

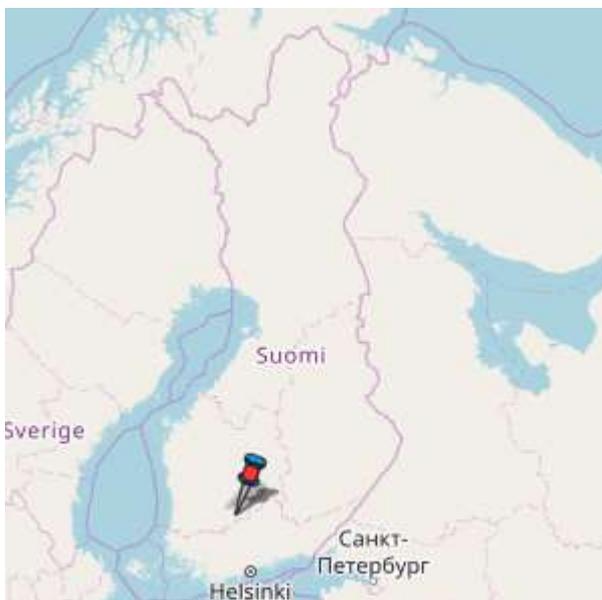
Venla 15th-16th June 2019

Report by Debbie Charlton

'Finland, Finland, Finland, the place where I'd quite like to be...' in the immortal words of Monty Python, was in fact, a place I really quite liked to be.



Saturday 15th June saw Sally Wilkinson (an honorary SMOCie for the weekend), myself, Helen Nisbet and Freya Askham, all assembled ready to run after a three hour train journey from Helsinki to take part in The Venla 2019.



Kangasala, was the location for the race.

The Venla women's race is part of the Jukola weekend. The Jukola relay is the biggest sports event in Finland and the world's biggest relay competition in orienteering.

The walk to the event assembly area led us through acres of tents and overnight pitches. I felt right at home, it was just like walking through a music festival field! The assembly area was a sea of pop-up cafes, sports shops, a special church and the cheerful bustling crowd, creating a magical summer evening.

Sally's leg was 5.8k which she did in 1:31:28.



A fly past by a military jet and a gun blast signalled the start and a 1km run to the start kite. This part was more like a running race than an orienteering race as most competitors chose not to look at their maps until they were near the start kite.

To split everyone up, the first two controls were gaffled with three possibilities for each

and there were also route choices.

Sally says;

'You had to really concentrate on your map and not be influenced by the hundreds of people around you. I chose the safe route via a path and aiming off a bend into the forest to get to my first control. Then a couple of compass bearings and paying attention to the landscape features saw me safely to control 2 and then 3, which was a common control for all competitors and the first TV control. Not somewhere to be caught loitering and studying your map!

Leg 3 – 4 was the first long one and having taken a rough bearing I joined a train of runners following one of the freshly made elephant tracks. The terrain for the first three controls had been through undulating and fairly runnable woodland, but the majority of leg 3 – 4 was green on the map and stepping out of the elephant track would take you into very slow going so the train was definitely the quicker option. However, as the train slowed and split near a control I realised it wasn't mine. I knew from the previous year (you receive an all controls map at the end of the event as well as your own map) that the different gaffles would not be too far from each other, but in quite dense forest 200m can seem a long way! Having worked out approximately where I was, I set off towards the control, but then allowed myself to be sucked towards a group of 30 women when it turned out were all looking for the same point. My Finnish does not go beyond 'kiitos' (thank you) but their English was excellent! Descending on control 4 together was not a problem as each one had a triangular wooden trestle with at least 12 punching points.

Controls 5 and 6 were straight forward and then there was another long leg from 7-8.

This time I decided not to join the train and picked my own route away from the pink line which again went through green forest and very rough open. When I looked at this leg after the event I was pleased that it was the same as taken by a couple of the quickest elite runners, but I was disappointed at how slow I was over the ground. I only saw one other person on the whole leg as nearly everyone had opted for the elephant track following the pink line and I don't think this helped me keep pushing on.

