

## **Should there be LESS orienteering in South African schools?** **by Loz and Sarah Colyer**

Well, we think there should. OK, so LESS is a small UK based charity that stands for Limpopo Education Support Services. It combines alternative teaching placements for University of Cumbria student teachers with providing teaching ideas and school resources for several schools in the Limpopo region in the rural north of South Africa. This summer, 25 students and several staff were involved in various projects in the area, which included developing orienteering in 2 rural schools.

Waterberg Academy, a mixed race school for 3 – 16 year olds, set up by parents in the area, seemed well-resourced already: an outdoor swimming pool, an IT suite full of computers, and a minibus for school trips. But the pool was closed for winter (blue skies and 25°C would not be called winter in the UK!), the computers badly needed networking for them to be used effectively, and the minibus rarely moved. The PE curriculum largely consists of rugby and cricket and, as we found out, no orienteering.

A very supportive head teacher was more than happy for us to teach a range of PE classes, produce an orienteering package for the school (colour maps, permanent markers around the grounds, a progression of lesson plans) and to run introductory sessions on map work for each class. We even managed to get one enthusiastic teacher to help out and be persuaded to continue orienteering at the school.

Alma School, a rural all-black school for 5 – 12 year olds, felt very different. A former white school before the end of apartheid, it had tennis courts, football pitch and a small stadium, but these were rarely used due to the extreme lack of resources. One football was shared between 400 pupils, and two of the classes were taught in a shed and the garage. Again the head teacher was very grateful for our orienteering package and a week of PE sessions (orienteering, dance, after school football and netball clubs), especially on the day of the teachers' union strike.

Orienteering as a sport in South Africa is on a much smaller scale than the UK and is limited to areas around the big cities. These pupils will probably never get the chance to take their navigation skills elsewhere but it was fantastic to see them run so much, map in hand, and enjoy doing it. "Anything that gets them out of the classroom" was what their teachers told us.

Sarah and I *were* lucky enough however to compete at two orienteering events near Pretoria. The first was a colour coded event at Doornport, an area of bush with a mini-mountain' in the middle. I casually ignored Tania's advice about wearing goretex trousers and set off on a 2½ hour epic of a brown course through the blackjacks and thorns. (Blackjacks are little spiky things that make South Africans laugh when thousands of them are attached to my leggings at the finish line, making me look like a hedgehog.) Running alongside a herd of impala was pretty special, but we were also warned about a leopard. That makes you wonder if the 'elephant tracks' really were made by the competitors trampling the undergrowth before you, or...

The second event was the South African Long O Championships at Gerotek – an incredible area used for testing military vehicles. There was a huge oval track with banked corners for high speed tests, a metal ramp that got increasingly steep (presumably you drive up it until you fall off backwards), and off-road test tracks that I struggled to run on, let alone drive over. Fences on the map were often in reality a wall of tractor tyres used by vehicles to bounce off if they got it wrong.

My 16 km course was another battle with thorns, blackjacks, dehydration and energy levels that saw me finish in the top 7 (out of 9 starters), whereas Sarah won her class by half an hour and was delighted to be awarded a bottle of South African red as the prize. Lounging around in the sun at the finish near the BBQ, waiting for the lucky dip prizes does make for a very relaxed day though.

Many thanks to Ian Bratt (who started orienteering in the Lakes), and Eugene for their help and advice before we flew out about orienteering in schools in South Africa, and to Tania and George for their help and loan of equipment. In fact everyone we met was very friendly with the two ‘UK visitors’, so thank you everyone!

Find out more about LESS and how you can contribute to it by visiting [www.limpopo-ed.com](http://www.limpopo-ed.com)