The vagaries of the BOF Ranking Scheme - Jonathan Gilbert

Being relatively new to the sport, I am not sure how long BOF has run a ranking system for its entire membership. The current system started in 2011 and you can find out your current ranking on the BOF website (http://www.britishorienteering.org.uk/page/rankings). The details of how the rankings are calculated are quite complicated, but for those who are mathematically inclined they are available at http://www.britishorienteering.org.uk/images/uploaded/downloads/even ts_competitionrule2014_s_rankingscheme.pdf.

Briefly this is how it works:
- Your personal ranking score is the sum of your best 6 results over the last 12 months.
- The average ranking score (per event) across the BOF membership is adjusted each week to be 1000. This is why the number of ranking points you have been allocated for an event can change with time.
- The ranking scores calculated for a specific course at an event take into account the quality of the field, by averaging all the ranking scores of all competitors taking part. This gives the average score for the course.
- The distribution of competitors' current ranking scores (mathematically the standard deviation) is also worked out, and the distribution of the scores allocated at the event match this historic distribution. Suppose, the average and standard deviation of the runners running a course are 1100 and 100. If on the day, the average time is 100 minutes and the standard deviation of times is 10 minutes, then if you complete the course in 90 minutes you would get 1200 (1100 + 100) ranking points. If you did it in 80 minutes, you would get 1300.
- Ranking points are only allocated for Level A/B/C Events and there have to be 10 or more competitors with an existing ranking on the course.
- It is widely thought that you receive more points at a Level A Event, however this is not true and the scores from all events are treated equally. So, the points you get for a run at the JK are the same as the points you get from a local event. However, if you have a good run at the JK, you are likely to score more points, due to the quality of the field pushing the average score up.

So mathematically, the system is based on sound principles, however it does throw up some oddities. For example, the first day of the Thetford Thrash at Santon Downham: On the Short Blue Course (6 km), Jim Prowting (TVOC) came 3rd in a time of 53:10 and received 1151 ranking points. On the Blue Course (7.4km), David Cronk (WAOC) came 4th in a time of 52:29 and also received 1151 ranking points. The sharp-eyed among you will have spotted that David ran far quicker (7.1 min/km) than Jim (8.9 mins/km), which hardly seems fair - guess which course I ran? If David had run the Short Blue at the same speed as he ran the Blue, by my calculations, he would have gained 1274 ranking points! It is possible that the Short Blue course was more difficult (either navigationally or in the terrain crossed), but having looked at the courses, this does not seem to be the case. The only explanation (I can think of) is that the quality of the Short Blue field was higher than the Blue (so the average score allocated was higher), but no-one ran to their potential.

Another oddity, is that for 2 orienteers of equal ability, the one who does more events in a 12 month period is likely to have the higher ranking score. Suppose Sarah does 6 events and scores 980, 990, 1000, 1010, 1020 & 1030, her ranking score will be 6030. However, Sally does 12 events and scores 980, 980, 990, 990, 1000, 1000, 1010, 1010, 1020, 1020, 1030 & 1030, but her ranking score is 6120.

So to boost your ranking score: Run a course with a strong field, e.g. by attending major events such as JK or Scottish 6m; attend lots of events; and of course run well!