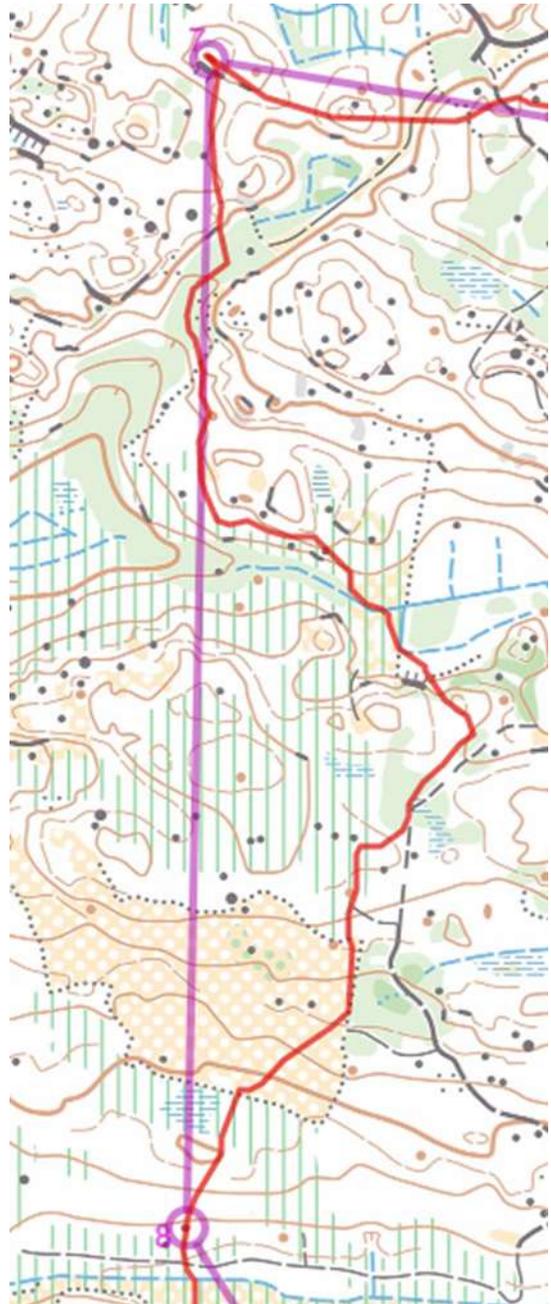
The last three controls were straight forward and then it was a downhill run into the arena to hand over to Debbie.'

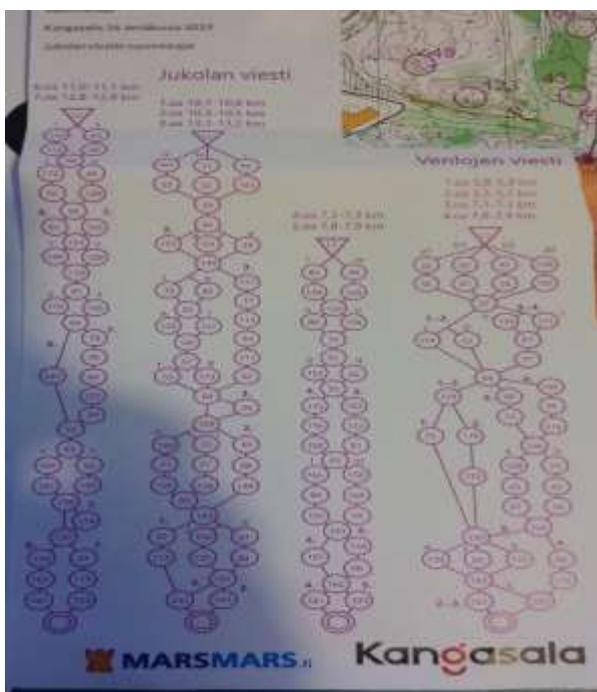
Sally came storming into the handover arena and I ran off on the second leg.

It was the most amazing feeling to be running in the forest and realise all the other competitors were women.

The style of orienteering was unlike any other I've ever done. The maps and legends and all the stuff that goes with orienteering was the same, but I realised early on that I needed to give up any pretence of finding my own way, it was just not possible.

With over 2,000 competitors in the wood, doing one of a limited number of variations on a theme, it was inevitable that you ended up in a long line of women 'trudging' to the next control. The one time I thought I'd got in front of the pack and made my own route choice, I soon realised that my 'pack' had gone the other way round a rocky outcrop, so I turned round, and was once again at the back of the pack.





I was happily following my tribe, towards control 10, but realised that they were not going to my next control. Somehow, I managed to work out where I was, and luckily my control was where I thought it should have been, it could all have gone so horribly wrong at that point.

The run in to hand over to Helen felt like it was going on for ever, with so many people watching I felt I had to keep running as fast as I could to hand over to Helen on leg 3. I completed my leg 5.3k in 1:14:59.

Helen reports; ‘The Venla relay had been on my orienteering bucket list for a while. Even though relays aren’t my forte, I had heard about the fantastic experience and the reality didn’t disappoint. You would think the locals would object when their area was suggested for the next Jukola – but quite the opposite because it means they get a new infrastructure for free. New roads and water supplies are built to supply the area and they leave them in situ afterwards.

I went to watch Sally in the start lane and only then grasped how massive the event is. Once the start pistol went, it took several minutes for all the runners to pass me. 1975 teams each with 4 runners – just under 8,000 competitors would enter the forest over the next few hours.

Each runner had at least 4 radio controls so we could track our team's progress through the forest. We were glad to have Sally with her expertise from last year's Jukola to explain the process as it was very different to any UK relay. Once Debbie had passed through her second check point, I made my way through to quarantine. Debbie had a great run – I had only just had time to check out the two routes out of the start field when I saw her running in.

