

SMOC RETURNS TO INTERNATIONAL COMPETITION!

By Ann Harris & Sandra Mather

After two years of limited orienteering, confined to the UK, the temptation to dip a toe into international competition proved too much for three SMOCies: Sandra Mather; Ian Byrne and Ann Harris. The lure was a return to the Euro city race tour, this time in the Belgian city of Antwerp, with a suitably green travel option on Eurostar. Given the vagaries of the covid situation at the end of last year, we held off buying our rail tickets for longer than usual, so it certainly wasn't a cheap travel choice. Sandra, however, had taken the precaution of finding and booking an excellent Airbnb apartment in central Antwerp for the race weekend itself. It was, therefore, with some excitement, together with a little bit of apprehension, that we set off...covid passes and Passenger Locator Forms duly completed.

We travelled to Belgium separately, before the race weekend, in order to do some sightseeing. Sandra explored Bruges, Ian stopped off in Brussels, and Ann and Sandra took the train out to Ghent.

The SMOC tour group convened at the Airbnb on Friday 1st April and set off that evening for the Mixed Sprint Relay. We were welcomed by a banner made up of the names of all the competitors...a nice touch and a great photo opportunity.

Friday PM: Mixed sprint relay



Sandra tells us: In order to get our full money's worth from the trip to take part in ASOM, Ian and I entered the mixed sprint relay. This was the weekend's first event that plebs could take part in (the elites had earlier training races) and was on the Friday evening. The venue was a school

on the left bank of the Scheldt, but it was easy to get to by tram and a short walk. There had been snow flurries during the day so it was very chilly but dry, with no

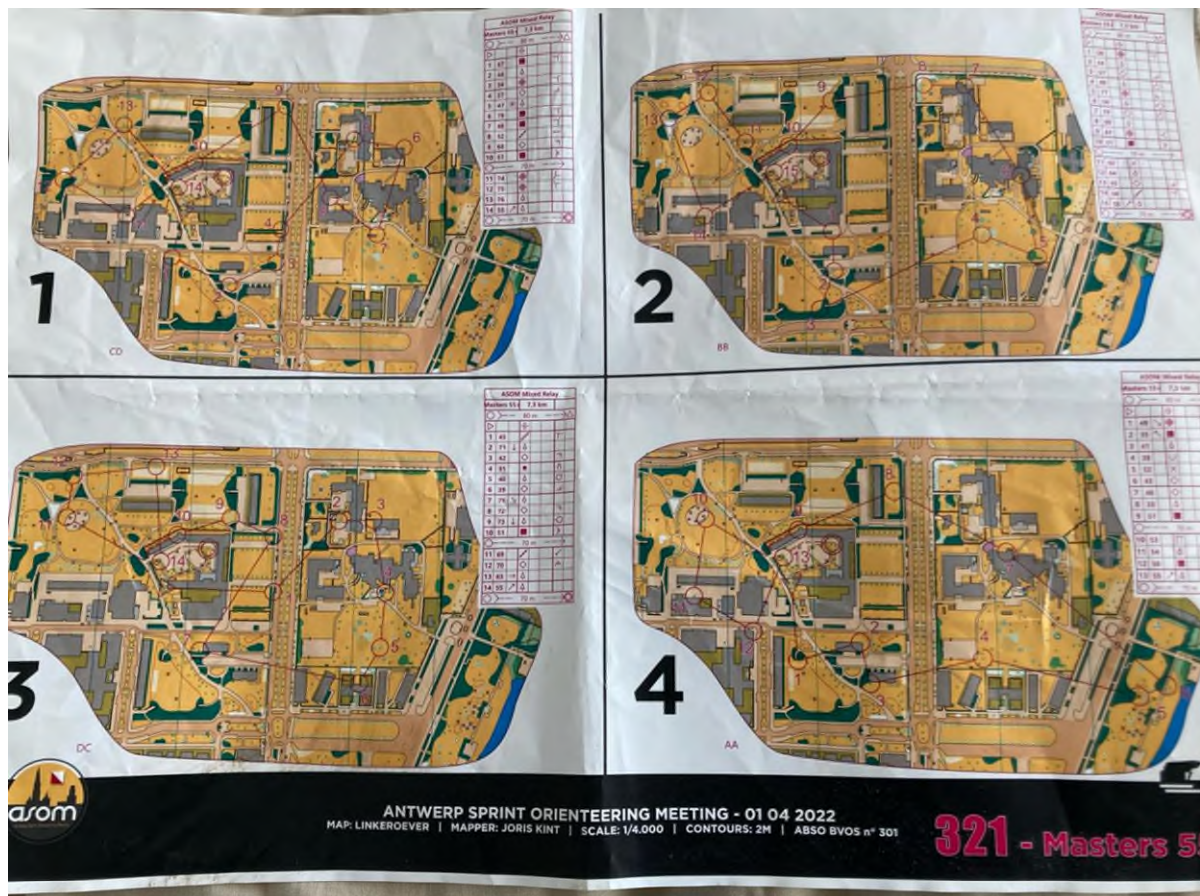
ice to worry about. Teams were entered in 3 categories: 128 in Open (including the elites), 19 in Masters (55+), 5 in Youth (under 16). The format was M, F, M, F (2 legs each) and each leg was 2km (actual running distance) for the Open and Masters classes.

