

Recommended changes to the proposed 2016 WOC selection criteria

Team and ESC,

I've been reading all the comments and had some time to think about various aspects of our WOC team selection criteria. I've also done some analysis on the team trials scores data and petition stats. Based on all of this, I'd like to recommend some specific changes to the proposed 2016 WOC selection criteria. I'll start with some general comments about the petition process, some justification for the changes I'm proposing and finish with a numbered list of specific changes that I'd like to recommend. I've attached a couple of documents that I'll refer to, and I've also posted them online in case the attachments don't come through. One of the docs is the same one I sent around last week. I've also attached this e-mail message itself as a pdf doc.

Attached:

US_WOC_Team_Petition_Stats.pdf

team_trials_plots.pdf

recommended_changes.pdf (this email)

Online:

http://www.catchingfeatures.com/eddie/tt_stats/US_WOC_Team_Petition_Stats.pdf

http://www.catchingfeatures.com/eddie/tt_stats/team_trials_plots.pdf

http://www.catchingfeatures.com/eddie/tt_stats/team_trials_plots.html (better quality figures)

I'm recommending the changes below in the name of fairness for ALL athletes wishing to be considered for WOC team berths. WOC selection is not a (Standing) team only issue. The WOC team is open to anyone who meets the eligibility requirements set forth in the rules. This includes non-team members and, in particular, juniors. In addition, there are stakeholders outside the candidate pool such as OUSA, sponsors and donors who provide most of the WOC team's funding. All of these folks deserve to have a say in the selection process if they so choose. Most importantly of all, the athletes themselves - the ones doing the hard work of training and travel in an effort to earn themselves a spot on the team - deserve the right to determine their own outcomes without the possibility of personal bias or subjectivity selecting one athlete over another without being given the opportunity to directly challenge all-comers for the rights to those spots.

Eddie Bergeron, 12/22/2015

WOC Team Selection and the Petition Process

There are only a small number of WOC berths (4-7) available each year, and a large number of athletes wishing to secure those berths. I'd argue that a spot on the WOC team is the most highly valued prize in US Orienteering. Yes it's a chance to represent your country at the World Champs, but ultimately it boils down to something that individual athletes really want to experience. There is no denying this fact, and it is completely understandable. Given the low-supply, high-demand situation, a selection process of some sort is required. Although the ESC has latitude to set certain terms of the selection criteria, the selection rules are actually set forth in the OUSA rules of competition, section G, which were revised in 2015 and are available online here:

<http://www.us.orienteering.org/sites/default/files/userfiles/u6/2015WOCselectionrules.pdf>

The very first sentence of the first paragraph states:

G.1.7 Selection Rules for the World Orienteering Championships (WOC)

G.1.7.1 The makeup of the U.S. Team to the World Orienteering Championships (the WOC Team) is based primarily on the results of a team selection competition (the Team Trials).

...

That is, the team is to be selected *primarily* via the results of the Team Trials. Without the word “primarily” there would be no petitions at all. The team would be selected via the team trials and that’s it. Rule G further states:

G.1.7.9 A candidate who is unable to attend the Team Trials or who feels that his or her performance at the Trials was not indicative of their true ability may in some cases submit a petition to the Review Panel for their consideration.

This is the petition clause. So we’re left with what is the definition of “primarily.” It must be more than half. Is it a simple majority, 2/3 majority, 3/4? Its left open for interpretation, and currently the Review Panel gets to decide. Just to note, a 2/3 majority would be 3.3 of 5, or 4 of 6. In any case, the current OUSA rules do allow for subjective placements on the team via petition.

Two Selection Processes

We’re left with a situation where there are two different selection processes at play, not independent of each other, but with *very* different requirements for different groups of athletes. The eligibility of athletes to participate in each of the two processes is ambiguous, allowing some to earn special exemptions via designated competitions and still others to get them for no reason other than where they chose to live. In either case, I’ll argue that giving any subset of team candidates privileges that are not afforded to the rest is inherently unfair, whether we feel those privileges are earned or not.

On one side we have the objective Team Trials races, occurring on one weekend, at a specific place and time which most athletes are strictly required to attend (and be punctual) - very much like the WOC races themselves. Basically, qualification races for the US WOC team. No one, not even the world’s best, are allowed to simply skip the qualification races at WOC. On the other side, we have petitions. The word petition has come to mean “without attending the Team Trials,” although that doesn’t have to be the case. Sandwiched between these two is the Review Panel, which is tasked with merging the two systems. This process is by its nature and by admission of the Review Panels themselves, subjective. It is also prone to inherent biases, even unintentional ones, without the Review Panel even realizing it.

