



BRITISHROWING

Honorary Rowing Safety Adviser Monthly Report

August 2023

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TEAMWORK | OPEN TO ALL | COMMITMENT

Incidents in August

An exemplary response

A blade of a 4x+ contacted a swimmer doing backstroke. The swimmer was unharmed and said that he was alone. The other rowing boat crews on the river were warned. All members of the club were informed of the incident with an instruction from the safety officer that all initial runs down the river should be done at slow speed. The local open water swimming group (who normally row in a different part of the river) were contacted and were advised of the club's precautions and boating times.

The club has clearly learned from this experience and acted in an exemplary manner to reduce the probability of its recurrence.

It is all about learning and not about blame

In one Incident Report, blame was apportioned between two crews from the same club. A comment was made that consideration of blame does not add value. In the event of a collision or near miss, everyone should ask themselves what they could have done differently to prevent the incident from happening. They should then use what they have learned to change their behaviour. The club responded that it agreed.

Act early and decisively to reduce harm

There was a collision in a race at a bend when a 1x on the inside of the bend maintained a straight line, despite a warning, and collided with the other 1x, close to the bank, causing some boat damage. The 1x that maintained a straight-line course round the bend was disqualified. Please act in good time so as to avoid damage and harm.

Take care to check your shoes

There was an incident in which a 2x was being used for capsizing training. The heel restraint fixings on both right shoes broke in the same place.

There was a similar incident summarised in the September 2022 Monthly Report here [HRSA-Monthly-Report-September-2022.pdf \(britishrowing.org\)](#).

Please take extra care to check the fixing of the heel restraint cord to the shoes in this type of shoe. We have a Safety Alert on checking Heel Restraints here, [Safety-Alert-Heel-Restraints.pdf \(britishrowing.org\)](#).

In another incident, a rower who capsized had difficulty removing their feet from the shoes because the release strap was too long.



Do not be reluctant to stop or reduce speed

A 4x+ was catching up with a group of smaller boats and the steers decided to steer round them rather than reduce speed. This resulted in the 4x+ taking the corner very wide, crossing to the “wrong” side of the river, and colliding with a tree. This caused some damage to the boat.

Take care not to launch facing downstream

A Learn to Row stable 4x+, with a beginner crew on their second outing with an inexperienced, cox launched with their bows pointing downstream. They were unable to get out clear into the stream and were snared, initially by the launch pontoon. Having cleared from the pontoon, they drifted at right angles to the stream onto the barges moored down river from the club and were trapped.

The coach went out on a launch but was unable to assist. Two other members in another launch, with a rope, and towed the 4x+ clear of the barges after which they spun the boat and proceeded with their outing.

Please take extra care when coaching inexperienced crews.

Take care to warn visitors who may not be aware of hazards

When carrying the boat into the water, a rower at a Regatta, caught their foot on a sharp rock and tripped over it. This resulted in two cuts deep enough to cut through fat but not muscle. The rower was wearing appropriate shoes.

They were unable to row that day, and not able to drive as they could not use the clutch pedal correctly and had restricted mobility.

Please take care to ensure that if you host people who are not familiar with your venue that you either remove hazards like this or provide information so that the visitors can take care to avoid them. If appropriate, instruct marshalls to help visitors to avoid these hazards.

Unacceptable and dangerous behaviour

A launch Driver fell out of a launch and their auto inflation lifejacket did not inflate. When it was examined, it was found to have been inflated on a previous occasion and had been repacked without replacing the used cylinder and actuation mechanism. Clearly this is unacceptable and dangerous behaviour. The launch driver was then rescued by the launch that they were following.

The club has instigated more frequent checks of its lifejackets and will ensure that their members understand the importance of reporting any deployment of lifejackets and that any such lifejackets are quarantined so that they cannot be used until they have been made serviceable again.

Take care when it is windy

There were several head on collisions where the wind blew crews onto the wrong side of the waterway. Please take extra care, when it is windy, to stay in the correct position on the waterway and to keep a good lookout for crews that have difficulty doing so.

Take care with your clothing

A rower caught their thumb in their clothes and lost their grip, this resulted in them capsizing. They climbed back into their boat and were helped by paddle boarders to retrieve clothing and flip flops.

The following is included in section 8.1 of RowSafe

Everyone is expected to:

- Not wear Dryrobes, denims, jeans or heavy cotton clothing at any time when afloat.
- Not wear a hoodie when rowing or sculling as the thumbs tend to catch in the pocket, or when coxing in a bow-loader as it could become entangled and impede a rapid exit.

