



BRITISHROWING

Honorary Rowing Safety Adviser Monthly Report

February 2023

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Incidents Reported in February

TEAMWORK | OPEN TO ALL | COMMITMENT

Tragic incident following a head race

A rower collapsed on the water and subsequently tragically died following a head race. There is an announcement on the British Rowing website [here](#). As this incident is subject to an independent investigation, it would not be appropriate to comment further here.

Take care of members of the public

A woman was seen on the edge of the steps and was later found to be in the water. A coach went back to the steps to check on her, she was sitting on the bottom step, submerged in the water with her head out of the water. She told the coach that her plan was to take her life. After some talking to try and persuade her to come out, she moved into the middle of the river, floating. An 8 was approaching with a launch and the coach signalled for the 8 to stop and the launch to help. The launch helped bring her to land where the coach dragged her out of the water. The woman was taken into the boathouse to have a warm shower and hot drink. The Police and Ambulance arrived and took care of her.

Tragically, on average, around 400 people drown around the UK every year and a further 200 take their own lives in our waters. There is more information [here](#). The British Rowing webpage on “Supporting Positive Mental Health” can be found [here](#). This includes a link to the Mental Health First Aid England website [here](#) where there is information on training courses.

If you see someone who you think may be at risk then please take time to talk to them. They can be helped by simply having someone to listen to them. If you want to be better prepared to help then please take one of the Mental Health First Aid courses.

Take care when driving towards the sun

According to the Incident Reports, a coaching launch proceeding at speed collided with a 4+ travelling in the opposite direction. This resulted in the launch mounting the 4+ at an acute angle, with most of the force taken by the boat and the rower at bow. The launch had just passed under a bridge. The sun was very low in the eastern sky and was shining from directly ahead of the launch. After the collision, the bow rower was lying down and showed no sign of attempting to sit up. It was later found that the bow rower had suffered a fractured skull but is now recovering.

The basic rule here is that if you cannot see where you are going then you should stop or at the very least slow down. Rule 6 (Safe Speed) of the International Regulations for Preventing Collisions at Sea (the [COLREGs](#)) explains this in some detail. It is not acceptable to drive into another boat just because it is difficult to see. Please also understand that launches are more manoeuvrable than rowing boats, and have an unobstructed view ahead. It should be easy for a launch driver to avoid a collision.

I have been notified that the Marine Accident Investigation Branch (MAIB) is considering investigating this incident.

Take care to check all of your boat

A rower ran their thumb along the saxboard. Part of the boat had splintered and went through the tip of their thumb. (There is a photograph in the report but this is too graphic to show here). The boat has been quarantined until the damage can be repaired. The rower had to go to A&E to have the piece removed.

Please take time to check your boats thoroughly before going afloat.

Take care with front end drills

A 4x capsized in choppy water and with a gusty wind when doing front end (catch) drills in shallow water. The crew was able to bring the boat to shore, and get back in.

In another incident the same thing happened with a 4- and in yet another incident a 2x capsized when doing roll-ups.

Please take care when doing front end drills with the blades square in the water. This is an unstable position and it is difficult for the crew to control the boat's balance.

Take care not to wear loose fitting clothing

A junior 2x capsized gently so that both rowers were in the water but were able hold onto the boat; they were only wet from the waist down. There was a launch with them. The boat was to be righted so that crew could get back in. One of the rowers was wearing a coat that they had unzipped when they had got too hot. The pocket was also unzipped.

Unfortunately when turning the boat a coat pocket was snagged on a rigger bolt. This caused in the rower to be pulled under the water. The rower realised what was happening and decided to duck under the boat to the other side. This was quite frightening for him. Both rowers were then pulled quickly into the launch and taken to land to get warm and dry. The coach then went back to retrieve the boat.

Please take care not to wear loose fitting clothing.

If you have a health condition then please let someone know

A coach was aware that one of the crew had a long-term health condition. When rowing back to the club, the rower started to shorten up and become ineffective in the water. They stopped and the rower reported being slightly nauseous. However, after some minutes rest, the rower was able to continue. After about 500m they stopped again and the rower said that he wanted to vomit but was unable to do so. The rest of the crew rowed back to the boathouse.

The rower was assisted from the boat. Once inside, the rower was immediately seen by an A&E doctor who is a member of the club. The doctor advised that the rower should go home to rest but that he should not drive himself.

This rower had already made the club aware of this medical condition. As a result his crewmates and the club were able to assist him when he needed it.

