

'MAROC rocks!'

by Roger Coombs

The Kingdom of Mar, was one of the 7 ancient Pictish kingdoms of Scotland and lies in Aberdeenshire between the Rivers Don and the Dee among spectacular scenery, extending from the sea to the mountains in the north east of Scotland. This is the enviable home of MAROC, one of Scotland's most thriving orienteering clubs which, in spite of the relatively remote homeland, is a club that is blessed with some of the best Orienteering terrain in Britain. It is also a club that frequently "punches above its weight" when it comes to both competition and organisation. So what's the secret?

The club was founded in 1977 through the efforts of a PE teacher at Aboyne Academy, Donald Wallace. The club was almost just a school's club initially but quickly started attracting keen outdoor enthusiasts and soon became an established part of the Scottish Orienteering Association (SOA). The first major event held by the club was the Scottish Championships in 1981, a competition infamous for the blizzard at the relays in Inver. This was in May! The photo on the front cover of *Compass Sport Orienteer* of Graham McIntyre and Rob Bloor was slightly misleading - it wasn't blossom on the heather, it was snow.

The inexperienced club founders found themselves thrown in the deep end when playing a major role with the Scottish 6-Day event of 1983 which was based at Ballater. Since then the club has twice repeated the exercise with further 6-Days in 1993 and 2005. These 6-Day events have introduced many of the British orienteering population to some of the best forests around: Inver, Glen Tanar, Pannanich, Cambus O'May, Sluie, Bogendreip, Balnagowan, Alltcailleach and Glen Feardar and this year, Coull will make a comeback with a newly revised map for a Scottish O-League race in September.

Not content with the "6-days" though, Royal Deeside also played host to the World University Championships in 1992. The forests of Glen Tanar and Sluie were used for a very successful week of orienteering with the highlight being the bronze medal won by Steve Palmer from the British team in the men's race.



Maroc banner.

Competitively, the club has always been strong with the first major success being that of the Aboyne Academy team (Douglas & Graeme Guy and Jamie Harvie) winning the JK M17 relay in 1980. Since then there has been a steady flow of Scottish, Scottish Schools, British & JK trophies and podium places coming to the club. And as far as the present day goes there can't be too many British clubs who can top MAROC's four victories on the 2009 British Championships individual day in the New Forest recently and this at an event in February some 500 miles from home!

The top club achievement among the seniors must be the 1993 relay Silver medal for Jon Musgrave at the World Championships. In 2000 Sarah Dunn (Pattinson) won the Elite class at the JK, defeating several GB

team members. On the veteran side the club has not one but two World Masters Champions - Jon Musgrave won his gold in 1997 in the wilds of Minnesota, USA and Sarah Dunn won in 2009 in the sand-dunes of Portugal. MAROC senior relay teams haven't been without their successes either, with a podium 3rd place in the Men's Premier at the JK in 2004 and a close 4th in the equivalent Women's class at the 2009 British Relays.

On the junior front there has always

been good representation in the Scottish Squad with at times more than a quarter of the selected membership being from Maroc. This year there are 6 members, including three who have, unusually, started orienteering through their school rather than coming from an orienteering family. Most recently Maroc has dominated the Jamie Stevenson Trophy, the Scottish equivalent of the Yvette Baker competition, with on one occasion having a third of the total turnout. With 3 firsts and a second in the past 4 years, and with a total of 598 out a maximum of 600 in 2008, the Deeside juniors have certainly become the team to beat. Other highlights include the win by the W14 team of Rhona McMillan, Evelyn Mason and Frances Wright at the British Relays in 2008, and the proud record of Coombs family offspring, past JK and British champions all three. The Aboyne Academy boys team took the silver medal at the World Schools in 2008, with Finlay Langan leading the team of Joab Matthews, Sam Burgess & William Stuart with his two individual bronze medals. Duncan Coombs, Hazel Wright and Kirsty Coombs have all gained GB junior team representation at JWOC, EYOC or JEC in recent years with Duncan achieving a top result of 22nd place in the 2007 Junior World Champs Sprint Race in Australia.



Graham MacIntyre & Rob Bloor cover photo by Bruce Bryant.



Evelyn Mason.

But MAROC is not stopping there! Clearly the junior program has been going from strength to strength since 2004 when it was reinvigorated by Denise Wright (helped more recently by Trevor Ricketts). A number of programmes have been instituted in the local primary schools with local weekend training sessions included as an integral part of the courses. This ensures that the orienteering at the school leads the participants directly into the club. This scheme was very successful, and more recently interest has been boosted through the Active Schools programme and other new members have come through word-of-mouth.

Juniors are motivated by participation in our local junior league, run jointly with GRAMP, and by active use of the Colour Badge scheme through which individuals can track their progression. A key tool is a weekly e-mail communication with the juniors and their families where



Jessica Mason.