Doing a good deed

A dog fell into the canal whilst many club rowers were out on the water. A Club member, who is also a vet, rescued the dog and returned it to the owner. The owner was reminded of the importance of keeping their dog safe.

Take care not to sit at the catch position too long

A 4x capsized when performing a full crew drill at the catch. All boats are unstable when the crew have their blades square in the water in the catch position. Please take care with front end drills.

Is it safe for small boats to go out alone?

I was asked by the CRSA of a rowing club based in a tidal estuary whether it was safe for single scullers to go afloat alone. The current club rules require that single scullers (including stable singles) operate a buddy system if they are using club boats so that there are at least two boats in an outing (not necessarily both singles) and that one of the rowers is experienced and approved to lead outings. It is also recommended that owners of private boats operate a buddy system. In the winter (GMT times) the club also requires that club fine boat singles keep to within 50m of shore.

It is now being suggested that this rule should be relaxed to permit experienced scullers to take out club boats unaccompanied, providing that they are approved by the Head Coach.

The response was that there are no defined rules and this all depends on the club's Risk Assessment. Simply, if the club's risk assessment indicates that being afloat in a single scull is only safe under certain specified conditions (such as when operating a buddy system) then that should be the basis for the club rule. It is not a matter for further debate.

I know a club that rows on a large lake where the risk assessment tells indicates that all 1xs, 2xs and 2-s should operate a buddy system and be within about 100 metres of each other. They can also operate a buddy system with a larger rowing boat or a launch. From what I know of the estuary club, I expect that the risk assessment would lead to a similar conclusion.

Pretending to collapse does not impress anyone

There has been a spate of incidents in which rowers have lain back in their boats at the end of races. In one case I have been told by a Finish Marshall, who is also a First Aider that: -

“One of the open junior quad sculls time trials was underway, and as usual some crew members melodramatically collapsed at the end of the race. This habit is not helpful and should be discouraged – it does not help the rower’s recovery, making it harder to breathe. I always ask my driver to head over to the crew to encourage them to sit up and make sure there isn’t a real problem (99% of the time there isn’t). However, I spotted one crew where the stroke had fallen back, and it didn’t look right. The “look at me, I rowed really hard” collapse generally looks more controlled than a genuine “I have a medical issue” one. Stroke was trying to sit up but was struggling. His crewmate at 3 did, in my view, exactly the right thing and cradled his head, keeping the airway in a pretty good position. Bow pair rowed the boat quickly to the nearest raft and shouted to the raft marshal to make him aware.”

The following text was added to section 4.2 of [RowSafe](#), Competition safety Plans and Safety Rules, at its most recent revision (April 2023): -

Participating Clubs

Officers of participating clubs are expected to:

- Inform the organisers if any of their rowers has pre-existing medical conditions that impact their safety or that of others.
- **Tell competitors that they must not lie back in the boat at the end of a race, as if they had collapsed (unless they have).**

Please take care to brief your crews not to lie back in the boat at the end of a race or exercise, as if they had collapsed.

RYA Call to Action

In the [June Monthly Report](#), I explained that a rower had been badly injured when taking part in an RYA Level 2 Powerboat course. The instructor had instructed the crew to use a technique that is no longer approved. The rower was lucky because if the propellor had struck his head or neck rather than his shoulder then the consequences could have been much worse. This Incident Report was shared with the RYA. As a result of this, and other incidents, the RYA has issued a Call to Action to all Powerboat Instructors and Training Centres recognised for teaching Powerboating. The Call to Action explains, in detail, the requirements for teaching the Man Overboard (MOB) section of the course. It contains the following: -

The MOB session is an integral part of all Powerboat courses. It is essential that those delivering Powerboat training urgently review their delivery of this session in line with this guidance, and that contained within the Power Schemes Instructor handbook.

I have read the Call to Action and think that it is entirely appropriate. If correctly applied, it should result in improved safety.

[This report contains safety guidance. Please read our safety message and disclaimer.](#)

Take Care near Weirs

There was an incident in which a 4x+, with an inexperienced crew, became stuck on the top of a weir. This was partly due to a combination of wind and stream, partly due to the inability of the crew to understand and follow instructions and partly due to the rowers having some experience of rowing but little experience of sculling. These factors were known before the event and the club has reviewed, and will improve, the supervision that it provides. The club will also ensure that an experienced rower rows at bow in otherwise inexperienced crews.

There is a line of buoys about 20 metres upstream of the weir. The water upstream of the weir is shallow so the linear flow speed there will be greater than that further upstream, in deeper water. In steady state flow (i.e., almost all of the time) the volume flow rate along a stretch of river will be constant but the linear flow speed would be greater where the river is shallow or narrow. This assumes that there are no inflows or outflows along this stretch.