The Review Panel (RP) is faced with an “Oranges to Apples” comparison. On the one hand, petitioning athletes are required to submit a list of results from the previous year to demonstrate their abilities. The RP is also free to read online training logs or look up additional results as they so choose. On the other hand are the athletes who have just competed at the Team Trials. While the RP is free to consider other results of the trials athletes (outside of the trials themselves), they are presented with the immediate head-to-head results of those athletes - competing directly against one another - just before making their decision. I worry that the RP gives extra weight to (mostly European) race results simply because the level of competition at those races is considered to be higher. I won’t argue that they aren’t, but as the trials athletes have not themselves been running in those races there is no way to know how they would have done relative to the petitioners in the same situation. Further, the race stress situation at the trials is very different from other races – even high level races elsewhere. Having a highly valued WOC berth on the line is more stressful than running in a WC race where getting a good result is important of course, but the consequences of a bad result are not the same. I can’t stress this strongly enough. Even if you don’t believe that its necessary to use the Team Trials as a stress test for potential WOC team members (I personally believe it is *very* important), subjecting one set of athletes to that test and not the another will lead to a less meaningful comparison. I don’t believe its possible for a Review Panel to accurately balance these and “pick the best team” as a result. It is Oranges to Apples, its inaccurate and its unfair.

To try and shed some light on the actions of RP-inserted petitions on the makeup of the US WOC Teams over the years, I undertook an analysis of the Team Trials scoring lists and RP petition acceptance statistics. Please refer to the attached or online documents.

It was mentioned earlier in the discussion that petitioners are not always named to the team and that there have been plenty of denied petitions in the past, implying that there is clear risk in petitioning without running at the trials. The numbers don't bear this out. From 2003 to 2015 there were 22 submitted petitions, 20 from overseas and 2 stateside. Of these, only 2 were not inserted onto the team (effectively rejected). That's a 90% acceptance rate. Of course there's a self-selection process at play here. Athletes will make a decision about whether or not to petition based on who will be attending the trials and their own relative odds of success. I don't believe that it's in the team's best interest to foster this sort of gaming in the petition process, but it is well documented that this does take place. Allowing athletes to petition for any reason (e.g. sickness, difficult conflicts, life) just encourages this.

Looking at the scores of the athletes that were displaced by the inserted petitions, the 8 male trailers that were displaced were all less than 2.3% behind the last accepted trailer, and in 4 of those cases less than 1%. While I fully accept the ordered score of the team trials (even if the difference between two athletes is very small), I question whether the Review Panel making subjective insertions into this scoring list can do so with an accuracy that is smaller than the margin of error in the trials results, which is at the 3.5% level for the men out to 11 places on the scoring list averaged over the last 10 years. In every case save one, the award went to the petitioner. For the women the situation is less clear, since the error margin is larger, but in at least half of the cases the displaced athlete was well within the margin of error. The benefit of the doubt should go to the athletes who showed up and raced under pressure, but RPs have consistently awarded for the petitioners 90% of the time. I understand that the RP decisions are by-definition subjective, but they are in real danger of appearing to be arbitrary.

Another point I'd like to make regarding the petition stats are a couple of individuals who have petitioned repeatedly for many consecutive years. I apologize for having to single out a couple of people like this, but this point is important and must be stressed. Sandra was named to the team by petition 5 times in a row over a 6-year period from 2007-2012 (she did not try for the team in 2011). Her appointment in 2012 marked 6 years since her last appearance at a Team Trials in 2006, and she was also named to the team by petition twice before that in 2004 and 2005. Sam has been named to the team by petition in all of the past 4 years, having last run at the trials in 2011, and appears to be poised to petition again this year. Given the justification for the "overseas" petition eligibility that the ESC provided earlier, I find it hard to believe that any person could have scheduling or other conflicts that prevented them from attending the trials over such a wide span of time. It would be too much of a coincidence - especially for two different people. This is not the behavior of athletes with scheduling conflicts, this is the behavior of athletes simply avoiding the stress and risk of running at the Team Trials. They're doing it because the selection criteria *allows* them to do it.

Regarding the petition eligibility requirements, as was pointed out earlier there is no orienteering skill metric for the "overseas" petition, while all the stateside requirements are based on results at specific events. Alex pointed out that this might be solved by simply removing all requirements and let anyone petition as they please. Given that 20 of the 22 submitted petitions were of the overseas variety, removing all requirements wouldn't change our present situation significantly. As Eric pointed out, the requirements on the petitions were put in place in response to behavior of the then "selection committee," now the Review Panel. These were meant as protections of the team trials athletes' rights. I don't think they have been very effective in that role, as panels have managed to work around those limitations even as they have evolved over the past few years. In my opinion, the best solution is to eliminate petitions altogether and simply require all athletes who wish to be on the WOC team attend the Team Trials. If any of our "best" athletes can't make the team as a result, that will be unfortunate, but sometimes as individuals we have to make tough choices about our own priorities and not ask other people to give up their own opportunities to accommodate us.