Take care with inexperienced coxes

There have been several reports where inexperienced coxes have allowed their boats to collide with stationary objects (a submerged tree and the bank) or with other boats. If you have a cox that lacks experience then provide them with all the training that you can and let them start their coaching journey in relatively slow boats.

Take care to ensure that your cox wears a lifejacket

There were two separate reports from the same city of coxes from different clubs not wearing life jackets. Please understand that a cox is responsible for his or her crew so it is important that they are protected in this way if they enter the water.

Do not lie back in the boat

At the end of a 2k row the rower in a 1x was tired and laid back to a flat position in the boat. When laid back in the boat the oars were released and this resulted in a capsized. Lying back in the boat not only puts the rower at risk, as in this case, but can also be interpreted by rescuers as a collapse. Please take care to remain upright.

Rowers with Epilepsy and rowers who suffer non-epileptic seizures

There have been several discussions on this topic, some of which have been protracted. In all cases reference was made to the British Rowing Medical Panel Guidance on Rowing and Epilepsy available [here](#). This applies to juniors and to adults.

This guidance provides the opportunity to base decisions on a “special individualised risk assessment of the individual and the event”. In my view this should be completed by the rowers medical team. It is best not to rely on buoyancy aids or lifejackets. People who are fitting may have no control of their breathing and inhaling even a relatively small volume of water can be fatal.

It should be remembered that rowers with epilepsy can be at significant risk. In 2021, Leo Lehner, aged 15, drowned after apparently suffering a seizure while rowing with his high school team in Dayton, Ohio. According to the Dayton Daily News Leo’s father told police that Leo “had a long history of epilepsy and had seizures ‘during his most calm moments.’”

Testing Lifejackets

There was an enquiry about the British Rowing standards for Life Jacket checks and whether it is acceptable for a club to do the visual checks themselves or the full replacement of canister and firing mechanism.

The response was that we provide guidance and advice; we do not define standards. There is advice on checking lifejackets in the Safety Alert [here](#).

When I check mine, and those that I look after for other people then, in addition to the visual checks, I remove each cylinder and weigh it and check its weight against that shown on the cylinder. I then replace each cylinder and inflate each lifejacket using a manual pump. If each one retains full pressure for more than one hour (I usually leave it overnight), then I release the air and repack it.

Clubs that do not use the Incident Reporting system

Believe it or not there are some clubs that do not use the Incident Reporting System. I have even heard of one that actively discourages its members from reporting. We have used ClubHub to identify clubs with over 100 members and I have written the following note to those clubs. Unfortunately the information in Club Hub was not reliable and some of the clubs identified in this way do not have over 100 members. Please keep your club's data up to date. This is the note sent to those clubs

Dear Club Safety Contact

Thank you for completing the annual Safety Audit on behalf of your club.

I have recently completed an analysis of incidents reported using the British Rowing Incident Reporting system. It is pleasing to note that the majority of clubs are able to contribute to the safety of the rowing community by sharing information about their incidents. Over 2,000 incidents were reported in 2022.

However, I was disappointed to find that your club did not report any incidents in 2022 even though you have more than 100 members. All clubs have incidents, from time to time, and I find it difficult to accept that a club the size of yours did not have any incidents last year. Incidents include simple capsizes, minor events that do not result in significant harm and near misses. If you believe that your club did not have any incidents last year then please let me know.

We have tried to make incident reporting a simple and straightforward process and take great care to praise and support the clubs that report incidents. We provide rewards and recognition to the clubs that report the most incidents, as described in my latest Monthly Report, attached. We never blame anyone for anything they have reported. We regard incident reporting as a positive activity that promotes rowing safety and supports the rowing community.

The Incident Reporting system can be found [here](#).

I will notify your Regional Rowing Safety Adviser (RRSA). I expect that they will be able to help you to understand that you have an opportunity to support other clubs and explain how to report incidents. If you need help to report incidents then please contact your RRSA or me.

Please discuss this with your club committee and please feel free to contact me if you have any comments or questions.

I have received some replies, many positive saying that they will report in future, and a few saying that they only report serious incidents and they did not have any of those last year. I have replied to all of these and copied the relevant RRSA into those replies. The replies to the negative ones addressed the issues raised and contained something like:-

We regard reporting incidents as a good thing and recognise and reward the clubs that report the highest number of incidents. We welcome reports, thank those who report and never use them to attribute blame. As the National Governing Body for Rowing in the UK, we would like all clubs to report all incidents including near misses. We even receive reports from non-British Rowing clubs.