Scottish 6-Day finish arena last day, 2005.

badge successes are recognized and future events are promoted. The club has grown from 10-15 active juniors in 2004 to around 75 regularly active now, and through 2008 reached a further 25 non-club adult members (largely non-orienteering parents) who tried the sport through the training sessions.

By the time this goes to press, 5 MAROC girls from Banchory Academy will have represented Scotland at the 2009 event in Madrid and with ongoing representation in "Scotjors" (The Scottish Junior Squad), the 14 – 17 GB Start Squad and the GB Junior Squad, further international success is also sure to come. There are hopes to enter a team for the Peter Palmer Junior Relay in 2009, and for local schools to enter teams in the British Schools Championships, both events that the club has rarely entered before. There is also an aim to organise international opportunities for up and coming juniors via contacts in Scandinavia or possibly with a club in France located in a town twinned with local Deeside town Aboyne. Most encouraging is the camaraderie developing among the juniors alongside healthy, friendly competition. An ongoing challenge for the club is to continue to refresh the ranks with new members whilst maintaining the interest and engagement of the older juniors. Meantime, in the words of one junior: 'MAROC rocks!' Supporting so many juniors does need a team of adults, and the number of qualified coaches has grown from one in 2004 to five who are qualified to coach up to Orange level and two more who are qualified to

coach at TD5 level. Experienced club members and parents help with 10-12 training sessions each year, ensuring that all the children can benefit from individual coaching. In the spring, we run a series of advanced technique training sessions over 10-12 weekday evenings which are targeted at preparing the more experienced club members for the Scottish Champs. These sessions have been successful in encouraging members to analyse and improve their technique. Recently the club committee agreed to recognise the club coaches' commitment by providing each a jacket from the BOF official coaching range.

Maroc has benefited over the years from having two experienced mappers in the club. Currently there are about 30 useable areas in the 40-mile stretch of the Dee valley between Braemar and Banchory. The terrain consists mostly of forested slopes, strewn with boulders and crags, while on the valley bottom are the hummocks and ridges associated with glacial moraine deposition. Challenges include revising the large portfolio of maps (we are still to transfer the last few maps to OCAD) and finding new areas to ensure that the orienteering experience

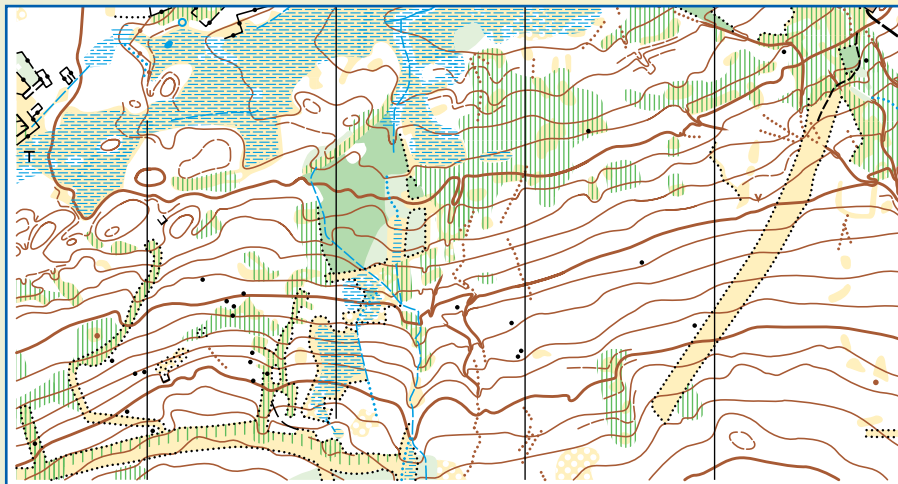
continues to be varied and challenging. A recent success has been the mapping of Birsemore, near Aboyne, one of the best new areas to become available in Britain in recent years. Currently the club is undertaking a project to extend the opportunity for orienteering to the community through the Active Schools project and in association with coaching activities have already mapped over 40 primary and secondary schools.

The Scottish Outdoor Access legislation has been very helpful in opening up discussions with landowners for orienteering access. Conversely though, the protection of Capercaillie has had a major negative effect on our use of several forests (Pannanich has been lost completely due to being declared a Capercaillie reserve by the Forestry Commission, while use of Cambus O'May has been severely restricted, despite being the dog-walkers forest of choice in upper Deeside!). There is a certain irony about the club logo being a Capercaillie while the bird in reality has restricted access to some of the best forests!

