

## Cox revels in cunning running

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Tim Cox on an orienteering course in the bush. Source: Supplied

**FRESH from a Pilates session early in the morning, Tim Cox is in his kitchen at home in Roseville, on Sydney's north shore. The businessman and veteran arts board figure reveals himself to be a dab hand at arranging morning tea, then settles down to discuss a topic close to his heart: orienteering, a sport that combines outdoor adventure with map-reading and navigational skills.**

It turns out that Cox - among other things an engineer, thoroughbred racehorse owner, public relations company founder, former chairman of the Australian Ballet as well as Bell Shakespeare and the Australian Major Performing Arts Group, and now on the board of the Sydney Film Festival - not only brews a mean cup of coffee but is a devoted aficionado of this robust outdoor sport, dubbed "cunning running" by its many followers.

The sport originated in Sweden in the late 19th century, growing out of military training exercises in land navigation. At 70, the silver-haired, urbane Cox seems an unlikely fan, but it has been a deep and enduring passion of his for almost 30 years. A key part of the charm of orienteering, he says, is that it involves the brain as well as the body. It's certainly kept him impressively fit - there is a lithe energy in his movements, a certain mental and physical alertness that a much younger man would envy.

Sitting in a neat pile nearby is a stack of old, weather-stained topographic maps used in various orienteering courses he has raced on over the years. Some have jagged holes, testimony to the rough terrain and the elements.

In essence, orienteering is about pitting yourself against the clock, the terrain and other competitors.

It's very much an individual sport, although there is great camaraderie off the field ("Orienteers love red wine," Cox says), and it is a sporting interest Cox can share with his wife, Bryony.

In a typical event, competitors, armed with a compass, individually make their way in a staggered start to a box with a map, which shows various "controls", represented by flags, placed throughout the course. The goal is for a competitor to make their way to each control in a sequential fashion until they get to the end of the course; the person with the fastest time wins this tough race. It's all about navigation and map-reading ability, combined with physical toughness and endurance.

There are urban-based events, set on university campuses and around streets, as well as the more demanding bush events. Events can also be run at night, and "that can be pretty hairy the first time", Cox says. "We've been lucky in that we've hardly ever come across snakes."

Night remakes the world in a strange fashion, he says: he's run the same course during daytime and found it completely different. There are various age-related classes, and different types of competitions. Courses are graded according to levels of difficulty: blue, green, orange and then red, which is the level he and Bryony are on.

Cox's eyes sparkle as he talks about the various events he and Bryony are attending, from the three-day Queen's Birthday event in Armidale, NSW, to the Australian championships in Tasmania in September.

Cox estimates every second weekend is taken up with some form of competition, and they've raced all across the country. "South Australia was interesting. It's very dry country, very different, a lot of erosion, gullies, dry rivers - that was a challenge. And last October we went down to Beechworth in Victoria, an old goldmining area - that was fascinating.

"Every course is a little bit different, with its own challenges. And every time, you will make a mistake."

In a sport where a key goal is not to lose one's way, it's interesting that the word "lost" is never used. Orienteers prefer more oblique terms: "misplaced" is popular, Cox says with amusement. He has found himself misplaced in the past because he chose to follow his gut instinct rather than the map. The minute you do that, you're sunk, he says. "The most important thing when you're misplaced is to sit down, take a deep breath, and say, 'OK, what does the country look like?' You just have to keep in control of where you are at any one minute - that's the whole point of orienteering."

Cox and his wife became involved after a friend spotted them jogging around a Roseville park and said he had a more interesting and demanding fitness option for them. Their first event was on the northern beaches of Sydney, and was tame as these things go: "It was out of a school and round the streets into a couple of little parks. You sort of start off that way, and then you take this great big jump into the bush." Cox taps one of the battered topographic maps, an intricately beautiful square of spidery contours and lines mapping the terrain around St Helens in Tasmania. "Like this, for example."

The potential for injury is reasonably high, given all those slippery gullies and ankle-jarring hills. Cox says he's lucky in that he's taken few hits, give or take the odd monster leech and the usual array of bloody scratches from close encounters

with the bush. His worst experience came at a competition at Macquarie University about four years ago when he fell in a sprint event, resulting in a serious hamstring injury. He smiles. "Look, it can be dangerous, but on the whole people are fairly careful."

Orienteering attracts a diverse group of participants. Cox has noticed a lot of high-level public servants in the mix, and a significant number of people who are good with computers. Their analytical intelligence is very helpful when it comes to imagining a map in 3-D, he notes. "One of the fascinating things we've found is that for some reason, you never ask anyone what they do. We go out for dinner and we chat, but not about that."

For him, the appeal is obvious. He loves being outdoors, plus there are the intellectual and physical challenges and the social aspect. Essentially, he says, he likes a challenge. He points to his eclectic work history, which has encompassed everything from engineering and horses to public relations and arts administration.

He grins when it's mentioned that his professional life seems to have been all about navigating tough terrain, tackling obstacles, and mapping and charting new territory - in a way, orienteering is a natural fit as a hobby. "It keeps you thinking, and it has allowed me to get away from the pressures. You come back on Monday morning refreshed and ready to take on the world."