One last point I'd like to make regarding the Team Trials scoring has to do with a dropped score. From at least 2005-2014 the team trials final scoring list was a best 3 of 4 or best 3 of 5 results, be that trials races, OUSA ranking score or a combination. Last year (2015) there was no dropped score, it was simply the sum of 3 races (and sprint winner). Not having a drop at the trials does have certain consequences. I believe it was Wyatt who pointed out last year that this "sudden death" scenario might result in athletes running more conservatively than they otherwise might – the sprint in particular. I believe the whole reason for adding the sprint winner as an automatic spot is to try and incentivize athletes to train harder for sprint. To then provide a disincentive to an all-out sprint run seems counter to that purpose. Will we end up with the strongest sprinter at the top of the podium, or someone else because our strongest sprinter also happens to be our strongest middle distance runner and doesn't want to risk an MSP in the sprint and be off the team completely? In the notes I've listed athletes who either MSP or DNSed in one of the trials races but still made the team (directly as a result of the one-dropped-score policy). If there were no dropped score, these athletes wouldn't have made the team those years.

Not to be overlooked is the effect that "sudden death" has on the petition process. Any runner who gets a zero score in any trials race is out (provided they have no means for petition of course). That opens a spot for a non-running petitioner, further increasing the unfair advantage of the petition process. In addition, the conservative running mentality that results from the threat puts further pressure on the relative strength of the trialing athletes' results that the RP will use heavily in comparing with the petitioners. It's a negative feedback that puts runners at the trials at a further disadvantage. I strongly recommend that a dropped score be added to the trials, either via OUSA ranking score, or if that is undesirable, an additional (4th) race. The one-person relay held at the 2014 trials was great fun and very relevant for the WOC mixed-sprint relay.

Incentives and the OUSA Ranking Scores

I've been following the results of A-meets over the past couple of years and I get the impression that the M/F21 attendance has dropped off a bit. As an example, there wasn't a single F21 starter at the Kentucky O games, and Jordan was the only Standing Team member in attendance. Granted that's just one event. This is an easily measureable quantity, but I haven't gotten around to it yet. In any case, I'm concerned that dropping the ranking score from the Team Trials has had the unintended consequence of taking away a useful incentive. I realize that the overall ranking score is still used as one of the petition eligibility requirements, but the impact of that has been minimal. Team attendance at A-meets is important for raising the competitive level of the entire event and getting the team some hands-on exposure with the folks who are paying the bills - not to mention that A-meet revenue itself is a big part of the OUSA budget. It would be nice to see some kind of incentive system to encourage team travel to A-meets. One way to do that would be to put it back into the Team Trials scoring.

Recommended changes to the proposed 2016 WOC selection criteria

Considering the points made above, I'd like to propose that the ESC make the following changes to the proposed 2016 WOC Selection Criteria:

- 1) Eliminate the petition process altogether. If it is desired to keep some form of petition process in place for some other reason (if logically justified and fair to ALL potential candidates), at least require all athletes wishing to be on the WOC team to attend the Team Trials, no exceptions.
- 2) There is a very real possibility that the sprint winner could also finish in the top 2 in the scoring list, resulting in only 2 "automatic" selections to the WOC team. This would violate OUSA rule G1.7.1 that states the makeup of the team be based **PRIMARILY** on the results of a team selection competition (the Team Trials). State explicitly that there will be *at least* 3 automatic selections, as a combination of the sprint winner plus the top 2 on the scoring list, or top 3 on the scoring list if the sprint winner happens to be in the top 2. If the Review Panel decides to increase the team size to 6 due to "unusual circumstances" as stated in the selection requirements, the number of automatic selections should be increased to *at least* 4. Without this change we risk devaluing the Team Trials.

- 3) The wording in section “2.” In the “Team Trials Selection Races” section also states:

If needed, the Review Panel will select additional runners in order to fill all available starts using the results of the scoring list and taking into consideration race schedule and athlete strengths, versatility, and personal priorities.

Add the words “(in ranking order)” or equivalent as follows, in order to make it clear that the RP cannot move athletes above others on the Team Trials scoring list:

If needed, the Review Panel will select additional runners in order to fill all available starts using the results of the scoring list (in ranking order) and taking into consideration race schedule and athlete strengths, versatility, and personal priorities.

- 4) Add an additional race to the Team Trials (suggest 1-person sprint relay or a second sprint) or include the OUSA pre-trials rankings as in past years and allow athletes to drop one score, making the final trials score a best 3 of 4 scores. This is very important for fairness between petitioning and non-petitioning athletes (if the petition process is retained) and also to avoid the negative influence of “sudden death” on the desired measured quantities.
- 5) The “Team Candidacy Declaration” currently lists a due date of April 1, 2016, but it appears the Team Trials date will be in early June. Make this date 1 month (or equivalent) prior to the Team Trials in order to give athletes time to decide preferences as close to the trials date as is feasible.
- 6) Review Panel instructions. There was an action item in the Oct 3, 2015 ESC meeting minutes to establish a set of instructions to be given to the Review Panel members (see email from Linda, 10/7/2015). I highly approve of this idea. Any proposed instructions should be sent to the team email list for review, and once final these instructions should be made public. That is, added to the 2016 WOC Selection Criteria announcement or otherwise posted somewhere on the web pages so anyone can see them. In other words, it should not be a secret what the ESC expects of the Review Panel, since athletes are being judged to these standards.