

Orienteering Australia – Hall of Fame General Division

Orienteering SA nominates Kay Haarsma for this award.

1. Introduction

Known today as a pioneer of mountain bike orienteering (MTBO), Kay Haarsma has made exceptional contributions to orienteering for over four decades. Her leadership spans establishing schools competition frameworks; junior and elite athlete development; national and international coaching; governance; and a long list of events and coaching innovations.

2. Schools Orienteering and Youth Development

A PE teacher and sports scientist, Kay has been central to developing schools orienteering in SA and nationally. She initiated the first SA Schools Orienteering Championships (1979), unofficial Australian Schools Championships (1985), and Schools Relay Championships (1986). In the early 1980s, she drove establishment of the Australian Secondary Schools Orienteering Championships (ASSOC), supporting interstate collaboration and national endorsement through the Australian Secondary Schools Sports Federation. She coached and managed several early SA teams and introduced team uniforms subsequently adopted by other states.

3. Junior World Orienteering Championships (JWOC)

Kay's advocacy was critical in securing national commitment for Australia's JWOC participation when the International Orienteering Federation considered establishing the event in 1989. She was appointed coach or manager for Australian JWOC teams on seven occasions: coach in 1991, 1993 and 1994, and team manager in 1996, 1999, 2000 and 2003. Her repeated appointments reflect both her expertise and the trust placed in her nationally, with JWOC providing a pathway for developing Australian coaches internationally.

4. National Junior Squad and Coaching Leadership

In 1983, Kay was appointed manager and coach of the newly established National Junior Squad. She immediately introduced structured systems that professionalised junior development, including squad newsletters, athlete surveys on training practices, and coordinated camps. The first national camp was held in Ballarat in 1984, followed by a Canberra camp with Australian Institute of Sport support. Her work laid foundations for a nationally coordinated junior pathway.

Kay also played a key role in elite coaching. For the 1985 World Orienteering Championships hosted in Australia, she was appointed Assistant Coach before later being

named joint coach alongside Clive Roper – a rare instance of an entirely Australian coaching team at World Championships.

5. Athlete Development and Sports Science

From 1988 to 1995, Kay served as state coach for a South Australian Sports Institute (SASI) orienteering squad. Athletes benefited from sports science testing, sports psychology support, and financial assistance for travel. This program significantly enhanced athlete preparation until support ended when SASI narrowed its focus to Olympic and Commonwealth Games sports.

Kay innovated continuously: using early sports heart rate monitors; taking ice vests to overseas World Championships; deploying sport scientists for indoor and field testing; testing early head-mounted cameras; creating terrain time trials; and authoring “Orienteering” (Leisure Time Series, Methuen 1984); “Orienteering Training Diary” (1993); and “SASI Psych Orienteering” with Cathy Martin (1990).

6. Mountain Bike Orienteering (MTBO)

Kay pioneered MTBO in Australia as both elite competitor and coach. Following research into European practices, she organised Australia's first MTBO event in 1995 in the Adelaide Hills. The event attracted a diverse field and demonstrated the viability of the discipline in Australia.

Her foundational MTBO development included course planning for Australian Championships and contributing to national competition structure. Kay was appointed National Coach for MTBO in 2003, leading to a national squad with junior pathways and introduction of national rankings, rules and technical guidelines.

Kay served as National MTBO Team Coach (2004, 2007–2011, 2015, 2017, 2018) and Team Manager (2024). Under her leadership, Australia developed a sustained international presence, and Junior World MTBO Championships participation from 2010. This notably included World Championship gold in 2015. Kay herself achieved first in W60 at World Masters MTBO Series (2015) and third (2017).

7. Northern Territory and Indigenous Engagement

In 2012, Kay undertook exploratory work in Alice Springs leading to structured schools orienteering programs across central and northern Australia. Between 2013 and 2014, she delivered school sessions, interschool competitions and teacher training, establishing an annual Alice Springs Schools Championships. Many participants were Indigenous students, representing significant expansion into new communities.

In 2013 she suggested orienteering for the biannual Alice Springs Masters Games and has helped coordinate the program three times since, in conjunction with Top End Orienteers.

8. National Leadership and Governance

Kay has contributed extensively to national governance and policy development. She proposed the Australian Orienteering League concept in 1991, aiming to raise elite competition profile, attract sponsorship and generate media interest.

She also served on multiple national selection panels, representing South Australia on the National Team Selection Panel (1992–93), serving on the JWOC Selection Panel (1994–2003, as chair from 1998–2003), and acting as an MTBO selector (2002–03).

9. Conclusion

Kay Haarsma continues to contribute her ideas and efforts to develop and promote the sport of orienteering to this day. A Hall of Fame award would be a fitting recognition for her decades of exceptional service.