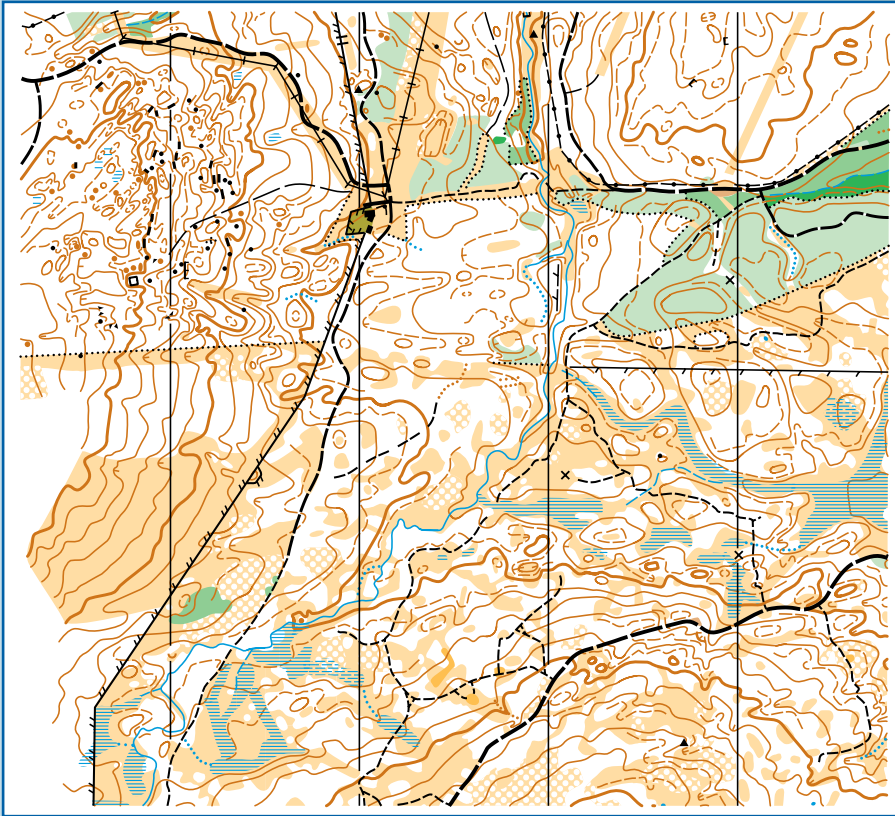
Maroc co-operates with Grampian Orienteers, the neighbouring club from Aberdeen, to provide a full programme of orienteering along Deeside throughout the year, with some 12 Sunday events being organised by each club. At each local event between 120 & 150 runners are expected with juniors often outnumbering seniors. In 2009, the club has already held the Scottish Night Orienteering Championships at Birsemore and will also host one of the seven Scottish Orienteering League events in October with Gramp making it into a double header with a comparable event on the Sunday. It should be a top weekend with some fantastic and varied orienteering. Overall between the two clubs there are about 100 events or training sessions organised in Aberdeenshire each year, enough for even the most hard bitten of O-fans!

The weekend events are supplemented by midweek night orienteering events as part of the Deeside Night Cup (Britain's premier night orienteering series) held

between November and February. This series has grown over the 12 years since its start and now regularly attracts over 30 competitors each Wednesday evening and more than this to the final "curry and lavish prize-giving". One encouraging



Bogendreip, excerpt at 1:10000. © Maroc



Birsemore, excerpt at 1:10000. © Maroc

development this winter has been the attendance of more of the club's juniors who improved rapidly over their runs. There are several orienteers in Aberdeenshire who learnt to orienteer at the night series - interestingly they found it easier to take an evening off during the week than use a whole day at the weekend. One started by finding 1 control in 90 minutes and after 4 years has progressed to confidently (and competently!) running the long course. Seven years ago the club introduced EMIT electronic timing. From initially a semi-manual process there has been a rapid progression to the norm being to use a PC at each event. This has transformed the event organisation, with only 4-5 officials now being typically needed. The benefits of splits and Routegadget availability and

prompt results posting are obvious. Use of the computers was initially daunting for some organisers but familiarisation sessions and mentoring of novices at events soon sorted that! The club now has a large pool of people confident with the technology. In 2006 we were the first sports club to complete Aberdeenshire Sports Council's Excellence in Sports Clubs Scheme and were awarded Enhanced Level of Accreditation. Last summer we had a follow up meeting and agreed targets for various improvements in our club management and membership services. Maroc is a club with over 30 years of success and achievement and it is looking forward to the future with confidence. What's in store? In the short term access to more new areas is hoped for



Night O in the Snow - Deeside Night Cup.

(including to a superb and huge area that could be used for anything up to World Championships standard); renewal of the stock of Emit event equipment; sourcing of funds to appoint a schools development officer; increasing our membership from its existing 150 (approximately half juniors) and continued representation by the local schools at World Schools Champs. In the long term the Scottish 6-Days will return, perhaps in 2015 or 2017 and there is a possibility that we could see the World University Champs again now a more organisationally demanding 4 race extravaganza! Whatever happens, Maroc will continue to flourish and offer a warm welcome and great orienteering opportunities to everyone who wishes to visit Deeside - for more information about MAROC visit our website at www.marocscotland.org.uk



The Aboyne Academy Boys take Team Silver at the World Schools Championships in Orienteering 2008 on home ground.



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