With the support of the Chui’s Student Excellence Scheme – Ho Wing Hing Talent Fund, I had the opportunity to travel to Estonia from 28 September to 5 October 2016 to attend the XXVIII Suunto Games 2016. I am very grateful for this opportunity to compete alongside the world’s top teams of Sweden, Switzerland, Russia, Norway and Finland. This year, the annual orienteering world ranking event attracted a record-breaking number of 1,068 participants of which around 200 orienteers including myself competed in the elite categories.

Orienteering is a sport which challenges both the mind and the body – competitors are required to complete a cross-country course connected by control points marked on a specially drawn map. There is no fixed route, and whoever finishes the course (i.e. visiting every single control in the given order) in the shortest time wins. This intriguing sport has brought me to many different countries over the past 15 years, but there is still a lot of unexplored territory. This was my first time in Estonia and it was definitely a great week to remember.

PRE-RACE TRAINING

I arrived in Estonia on 28 September – three days before the Games for rest, climate adaptation and pre-race training aimed at familiarization with Estonian terrains and mapping styles. With immense generosity from the Swedish team, I was able to join several trainings in both forest and urban areas with the world-class team. It took all my strength and will to keep up with the Swedish girls in the forest, and although I only managed that for a few sprint loops (after which they sped up and did a few more), it was most exhilarating to train with elites from orienteering’s origin country! The Swedish orienteers and coaches were all very generous in sharing their techniques and invaluable thoughts on training and racing. I was also deeply enlightened by their devotion and words of encouragement. I made several new friends and we are hoping to meet again in future world class events, including the World Orienteering Championships 2017 (WOC 2017) to be held in Estonia next July.
THE SUUNTO GAMES

The Suunto Games comprises of two world ranking events, starting with a long distance race (>10 km) on 1 October, and ends with a middle-distance race on 2 October (~6 km). With fresh insight and experience from pre-race training, I felt confident and well-prepared to tackle the delicate and marshy terrain of the Estonian forests.

Heavy rains took all competitors by surprise in the midst of the first day’s long distance race. Keeping my calm, I completed that race within my aim of <3 hours. After a quick evaluation at the race finish, I went back to recuperate for the middle distance race which was due to start in less than 24 hours.

The second day broke with heavier rains, lowering the temperature to around 10 °C, but that did not cool my determination to run a good race. With a much shorter course in a middle distance race, there is also less room for mistakes. I focused on navigating calmly and taking on the advice from the Swedish coach to just go straight, instead of running around to avoid the marshes. This strategy helped me scrape down on my finish time by minimizing the running distance and narrowing the range of route choices I had to consider. The shorter legs in the design of a middle distance race required intense navigation and this strengthened my map-to-terrain contact and amplified my sense of certainty and confidence as I raced. With only minor mistakes and a smooth run, I still felt strength in my legs as I sprinted at top speed toward the finish line, clocking 62 minutes 51 seconds at a good pace of 12.3 min/km.

(Left) An excerpt of the middle distance race map (credits to the Suunto Games official website) in Haanja. The triangle marks the start. Marshes are shaded with narrow blue lines, e.g. the light blue patch cut across by the line connecting controls 2 and 3.

(Right) My finishing dash toward the finish control at the long distance race.
The two days of intense racing and a particularly good result from my middle distance run has resulted in a giant leap of 11% in my world ranking and boosting my Asian ranking to a solid 5th place. Although I am still a long way from being ranked among the world's best orienteers, I am highly satisfied with this improvement which also equates added advantage in future world ranking events.

The Games was followed by three days of intensive post-race training of two sessions per day in a wide range of forest terrains to prepare orienteers for WOC 2017. I was able to further hone my orienteering skills through various course designs and training methods, boosting my confidence for the races to come.

Mass start at relay training on 4 October 2016. Seen in the photo are orienteers from Norway (first left), Sweden (in yellow) and myself (third left in blue).

WHAT’S NEXT?

Overseas experience is of utmost importance for Hong Kong orienteers like myself as our city is deprived of vast runnable forests with challenging terrain suitable for orienteering. This award was not only a pathway to another foreign adventure, it was also a truly significant recognition for my sports achievement and hard work. My eyes are set on breaking new grounds for myself and Hong Kong at the World Orienteering Championships next summer, and also to defend my title at the Asian Orienteering Championships which will be hosted by Hong Kong in 2018.

It is an ongoing challenge to balance between my orienteering pursuits and intense research work as a PhD student. The rewarding experience in Estonia has reinforced my determination to train harder to equip myself for the next challenges. Beholding the honor of being a Chui’s Student Excellence Scheme awardee, I will continue to pursue higher goals in orienteering and make further and continuous contributions to academia as a researcher and HKU student.