Map in hand, I exited the field and started the long 1km run into the forest. I had heard from Sally that competitors ran in large groups along the elephant tracks. When they arrive in the rough area of the next control they join forces and happily share info about the control location on their map. How different from the British style where this would be viewed as “against the rules”. Likewise I've never been a fan of elephant tracks as they never quite go along the bearing I want and similarly I've never liked running in large groups as I always want to go at my own pace – so this was a big culture shock! But I soon had to change my game – at my first control I was on the wrong spur – so I joined in the chat and quickly relocated myself to the correct control.

The next few controls went to plan. At number 4 I was first to shout down the slope 'is that 125?' before I wasted energy picking my way down to it. I joined the pack to the next few controls but for 8 to 9 I had a longer leg and there was a path that contoured around a few hills so I broke from the pack and made my way along the path. Big mistake. I was soon virtually alone - not a problem – but stopped too high and lost time. Made a similar mistake at control 13 by forging my own route. Lesson learnt, I joined the pack and the community mentality for the rest of the course.

At 7.2km my course was longer than my usual Green course and I was a little



disappointed that I just missed the cut off before the mass start but managed to give Freya a shout and a wave as I ran into the Finish field just as she exited the mini mass Start.

It was a very different experience to orienteering in the UK. Next time I will embrace the pack mentality and be first to ask for help – it's the Scandinavian way. When in Finland ...'

Helen did leg 3, 7.2k in 1:58:33

Freya's account of the day follows; 'It felt like a really long day already by the time it was my turn to put on my o-shoes and make my way across to the changeover area. It had been fascinating watching the race on the big screens, wandering around the huge arena, shopping and generally soaking up the atmosphere but now I had to concentrate. I was surprisingly relaxed and although the team had done a great job it looked like we would just miss the last cut-off time and I would have to take part in the mass start for all those left to complete our legs. There were probably about 50 of us at this point and the marshals removed the barrier that had been set up to separate those coming in from those on their outward leg and we were all told to stand by our maps which were laid out in long rows on low A-frames. I could tell the atmosphere was going to be great because as we stood there waiting for the countdown to the start others around me were laughing and explaining the jokes the commentator was making in Finnish on the PA. As we all started and ran out of the changeover area I just saw Helen running down from her last control to my left waving madly and it gave me a real boost to know she was home. Her wave felt like a handover in itself!

I kept to a steady pace on the 900m of so to the start kite knowing there was a long way to go (at least another 7.9km!) and I decided to take the longer but safer path route to the area near my first control. Sally had warned us that most of the Finnish competitors stuck mainly to the "pink line" route simply taking a bearing from one control to the next regardless of any vegetation, marshes or line features. I overshot slightly on number 1 but spotted the spur and circled back just in time. I saw several other controls on my way to number 2 and realised just how easy it was going to be to get distracted by controls not my course. Number 3 was the TV control that I'd been watching on the big screen for most of the day and it was a little surreal to actually be there and this was the first time I actually felt the effect of the gaffles as groups streamed off in different directions. I stuck to my bearing and contours made this one easier to find. By this time "trains" of runners was forming and on this slightly longer leg I realised that it was going to be a balancing act between keeping up the pace with the line of runners I was in but also checking my bearing and location. At various points the group split to take different routes and you had to decide quick or risk being run over or left behind! As the controls ticked by I recognised a few other girls but you could never be sure your next control would be the same as theirs or different. Sometimes on a leg, runners would be calling out to others around them and I realised they were checking the number of the control the group was heading for but of course they were speaking Finnish. I asked in English and they chatted back with me trying to teach me the next number in Finnish which was mind-blowing whilst trying to run and navigate! It was a great atmosphere though and I was loving the adrenaline rush!

The terrain was pretty runnable with areas of rock where you had to take it steady but many, many elephant tracks criss-crossing in all directions had built up across the different legs. About two-thirds into my course the planes which had flown over to start the race did a fly past for the crowds at the arena. It took me a minute to work out what was happening and it was deafening. It was a bit scary for a while as it felt a little like being hunted down!

On my way to control 16 another girl and I actually broke away from a larger group and we were right as they were all heading too far west (assuming they were going to the same control as us?!) and as we headed to 17 I found myself at the front of quite a long train of runners which was a new experience and boy did I feel the pressure! Luckily it was just where I hoped and all that was left was to cross the track and follow the well-worn route down to one of the final controls. I know I had a huge smile on my face as I gave it everything I had left on the run-in. I was on a massive adrenaline high. I'd finished 911th (out of 1635) on my leg in under an hour and a half and even picked up 96 places for the team. I enjoyed it even more than I thought I would and can't wait to have another go – perhaps even in the Jukola! Freya completed leg 4, 7.5k in 1:27:55.

Here is a short clip which gives some of the flavour of the event.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?reload=9&v=3rjCm39IBc4>

We didn't stay for the Jukola, the 7 man/woman relay that runs through the night. We headed straight back to Helsinki and spent Sunday sampling the delights of the city. Perhaps in hindsight we should have, even if we didn't know any of the teams, it would have been wonderful to watch the spectacle through the night and see the dawn rise, maybe next year.....