

PEAK PERFORMANCE

Hair-raising activities, computerised scoring – it could have been a disaster, but the event devised by a team of young Leaders was a huge success, reports **Matt Richards**

EXPLORER SCOUTS

I'd lost count of how many times, sitting with the team who were helping me make Apex Challenge happen, that I'd been asked "But will it work?" There were so many things that might not be right. Did they have enough time? Was it going to be challenging enough? What if they all finished early? Was it too complicated? The basic idea hadn't really changed much. It was set to be a go-where-you-please score event, but the project just seemed to get bigger and bigger.

I wanted it to be the sort of event I'd always wanted to do when I was a young Scout. You'd be sitting there in school in the middle of your final French lesson for the week. For the previous couple of weeks you'd been looking forward to the event. Every day seemed to get longer and longer till it finally arrived. It had to be something a bit different, though – there needed to be elements that surprised people. You know, when you've been somewhere and seen something and thought "Wow – I'd have never thought of doing that."

Tuning in to the weather forecast in the run-up to 14 September became a daily obsession. There was a big 'low' approaching with a cold front. "Rain in most parts by the end of the weekend." How can Sián Lloyd say that and still smile? I had visions of 100 Explorers wandering around in something reminiscent of the trenches of the Somme. There wasn't a wet weather plan. Do or die.



Above: Ruth Parkinson and Sam Doyle study the specially created Apex map
Right: The girls from Doncaster East plan their next move

It was my idea to start with, but I still needed to assemble the team. Obviously there was the old Scouting gang back in Sheffield that I'd grown up with. They came on board quite early on.

Then there were my housemates from Leeds. At first they just saw me sending off all these letters trying to get prizes, and didn't take much notice. They agreed to help, probably thinking I wouldn't take them seriously. Some of them hadn't been involved in Scouting before, so it was good to have them coming to it with a completely open mind and coming up with new ideas.



As the event got closer, there seemed to be more and more to do. I wanted a big impact from the moment you came over the hill and into sight of the start. Huge signs bearing our new logo lined the roadsides as the teams approached from across the County. A projector screen at registration carried a looped computer presentation to set the mood for the day. A sound system was rigged up with lively music to keep the troops amused while they waited to set off.

Technology played a big part in it all, really. I suppose I am a bit of a techno-geek. But it all had to look the part. Having a computer scientist for a housemate helped – not least with the database system he created to log the teams' progress as they set off and when they got back.

There had to be some sort of computer system for the scoring to be able to handle all the different elements we'd built into the challenge. Points for bases, extra points for controls, then points deducted for every minute they were late. This wasn't something you could add up on a tally

chart with a pencil and a bit of paper.

There was such a build-up to the Saturday morning. I don't know what the people taking part felt like, but I was really getting into it all by now. All this planning and worrying but still no sign of Sián's rain. Within an hour of opening the doors of the registration tent, they were all off, trampling through bogs, jumping over ditches and wading through bracken that came up to my shoulders – so it must have completely swamped some of the younger ones.

Wandering around the Burbage Valley to see how they were getting on revealed something like a bizarre scene from the Famous Five. By lunchtime there were groups of slightly muddy youngsters sitting all over, eating their packed lunches. If I'd seen a bottle of ginger beer come out of a rucksack, the image would have been complete.

And they were all smiling. They told me with such enthusiasm how they'd narrowly missed falling off the electron ladder spanning the river, and how they'd set off on the mountain bikes to find the flag but had got lost on the 200-

Above left: clipping the punch at the end of the ladder walk of death!
Above right: A pleasing bike ride at one of the bases

mile ride and ended up going two miles up the wrong hill.

Suddenly it dawned on me that most of them couldn't care less how many points they'd got. They were just having a damn good day out. Of course there were the teams really going for the prizes and racing round at top speed. But for most of them it was about getting away from their parents for the day and spending it having a laugh with their mates.

Time was getting on and I had to head back to base. It wouldn't do for me to be out wandering around when the first team could be getting back any minute. The computer might start knocking points off my score. Except I didn't have a score. I was getting too into it all now. I actually did want to be taking part. But no – back to base.

The team were hard at work ready for the hordes to arrive back. The first red-faced, more than slightly out-of-breath group came dashing round the corner. "Are we late – are we late?" "No no, you're all right." The trickle of teams arriving back quickly turned into a torrent of proudly brandished control cards. The clamour, the eager faces, desperate to know how they'd done – they were sent to sit and relax while the mass scoring system swung into action.

