

**Research and discussion regarding the possible addition of M/F 75+ age categories and courses.**

- By Ross Burnett; prepared September 26, 2005.

**Introduction:**

The following motion was put forth for discussion at the 2005 COF AGM. Since I had been involved in the work to come up with the present course/category system adopted by COF in 1997, I was asked by Colin Kirk to provide some analysis and thoughts on this proposal. The opinions are my own, and provided to facilitate discussion. I have tried to be as neutral as possible in identifying the issues and the pros and cons.

**The Motion:**

*Whereas COC promotes orienteering as "your sport for life", and whereas there are now greater numbers of maturing orienteers, I move that the COC introduce a category for 75+, for both men and women, with an appropriate length of course.*

**Background:**

The present course/category system, in use by the COF since 1997 is shown in the Table:

Course	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Categories	F-12; M-12	F13-14; M13-14	F15-16; M15-16	F55-64; F65+; M65+	F17-19; F45-54; M55-64	M17-19; F35-44; M45-54	F20-34; M35-44	M20-34

While this is not the place to rehash all of the pros and cons of this system some explanation is useful. This system was an attempt to address a number of interrelated issues at the time:

- The low numbers of participants in some (5-year) categories;
- The arguably overwhelming number of categories relative to the number of participants in most competitions;
- The desire to simplify the system;
- The desire to have more consistent course setting in terms of achieving recommended winning times.

The system of allocating categories to courses is not perfect. A perfect system would have separate courses for each age category. At the risk of stating the obvious, the problems stem from the fact that different age categories do not run at the same speed. This is why recommended winning times for some of the courses are given as ranges rather than single targets. For these courses, some of the age categories would be expected to be at the fast end of the range, while others would be at the slow end.

**Factors to the Discussion:**

There are a number of factors (or questions) the COF may wish to consider in debating the motion. Each is discussed in more detail later. These include:

1. Should such a change be made solely based on an analysis of the number of Canadian participants in the existing M/F 65+ and proposed M/F75 + categories?
2. Is the existing course 4, with a recommended winning time of 50 minutes, too long for those M/F 65+ runners that are over 75?
3. Is it appropriate that a 75 year old must compete against a person 10 years younger? (Note that besides M/F-12 (which for practical reasons should be ignored), the only other categories with more than a 10 year spread are the elite/open men and women – M/F 20-34)

**Number of participants:**

Since the present system does not identify those over 75, the following table presents the number of Canadian participants in the 65+ age categories for the last eight Canadian Championships. It appears as if numbers are increasing.

Competition	Location	Men	Women
COC 2005 - Classic	BC	8	6
COC 2005 - Short	BC	9	6
COC 2004 - Classic	Yukon	8	6
COC 2004 - Short	Yukon	9	6
COC 2003 - Classic	BC	7	4
COC 2003 - Short	BC	7	4
COC 2002 – Classic	Alberta	8	6
COC 2002 - Short	Alberta	8	6
COC 2001 - Classic	Manitoba	4	3
COC 2001 - Short	Manitoba	4	3
COC 2000 - Classic	NB	7	3
COC 2000 - Short	NB	5	2
COC 1999 - Classic	Ontario	6 (?)	4
COC 1999 - Short	Ontario	4 (?)	3
COC 1998 - Classic	BC	5	3
COC 1998 - Short	BC	4	3

Note that in 2005, BC did offer 5-year age categories. Canadian participation was as follows:

Age:	COC Classic		COC Short	
	Men	Women	Men	Women
65-69	8	6	9	6
70-74	0	0	0	0
75+	0	0	0	0

The number of Canadian participants in the M/F 65+ categories may not on its own justify an additional age category. However, if the determination of age categories was based solely on participation, then arguably some of the junior age categories should be combined. The argument against that idea is usually that because the youth are still growing, there is a distinct physiological difference between the ages that is not fair to have for example a 14 year old competing against a 19 year old. However, a similar argument could be made for the seniors – essentially that the body of a 75 year old is distinctly different than that of a 65 year old, much more so than say between a 55 and a 45 year old.

In support of the Motion, a simple comment has been made to me: *“So what if the numbers are (or would be low) in the resulting age categories if M/F 65+ was split by adding M/F75+ -- we’ve put up with low numbers in many of the junior categories for years, and no one seems overly concerned if there are only 1 or 2 come awards time. Why is this any different?”*

**Achieved times of M/F 65+ on Course 4:**

The recommended winning time for Course 4, for each day of a two-day classic event, is 50 minutes. The following statistics are from the last four COCs that used the 8-course system.