Reporting only the most serious incidents produces a distorted view of rowing safety. It would make it seem as if most of our incidents cause serious harm.

It is not unusual for people to slip or trip and fall on land. These often cause relatively serious injuries. We would like to have a more complete picture of these incidents. Please report these too.

Support for Adaptive rowing

Although this is not strictly a rowing safety matter you may be interested to know that British Rowing have announced financial and practical support for clubs to increase participation in adaptive rowing. The aim is to help you make it as easy as possible for clubs by providing:-

- Free coaching advice and workshops
- Funding support for an equipment starter pack
- Mentoring advice and support and
- Opportunities for people with an impairment to become adaptive rowing coaches

There is more information [here](#).

Carrying Adrenaline Auto Injectors (AAIs).

There was an inquiry about rowers who may need to use an EpiPens or Adrenaline Auto Injectors (AAIs). These rowers have been given waterproof pouches so that they always have their AAIs on them. The alternative would be for the coach to carry them.

The response was that the waterproof pouch idea is a good one. If an AAI is needed then it could be used without delay. It should be carried and used by the person needing it, themselves. One injection will last about 5 minutes so it may be appropriate for them to carry more than one if they are going to be some distance away from help.

Providing the person who may need assistance consents then it may also help if rowers sitting near to them know where to find the AAI and whether and how to use it.

If an AAI is used then the casualty will not be able to row and will be in need of urgent medical care. Call an ambulance without delay unless medical care is immediately available.

Flares in Gigs

There was a request from the Safety Officer of a Gig club about the carrying pyrotechnic flares in Gigs. This club rarely, if ever, ventures more than a mile offshore, they carry a VHF radio, tuned to Ch 16 if operating solo, and a Personal Locator Beacon. There are currently flares in their safety box that are due to expire and do they need to replace them.

The response was that the first question to ask is "is there anyone there to see them if you fired them?" If there are usually no other boats in sight then flares may not be much use in sending an alarm message, although they may be of some use if a rescuer was searching for you.

Do you row with one boat on its own? Are you sure that it is safe to do so? This is a matter for your risk assessment.

If you have flares then carry them. Make sure that you have the radio and do not be afraid to call "Mayday" if you need urgent help or "Pan-Pan" if your needs are less urgent. Whether you need new flares depends on the circumstances. Personally I would use the radio before I thought of using the flares.

What medical provision should a regatta provide?

I was asked for information on the level of first aid coverage for all the rowing events, the number of first aid providers, the level of training and the medical equipment carried.

The response was that there cannot be a definitive answer to these questions because regattas vary so much in size and scope. The medical provision that would be appropriate for each will depend on the local circumstances. These include the availability of ambulances and the travel time to hospital, the previous experience in delivering medical assistance to competitors and others at the regatta, and the ability of competing clubs to provide care for their own members.

In view of recent incidents I would advise you to ensure that you have at least one AED available. Please check whether there is a public access defibrillator nearby. It should be close to where it is likely to be needed, any delay reduces the survival chances of the casualty. It would also be appropriate to ensure that most of the people who are assisting at the regatta are competent to deliver good quality CPR. I wrote about this in last month's Monthly Report (available [here](#)), this contains information about training.

Good quality CPR is important because if someone suffers a cardiac event then CPR will keep blood circulation around the body, including to their brain.

I was asked by a different regatta organising committee whether they must have St John's Ambulance cover at their regatta in June. They have several members who are medically qualified to a higher standard than St John's staff, and they are willing to take on the First Aider role for the day.

The response was that the first aid provision that you need should be defined by your risk assessment, taking into the account what has happened in the past. If you get the chance then ensure that you have lots of people who can deliver CPR, as it is best done in relays. Also please beg or borrow an AED, if you do not already have one. Please do not assume that just because something has not happened before that it will not happen this year.

The competition organisers should also discuss equipment needs with their medically qualified helpers, this is important. They cannot assume that they will have access to the equipment or drugs carried by an emergency ambulance or air ambulance responding to an incident. They can advise and request but they cannot take over the management of a patient, especially when they may want to do a procedure that does not fall within the ambulance/air ambulance protocols.

What is an at-risk activity?

