the knock-out sprint. This was back in central Edinburgh around Canongate. This time I was a control guard, so had the awesome responsibility of putting out a control for the world champs! There were two controllers who came round checking controls: one from the local organisers and one from the IOF, and my control placement was approved. After that, my job was to protect the control from interference/blocking by the public, and then to bring the control back in again.

I was on duty at control 2, which was behind a pub and was one of the TV controls. Rob Lines, one of the official photographers was also taking photos at my control, running from taking photos at the start, to control 2, then back to the finish. There were six semi-finals, three for the men and three for the women. The racing was fast and furious and was so exciting to see. I had managed to see the finish of some of the quarter finals and also got back to the finish to see the men's final. The knock-out sprints were the most exciting event of the week, with a fantastic atmosphere around the start and finish area.

There's a control in there somewhere:



Days two and three were also better in terms of the information that we got. For those days we had WhatsApp groups set up which were used to send information like assignments and maps. This was a great improvement on day one.

All in all, volunteering was really enjoyable. We got food everyday: sandwiches, sausage rolls, crisps, biscuits, water. We were closer to the racing than most spectators. And we got a free t-shirt! What's not to love?