Our first task was to queue to get our numbers and t-shirts. Our envelopes had our numbers for the Saturday and Sunday races, but they hadn't included our relay numbers, so it was back to enquiries to sort that out. We had arrived too late to get space inside, so used an outside (but undercover) area to change and leave our bags.

The school courtyard was being used as the start / hand-over / finish area and was crowded with more than 300 orienteers milling about, waiting for the start. It felt a bit like being in a snow globe with people running around warming up, moving in all directions. I just bounced around a bit, trying to stave off frostbite and keeping out of the way.

After the mass start, it was time to wait to see the first runners come in. The courses were set so that everyone came briefly back into the courtyard with about 500m to run. This created a bit of a scrum as all the second runners were trying to see where their first runner was. Once I saw Ian come through his 500m to go point, I took my jacket off and went to the change-over point. There was some fine snow coming down at this point but happily it stopped soon after I started, and the weather was dry for the rest of the race.

We managed our change over okay, and then I was out on the course for my first "competitive" run after blowing my calf in the British Middles. Luckily Ian didn't have high expectations of me because I was going to be slower than usual. My approach was to run until my calf protested, then walk to rest it, and repeat. I spent a few seconds making sure of where I was going rather than haring off in the wrong direction. It wasn't a technical area, with routes criss-crossing a housing estate made up of high-rise blocks, open ground and parks. The additional complexity came from: orienteering at night; the large number of controls; and the swarms of orienteers heading in all directions. This is what our maps looked like:



On my first leg, I set the standard for SMOC for the weekend by skipping a control. This was a control which seems to have been on every course, on the mandatory route through the courtyard, but tucked behind a wall corner, and around 500m before the finish. Judging from the results, I don't think I was the only person who missed that control, and of the people I was with at that stage, I saw several others who also ran straight past it. With eyes that aren't the best on a sunny day, I did find the map challenging to read during my second leg when it was completely dark, even with my head torch on max. During that second leg, I had about four controls in an unlit park at the edge of the river, with no other orienteers to be seen... this was not the best experience. Overall, I was fairly pleased with my two legs. My calf survived and our time would have put us about mid-field had I bothered to visit all the controls.

About 48 seconds into this clip, you can almost see our first handover:

<https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=426300255925247>

Saturday PM: Sprint Races

Ann tells us: On Saturday there was time for sightseeing in the morning before heading off back over the river to the event centre for the Sprint Races. The two events for club orienteers were three hours apart, fitted around a series of knock out sprint races for the elite competitors. This was a fascinating addition to the usual Euro City Race weekend format, giving a glimpse into the world of the young, lean, unfeasibly long-legged, and incredibly speedy elite orienteer. The age profile for the weekend's competition was very different to what we expect at UK events, with over 250 young elite runners in Antwerp. The GB team had 14 members and achieved several podium places over the weekend. It was good to cheer them in. There was even a small team from the Ukraine.

In order to protect her injured leg, Sandra opted out of the sprints, playing a useful role as club photographer at the start of Sprint 1.



Both races used the usual urban sprint format, with courses planned around a flat, suburban housing area, dotted with small green spaces. There was nothing particularly challenging in terms of navigation... definitely not up to Milton Keynes' standards. Both Ian and I had relatively clean first runs. Buoyed up by our satisfactory performances,

and motivated by the need to warm up, we turned down the chance to watch the elites in action and chose instead to relocate to a riverside cafe for coffee and cake, in the company of other Brits.

