



BRITISHROWING

Guidelines for Responding to Major Incidents at Competitions

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Background

A number of British Rowing officials attended Dorney Lake in August 2022 to support the Outrigger Canoe Sprint World Championships. On the final day a serious medical emergency arose when a Masters competitor collapsed and nearly died after his race. Thanks to the excellent response by the organisers and emergency services (including an air ambulance) he survived, but the incident offered some important learning for rowing competition organisers.

Key to the positive outcome were:

- Rapid response by the on-site medical team who were decisive and effective in giving immediate treatment
- Early involvement of the emergency services, who quickly attended and took over treatment
- Good crowd management by the organisers to maintain control of the site and situation.

This document captures the main lessons as a series of areas for a competition Organising Committee (OC) to consider in their event planning, and to add to their standard emergency procedures. These are largely framed around a multi-lane regatta, but the principles would apply equally to any location or type of competition. Such incidents are thankfully rare, but it's important that an OC thinks in advance about how to deal with them, to avoid making up a poor process 'on the fly'.

Ideally these lessons are incorporated into their existing cancellation/postponement procedures, which most any major rowing competition should already have in place. Samples are available for any competition OC that doesn't have them.

Applicability

These guidelines focus on an individual or small group of people suffering a life-threatening medical emergency such as major trauma, a heart attack or similar, or a death. But the principles would apply equally to other major emergencies such as a fire or a bomb warning. The test is whether managing the response will impact the normal running of the competition.

So the first step is to determine the definition of a 'major incident' for your competition, and who decides when a major incident procedure is invoked. For instance, a competitor with a heart attack on a boating raft is going to have a major impact, but a pedestrian hit by a car and suffering major injuries by the start tower might not directly impact competition.

Ideally a senior OC member (e.g. Chair, Race Committee Chair) declares that a major incident is in progress, so all involved are aware that relevant procedures start to operate.

Such procedures should be agreed in advance with the venue. This should ensure that the procedures take account of their needs, and that they collaborate if an incident is declared rather than trying to operate their own processes.

These guidelines are supplementary to the existing Safety Alert on [What to do if a rower](#)

[collapses in a boat.](#)

Areas for Action

Once a major incident is declared, these factors come into play, and responses should be planning – at least in principle – in advance.

Incident Control

Establish a clear line of command, ideally centred on a dedicated Race Control function responsible for managing the site in general – especially the vast majority of competitors, spectators and volunteers who are not involved directly in the incident.

Nominate one senior official to coordinate the incident response. They liaise with onsite and visiting emergency services so there's a single point of contact with a complete, overall picture. Any requirements they can't deal with directly are passed to Race Control for action.

The professional emergency services such as ambulance crew, doctors, police and air ambulance crew deal with such incidents every day, and are best placed to decide what needs to be done in the best interests of the casualty and anyone else affected by the incident. The competition officials dealing with the incident should support them, and not try to tell them how to do their jobs.

Ensure key information and actions are logged as the incident progresses, so you have a good paper trail for any subsequent inquiry. An event log is advisable for any competition anyway, so this should be in place already.

Access

Identify the optimum access routes for emergency services, both to the event site in general, and to the specific location of the incident / casualty. Check that any postcode or location reference works properly with common satnav software such as Google Maps or Waze.

For instance, at Dorney some navigation apps will guide you to the main boathouse via the side gate from Boveney Road and Dorney Common (which is usually locked), and not via the main gate off Court Lane. It's better to give the postcode for the main gate than for the boathouse. At Holme Pierrepont, you should decide which of the three access routes from Adbolton Lane will give the quickest access to the incident location.

If necessary deploy trusted people to guide the emergency services to the required location.

Ensure there is a clear, unobstructed route for emergency vehicles to access the incident when they reach the site. In particular clear bystanders (competitors, spectators, etc) to safe areas away from the incident. If necessary deploy officials to achieve this. Remember several vehicles may attend, so be ready to deal with all of them, not just the first arrival.

Determine possible safe landing places for an air ambulance helicopter in case it's called in. These should be as near as practicable to the incident, but free from people and clutter. If necessary arrange a vehicle to meet the crew and take them to the casualty. The aircrew, led

by the pilot, will decide where to land regardless of any advice from the ground, so offer options not instructions, and be ready to respond to their needs.

Managing Competition

Most of this section should be covered by existing procedures for dealing with race cancellation due to bad weather.

Decide whether racing can continue or has to be suspended. This decision is based on whether the incident can be managed without limiting access to the water or land areas required for racing.

In a weather-related suspension, you usually have a little time to manage the situation and, for example, race some crews back to the finish to get them off the water quickly. With a major incident you may not have that luxury. As soon as it happens you have to respond simultaneously to the emergency, and to stop on-water activity getting in the way.

Accept that dealing with a serious medical incident is going to take time: it might take an hour to stabilise a seriously-ill casualty and make them ready for transfer to hospital.

Decide what to do with competitors already on the water. If possible direct them to a suitable landing site so they can get off the water. If this is away from the main centre, arrange transport to get them back there and return them later – if only to retrieve their boats.

Make sure volunteer officials are looked after as well as competitors.

Once the likely duration and outcome of the incident is becoming clear, start planning whether and how to return to competition. This may require the adoption of different draw patterns, or the partial – or even complete – cancellation of racing.

When a return to racing seems possible, allow enough time for competitors and officials to get back into place. This may take a little longer than you would like.

Establish in advance some principles for deciding whether and how to resume racing in the event of a death. If the incident happens later in the afternoon you may have to accept you've lost that day's racing anyway. But if there is a choice, what does your OC think is the right philosophy: the show must go on, or we should not be racing at a time of such loss?

Communication

In these situations, clear and timely communication is of vital importance.

Create pre-set PA and radio-net announcements that can be made as appropriate. For example:

“Due to an emergency, all racing has been suspended for the time being. A further announcement will be made in (xx) minutes at (hh:mm). We ask that everyone immediately clears the (yy area) to allow emergency services safe access to the (zz location).”

Don't make a running commentary on the state of the casualty, or even indicate that the

situation is life-threatening (or worse).

Once the incident is resolved (e.g. the casualty is transferred offsite to hospital) and the plans for the resumption of racing are agreed, make further PA and radio-net announcements to ensure everyone knows what they need to do. This may also include social media posts.

Welfare Considerations

Identify if the casualty has any relatives or close friends on site, and define one official to find and support them (e.g. the event welfare officer). If they're on the water they need to be located and, if appropriate, brought ashore. That might include crews from the casualty's club in general. If necessary provide ongoing support as the incident unfolds – such as a private space to wait, suitable refreshments – and timely communications about what's going on.

If there's a serious incident involving a threat to life or even a death, many onlookers will be concerned and upset. The OC's actions in response to such emotions will have a significant impact on how the incident is viewed afterwards – and so on the reputation of the competition.

In these situations, people go through a form of grieving process, often defined by the 'SARAH' model of Shock – Anger – Resentment – Acceptance – Hope (there are many variations on the words). The principle is that people need to be helped through the shock, anger or distress to a point where they accept what's happened and are ready to move on.

An OC can promote this acceptance with a sensitive but genuine public acknowledgement of the loss. For example, gather those who wish to attend at a central location (e.g. the main boathouse) and announce what has happened, hold a short silence, then announce the plans for the rest of the day.