

THE DAWN OF TIME

(50 years since the first orienteering event in NSW).

Mount Hay, Sunday November 14, 1971.

How the first orienteering event in NSW came about is a tale of celebrity, curiosity, determination and a huge slice of luck.

The map

Source / creator: an A5 photocopy of the standard NSW government map of the time

Scale: 2 inches = 1 mile (1:31,680), with 50-foot (15.25m) contours!

Detail: hardly any, it didn't even have magnetic north lines!

The background

Orienteering events had been happening in Victoria for two years and ACT had just started, but no clubs had been formed yet. A small contingent from New Zealand was about to compete in the first Australasian champs in Victoria in November 1971.

The organiser

Scout leader **Peter Nicholls**. He later became the first president of Orienteering NSW.

The setter

Ake Persson, a Swedish orienteer living in Wollongong at the time. He had done some events in Canberra (and later moved there).

The participants

Rod Dominish (Bennelong, Waggaroos, now Enoggeroos) and **Dave Lotty** (Bennelong, Kareelah, now Uringa) were in their mid-20s and committee members of Randwick Botany Harriers, a running club in Sydney's eastern suburbs. Rod, 27, was secretary and Dave, 26, club captain.

Gordon Pirie + 6 New Zealanders – Gordon won a silver medal for Great Britain in the 5,000m at the Melbourne Olympics in 1956, and was living in New Zealand at the time. He won the British Orienteering Championships in its first two years, 1967 and 1968, and won the first edition of the JK Orienteering Festival. He also represented UK at the 1966 and 1968 World Orienteering Championships, when they were held every two years.

2 scouts – presumably brought along by Peter Nicholls.

The spectators

Rod's wife, Dave's wife and daughter (aged 1).

How did Dave and Rod know each other?

They had been friends since high school in Canterbury and knew Gordon through being extras on a film in early 1969 being made in Sydney where he was the technical expert.

[While Gordon received a film credit, neither of our intrepid orienteers did. You can check out the all-star cast here: [The Games \(1970\) - IMDb.](#)]

During filming, Gordon gave the guys a copy of his book, "The Challenge of Orienteering" (1968). He had been competing in the sport since 1962 at least. The book interested them, and the following year Dave tried to get information from the Amateur Athletics Association of NSW (AAANSW), initially unsuccessfully.

Dave also looked at the rules of AAANSW to see if orienteering came under their auspices.

Clive Lee was secretary of AAANSW and manager of the Australian athletics team that Dave was chosen in in August 1969 but knew nothing of this strange running sport.

He said orienteering was not "claimed" by athletics, so they could do what they liked. (Athletics was run very strictly as an amateur sport, and even the slightest contravention of its rules would mean expulsion.)

Importantly, that first tiny bit of contact meant the athletics people knew Dave was interested in orienteering.

But Rod and he were still getting nowhere with their search (this was long before personal computers, let alone the internet) for anything about it.

So they wrote to the International Orienteering Federation in mid-1971 (the address was in Gordon's book) and asked for advice, and if there was any orienteering in Australia.

The IOF referred Dave to their contact Tom Andrews in Victoria who had put on events from late 1969. By this time, ACT and Victoria had formed the Orienteering Federation of Australia (with David Hogg as its first president; he had moved from Melbourne to Canberra).

In October 1971, Tom Andrews contacted Dave and by complete coincidence, at the same time Gordon Pirie wrote to Rod from New Zealand.

Also out of the blue, a woman whose father used to coach Gordon (she lived in Sydney) had heard that he might be coming to Australia for orienteering.

She contacted AAANSW to see if they knew anything. No, but they knew Dave was interested in this new sport. Clive Lee was in the office at that moment and put her onto Dave.

By then OFA had informed Dave that Peter Nicholls was "doing something" re orienteering.

When she contacted Dave, he put her onto Peter and contacted him as well.

What happened next was like one of those movies where a handful of totally unconnected groups go about their business, then suddenly their paths collide...

So at pretty much the same time,

- the small Australian orienteering community knew of the NZ team coming to Victoria and asked Ake to put on a practice event in NSW for the Kiwis
- Gordon sent Rod another copy of his book with a letter saying: "I'm coming to Australia with a team!"
- Rod contacted Dave with the news, to be met by Dave saying: "I know! I've just been in touch with Peter Nicholls and here's the event details!"

It was a remarkable alignment of the planets, after more than two years of Dave and Rod trying to find out *anything* about orienteering in Australia.

Rod and Dave then "just turned up" to the event.

Why was such a remote location chosen? Even now, it looks a wild, remote place.

"Only Ake knows!" replied Dave.

The course was 6.6km straight line with 330m of climb! Controls were red buckets with different coloured crayons.

Gordon won the event in a time of 1h 19m, a Kiwi was second, Rod was third in 1h 44m and went to Victoria for the Australasian event, while Dave was fourth in 1h 55m.

"We loved it," said Dave, who estimated he covered 9-10km.

What happened as a result of this event?

Rod and Dave decided to conduct an event on the same course a month later (Sunday December 12).

They contacted a number of distance-running friends (Ian Hassall, Norm Johnston, Ross and Toy Martin, plus a few others) to come and give it a go. They were in with some cross-country skiers and Hash House Harriers (HHH) so there was a mix of people.

They had 14 entries and formed Bennelong Occasional Orienteers at the event. Rod was inaugural president and Dave as secretary drafted a rough constitution.

Why the name Bennelong? The shell of the Opera House had just been finished. It and the Sydney Harbour Bridge *were Sydney*, so they called it Bennelong. Dave had heard of a UK club with "Occasional" in its name, and BOO sounded great!

And that was the start of orienteering in NSW.

So what happened from there?

On January 25, 1972, Dave ran an event at Garie Beach in Royal National Park with 35 entries, most of them runners, people from the HHH and skiers.

February was at Duffys Forest and had 60-80 people.

Penrose State Forest attracted 100 people for the first time, and by mid-1972 there were regularly 150-200 attending, nearly all by word of mouth.

You can see the map from the very first event below. Imagine running on that!