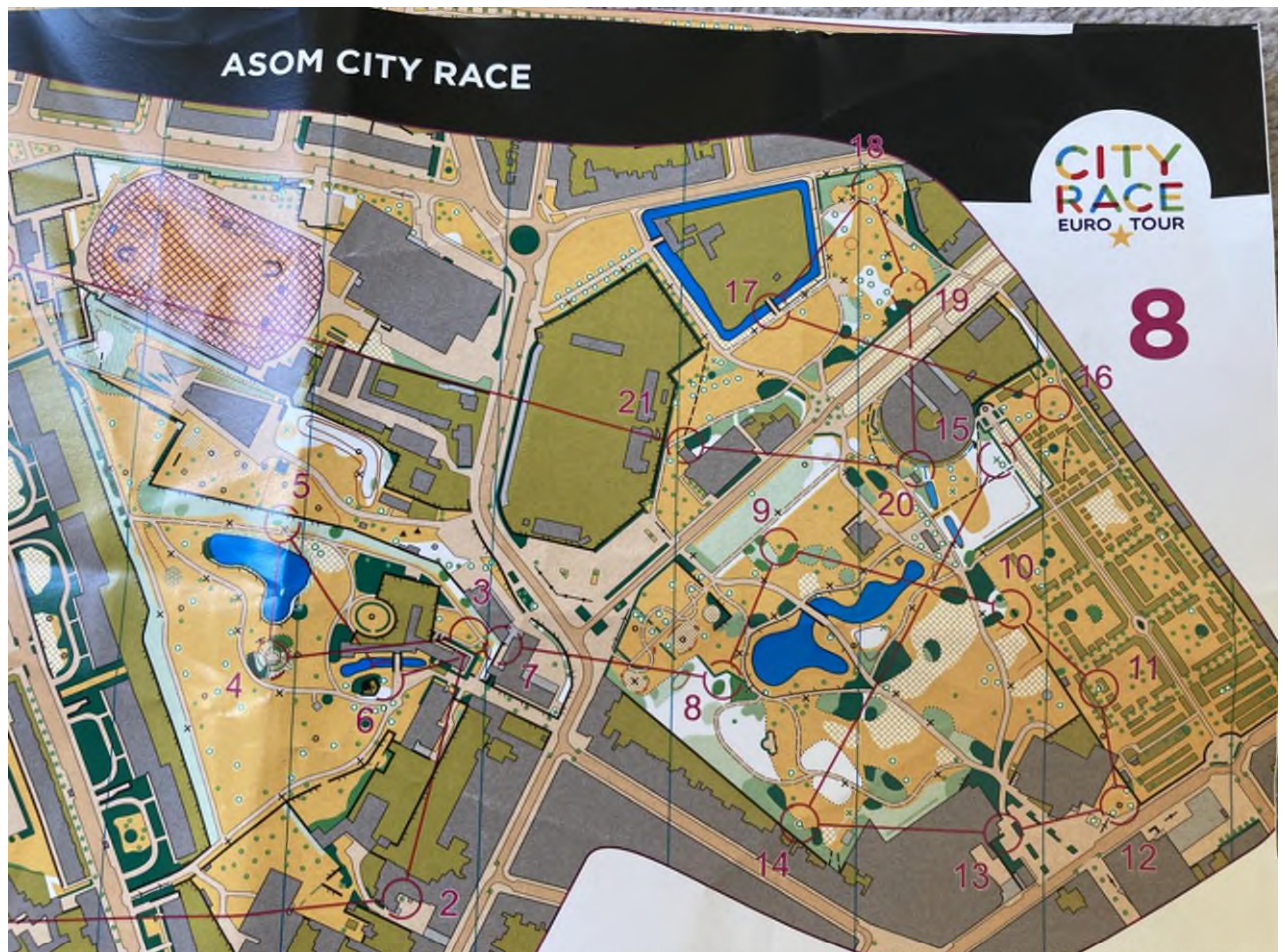
Returning to the fray, we were not as successful... perhaps too chilled/full of cake? Ian ran so fast that he managed to miss out a control. I did find them all, but lost time on one leg when I failed to spot the only contour (a form line) on the map... something I would have known about if I had run the relays... damn. Still, it was good to get the little legs going, and to have some practice before the main event. Over to Sandra again.....

Sunday AM: Antwerp City Race

Or rather, the Suburb-to-the-North-of-Antwerp City Race. This was the event I had come to run, the first of the five I needed to count towards the City Race Euro Tour for 2022. Getting to the start was another trip by tram, then a short walk to the assembly area in yet another school. Today we were early enough to get space inside and even a bench to sit on! Such luxury.

Alongside the City Race, there was also a World Ranking Event (WRE) sprint race for elite orienteers. This had the same finish as us but started at another venue. The elites would start much later than us, so we were able to watch them for two controls on a short loop just before their finish.

It was a beautiful sunny day, which we all appreciated when heading to the start, just a short walk away. The start was slick and well organised and we were all sent on our way in the sunshine. My first control was an easy one, no real route choice, just easing into the map. I then had a short loop of controls which felt like they had been put in to add distance as they were essentially a run into a park, round a pond and then back out the same way. Not very interesting. I had a



longer leg next which moved into the more interesting area, of the map, as you can see from Ann's course (above). This consisted of a series of parks and an old graveyard, providing decent route choice. There were lots of controls, close together, and the resulting constant changes in direction and dead ends required us to keep cool heads. I made one small mistake, where there were two controls on thickets quite close to each other, and I went to the more visible one that was 20m further away. It probably cost me less than a minute, not exactly catastrophic!

I really enjoyed the run and the finish tunnel, which was lined with people and felt like I was finishing at a huge event. I think I was the first of the SMOCies to start and was the first to finish even with numerous walks to rest my calf. Even with the walking, I finished mid-field which was encouraging.

How did the rest of the team do? Ian, unfortunately, went off too fast again and was disappointed to find that he had missed out a control. Ann had a steady run, finding all her controls in the right order, finishing 5/12 in her age group.

Overall, it was an enjoyable weekend, with great maps and interesting courses. I find the European events interesting... you get a t-shirt for the same levels of entry fees as we pay here (and get nothing) and also the lack of stress they seem to feel about juniors crossing roads. Antwerp is a compact and interesting city, with efficient public transport, so the event is well worth a visit. I believe their intention is to go back to holding this every year, so one to look out for, especially if the organisers can use the historic city centre next time.