Following last month's report, I was asked what constitutes an "at risk" activity. The response was that it is more about behaviours than activities. An at-risk behaviour is one where someone has chosen to act in a way that puts him or her at unnecessary risk. For example, someone may decide to cycle along a busy street not wearing a helmet or they may decide to go afloat in a launch not wearing a lifejacket.

The safe or acceptable behaviour can be specified in the risk assessment as a barrier that reduces the probability of a hazardous event occurring or a control that reduces the severity of harm if it does.

Boat Lights

Following a head on collision in darkness, a rower wrote to ask about the British Rowing rules for boat lights. He thought that it was a British Rowing requirement for boats to show a flashing white light on the bow.

I explained that we (British Rowing) do not have specific requirements for boat lights. We simply advise that clubs follow the rules, or guidance, provided by their navigation authority. The flashing light specification belongs to the Port of London Authority and applies on the Tideway.

Our Policy on Capsize Drills

There was a request about our policy on capsized drills. The club has 16-19 year olds, some beginners and some very highly experienced club rowers. How often should a capsized drill take place and does it have to be live i.e. them physically doing the capsized drill or is watching the training module on British Rowing website and discussing this with the rowing coaches sufficient. The club no longer has access to a swimming pool.

The response was that we do not have requirements, we simply provide advice.

Many clubs hold capsized drills annually in line with their annual intake of new rowers. I do not think that it is necessary to have each person complete the capsized drill every year although some may wish to as it is quite enjoyable. The [online learning module](#) on RowHow is quite effective. However, it helps if each rower has completed the capsized drill at least once. They will then know what to do if they capsize. This note was copied to the Regional Rowing Safety Adviser, as they may be able to help to find a suitable pool.

Cold water shock and river rowing

There was an enquiry about the incidence of Cold Water Shock (CWS) following capsizes as I had mentioned that none had been reported. I was asked whether an expert like Professor Mike Tipton ever commented on this subject in English rivers as much of the CWS work seems to be in coastal and estuary waters.

The response was that the first thing to note is that river water tends to be colder than sea water by a few degrees.

Rowers are trained that if they enter the water then they should do so as slowly as they can. Rowers also tend to wear more clothes than most swimmers and people who bathe in the sea. Cold water shock is dependent on the rate of skin cooling.

We also explain to rowers how they will feel when they enter cold water (i.e. dreadful) and that they will soon feel a little better. This positive mental attitude helps. We also share videos on what happens as they enter the water, Mike Tipton did the voice over on one of these. The videos can be found [here](#) and [here](#).

Advice about fitness to compete also applies to officials, etc.

In [last month's report](#) I wrote about "People with health concerns, at competitions, and elsewhere". This was intended to apply to competitors. However, it has been pointed out that it should also apply to others who are helping clubs and competitions. This includes umpires, marshalls, and other officials and volunteers.

Cleaning up after Geese

We were asked whether British Rowing has any advice for clubs with regard to dealing with water birds, such as geese and the problem with droppings. It was felt that it is a good pre-launch workout to sweep the hard before boating, but other members of the club have concerns about possible health effects.

The response was that we agree that it is a good idea to clean the pontoons or launch area before use. You may be able to wash away some or all of the droppings with buckets of river water. Please be careful in cold weather in case it freezes and makes the surface slippery. If it is icy or you need to use brushes, please clean a small area to stand on first to avoid slipping and work from there.

This should be safe providing you follow good hygiene practices, by covering any cuts and washing hands thoroughly afterwards.

It is a common problem as you say and there is no easy solution. We did visit one club where they had fixed a cord around the edge of their pontoon a few inches above the surface, like a little fence. This proved to be sufficient to deter waterfowl. We are not aware of any other tried and tested means to deter them.

Avian Influenza

It is understood that there has been an outbreak of Bird Flu on the Manchester Ship Canal. This is impacting some of our Clubs in the Region. DEFRA and other agencies have requested they stop rowing and wait two weeks from the last infected bird found.

My advice was that if this is about risk to rowers, or any other people, then the concern is without foundation, I have shown that in a quantified risk assessment that is available in Appendix I of my [Monthly Report of February 2022](#). If it was about disturbing the birds so that they fly to other locations and spread the disease then it may have merit. If the level of infection is the same everywhere in the area then there should be no concern about the birds flying away.

Good hygiene would also help. Keep cuts, blisters, etc. covered and wash or shower after contact with the landing stage or pontoon. Use soap. Just do the things we learned to do during Covid. There is further advice in the Safety Alert on [Avian Influenza](#).