This bit had to be slick. I didn't want them waiting around for hours on end. Neither did I want to give the game away

How the Apex Challenge worked

The Apex Challenge was a score competition. Teams of four had six hours to visit as many controls and bases as they could.

They got 50 points for completing each of eight activities (climbing, abseiling, mountain biking, rope bridges and so on). But the winning teams could enhance their score by visiting other control markers in more remote locations to top up their score. Planning, teamwork and strategy were crucial.

The winning teams took home more than £500-worth of prizes ranging from top-of-the-range waterproofs to theme park tickets and gift vouchers – all donated by outdoor companies after a few grovelling letters.



Above left: The ladder crawl was set in front of crowds of tourists at Burbage Bridge
Above right: One slip and it's over – a Keighley Leader feels the strain
Below: Halfway there – heading for the punch is harder than it looks

shouted. The parents were starting to arrive by now. So off they all went – back to another week of French lessons.
 Back we all went too, full of bigger and better ideas for next year. Anything to give me an excuse to watch good old Siân again. Oh and I suppose, yes, it did work. ■

For more details visit the website at www.apexchallenge.co.uk



about what was to happen next. “So do we go home now?”. “No, not yet,” I said. The grand finale was yet to come.

The masses gathered, not quite sure what would happen next. I wasn't 100 per cent sure what would happen next. I had an idea what I wanted to happen, but the team was still beavering away behind the scenes. Well, behind the side wall of the marquee – but you know what I mean.

First up was a montage of photos from the display on the big screen. Of course they'd all seen the guy flashing the camera around, but probably didn't dream of seeing the results by the end of the day. And then came the awards ceremony itself. The computer database

had done its stuff. There were the results in glorious full colour on screen. I suppose it must have looked like something off television. A bit like the Oscars, South Yorkshire-style. Except they all get really bitchy in Hollywood. Here they'd all got the prize – an event not quite like anything they'd done before.

Oh yes – the team. They were still at it around the side of the tent. Churning out paper faster than Fleet Street. A pack of results detailing where the teams came, an analysis of the places they had visited, and even, to top it all off, a computer-generated map showing their individual routes around the Burbage Valley.

So, do you want to come back again next year? “Yes,” they said, or rather

What the participants thought

- “The event was really well organised. We really enjoyed ourselves – we've got the bruises to prove it.”

Fighting Force

“We came 16th but still had a great time.” Tickhill 2

- “Have more things like this – it's been fantastic.”

Ay-up Munkeys

- “Everything was excellent and our day couldn't have been better.”

Norton Nemesis

- “We congratulate you on the best-run event we've had the pleasure of attending in many a long year.”

Keighley Explorers

- “Many thanks for organising the event – our Scouts had a great time.”

Wilsden Scouts

TIME	ACTIVITY	ZONE	METHOD	INSTRUCTIONS
90 mins	Obstacle Course	Values	Teambuilding, Activities with others	To encourage communication between Explorer Scouts, ask them to construct an obstacle course using nets, ropes, pioneering poles or anything that's handy in your meeting place. In small groups, one Explorer Scout should be nominated as Team Communicator. The rest of the team are tied together and blindfolded using scarves. The communicator shouts directions to the team to help them through the obstacle course without any other members of the team speaking.
2 hours	Local Facilities for the Blind	Community service	Outdoor activities, Projects	Following on from raising awareness during the previous activity, Explorer Scouts could assess what problems blind people find in their local community. These might range from badly-maintained pavements to poorly-designed local facilities. Why not let the local Council know your findings? You could do this by visiting the Council Offices, submitting a report or by sending in a video.
2 hours	Make a Video	Skills, Community service	Outdoor activities, technology	To let the Council know your findings, why not produce a video of the local issues? Perhaps a Unit Leader has a camera you can borrow, or an Explorer Scout could borrow one from school/college. Unit members could perform different roles, for example, presenter, director, camera operator, etc. The video could include text and credits if you can get access to editing facilities.
1 hour	Visit	Values	Visits and visitors	To find out what facilities are available locally to support blind and partially-sighted people, you could ask a local professional to explain what provision there is, and how the Explorer Scout Unit could assist. It may be that the Unit could raise money for a specific project or members could give some time to assist with an outing. You can get plenty of information on services to support blind and partially sighted people from the Royal National Institute of the Blind (www.rnib.org.uk) or telephone 020 7388 1266.
5 mins	Closing Ceremony and notices	Values	Keeping the promise	Always use the end of the meeting for notices. They are more likely to be remembered if they are fresh in the mind at the end of the night!