Competition	Winning Canadian time: F55-64	Winning Canadian time: F65+	Winning Canadian time: M65+
COC 2004 – Day 1	47:24	58:38	40:14
COC 2004 – Day 2	41:09	60:10	34:47
COC 2003 – Day 1	59:10	74:01	46:54
COC 2003 – Day 2	49:54	60:34	44:51
COC 2001 – Day 1	66:34	82:17	51:02
COC 2001 – Day 2	63:58	86:40	71:02
COC 2000 – Day 1	119:58	107:42	133:53
COC 2000 – Day 2	91:30	97:54	89:35

This information demonstrates two things. First it shows an example of how the assignment of certain age categories to the same course does not work well, (and perhaps may be grounds for revising the system?). In this case, the M65+ runners very obviously complete Course 4 distinctly faster than both the F55-64 and F65+ runners. So even if a course setter “gets it right” by designing a Course 4 that M65+ runners will do in 50 minutes, it will almost certainly be too long for the other categories on that course. An extreme example is the Day 2 Course from 2004, in which the M65+ winner was 15 minutes *faster* than the 50 minute RWT, yet the F65+ winner was still 10 minutes *slower* than the 50 minute RWT. Secondly, this information tells us that Course 4 is simply too long for F65+. Of the eight examples above, the closest any course setter got to a winning time of 50 minutes for F65+ was Day 1 of 2004, at 58:38. The Day 1 Course 4 from 2000 was arguably more than twice as long as it should have been!

**Appropriateness of having “open-ended” M/F 65+ categories:**

While we talk of having “10-year” age categories, the M/F 65+ categories are in fact open-ended, so this is arguably unfair for anyone 75 and over. When someone turns 35, 45, 55 and 65 they have a new 10-year age category (and shorter course) to run in, but not so the 75 year olds. And as mentioned above, ten years at that age is arguably a much greater difference physiologically than for people in their 30’s, 40’s and 50’s.

**Ross’ Conclusion:**

For what it’s worth, my personal opinion is that the motion should be supported; that it is appropriate to offer new categories for M/F 75+, and that it should be on a new course.

**Proposal for a 10-course system:**

It may be outside the scope of the discussion (unless, I assume, there is a motion regarding a more general tweaking of the 8-course system) but the following is suggested as “food for thought”. It may be perceived as ‘opening a can of worms’ – but at the same time, if weaknesses have been identified it may make sense to make a single change to go from 8 to 10 courses, rather than 8 to 9 courses now, and possibly 9 to 10 courses in a year or two. Here is what a 10-Course system might look like:

Course	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Categories	F-12; M-12	F13-14; M13-14	F15-16; M15-16	F75+; M75+	F55-64; F65+	M55-64; M65+	F17-19; F45-54;	M17-19; F35-44; M45-54	F20-34; M35-44	M20-34

There is a certain symmetry to this system, particularly in how the older age categories are allocated to the courses. There may still be weaknesses in that some of the categories on the same course would still not be able to achieve the same winning time, but I think this is an improvement over the existing system, and, as mentioned above, a perfect system would entail separate courses for each category, which would be impractical. Note that the above is really only a “desk-top exercise” – I have not done any TPK or winning times analysis to support how the categories are assigned to the courses.

It will be argued that course setters have a difficult enough time trying to set and control eight courses, so to have to design ten would be overly burdensome. However, I think it could also be argued that a 10-course system may make some aspects of course setting easier, since it narrows the clientele on any course down, making it easier to focus on their needs, and therefore “get it right” in terms of appropriate distance and technical difficulty. For example the above system would eliminate the Course Setters “conundrum” regarding the old/existing Course 4 – that is “Do I set for what an M65+ will do, what an F65+ will do or what an F55-64 will do?”

Also, the increase in use of electronic punching has provided some flexibility and changes in our way of thinking about how courses can be set. This may help to decrease the workload. For example, more convoluted courses, courses in a smaller, more restricted area etc.

While the USOF uses a system of seven colour-coded courses, they usually in fact offer ten courses, when the variations are counted (i.e. green-x; green-y; brown-x; brown-y; red-x; red-y).

Going to ten courses might mean that we simply need to manage people’s expectations a little more. For example, participants may need to be educated not to expect 100% unique courses – that (for example) Courses 5 and 6 might only differ in the first control, and with Course 6 having an extra section of 3 controls. Having more common controls and legs is not necessarily a bad thing given most orienteer’s interest in comparing route choices and splits.