In other words, as a boat gets closer to this weir, the stream will become stronger, and the boat will be swept faster towards the weir.

The 4x+ was only held in place because a log had previously become lodged on top of the weir. Had the log not been there then the 4x+ could have been swept over the weir.

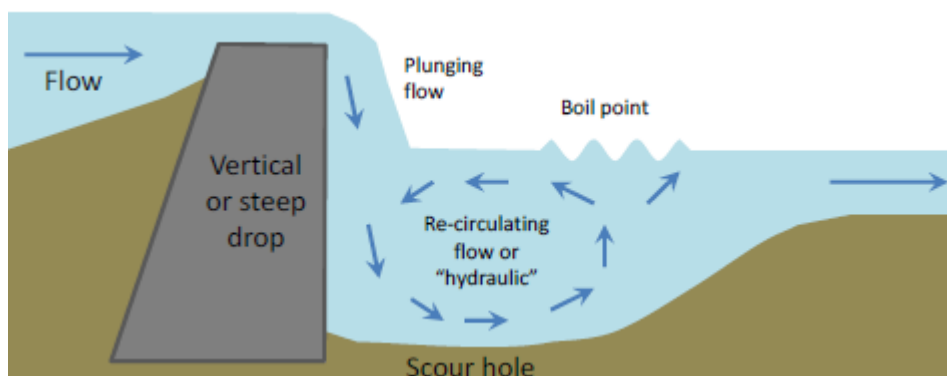
It is lucky that the boat was caught on a log as the water downstream of a weir can be very dangerous. This is due to the downward circulation in the water close to the weir and to the aeration of the water which reduces its effective density and makes it less buoyant.

Please see the British Rowing [Safety Alert, keep clear of Weirs](#) and the more extensive British Canoeing guidance [Safety at Weirs](#). The British Canoeing guidance contains the following: -

Hazards at weirs

People drown in weirs every year in the United Kingdom. At least 13 people have died at weirs between 2010 and 2015. In the United States weirs (or 'low head dams') have earned the term 'drowning machine'.

The greatest hazard is often the strong re-circulating flow (or towback) immediately downstream of a weir. This can trap a person, animal, or object, leading to exhaustion and drowning. The flow is often highly aerated with reduced buoyancy, making it hard to stay afloat.



Flow rates and safe rowing

A Club Rowing Safety Advisor wrote to ask for advice on river flow rates and safe rowing. The recent heavy rain has brought into the question, the flow rate limitations put on their local rowers. Their club has a barrage controlling the river effects of tides and flow. They set a rate of 120 cumecs (cubic meters of flow per second) above which they advise all craft (other than an emergency boat). The club has limitations of 100 cumecs above, which no novice rower should be on the river; no experienced rower should be on the river above 150 cumecs.

Many experienced rowers, feel this restriction is too great. They consider rowing for the “experienced” rower should be permitted at a flow rate of 200 cumecs. Does British Rowing have any advice on this subject?

The response was that what really matters here is the linear flow speed of the water in the river (in metres per second) rather than the volume flow rate in cumecs. The volume flow rate will be more or less the same along the length of the river, but the linear stream speed will vary from place to place as the width and depth of the river varies. The stream speed will also vary across the river; on straight sections of river, it will be faster in the middle.

We do not have any criteria or guidance based on either linear stream speed or volume flow rate.

There is information on flow round bends here [Safety-Alert-Flow-around-bends-in-rivers.pdf \(britishrowing.org\)](#).

It gets more complicated. It may be safe to row on a straight section of river even if the flow is strong provided there are no fixed obstructions (e.g., moored boats, bridges, fixed pontoons, etc..) that a boat can be swept into. Weirs could be an additional hazard (there is information on Weirs here [Safety-Alert-Keep-clear-of-Weirs-Dec-2019.pdf \(britishrowing.org\)](#). Have a look at the Safety Alert here [Safety-Alert-dont-be-swept-into-danger.pdf \(britishrowing.org\)](#)

You also should take the boat size and speed, and capacity of the crew into account. What may be safe for your first 8s could overwhelm a single sculler.

If a crew is going to go rowing in a strong stream, then it would be best to start the outing by rowing upstream (if possible). It would then be reasonably sure of being able to get back to the boathouse.

Unfortunately, I could not provide a simple answer, but I do not think that there is one.

Winter Head Races for Juniors

If you are planning a Head race for Juniors, then please consider the following.

We already have a Safety Alert on [Not Getting Cold at Heads](#). This advice has been incorporated into section 4.5 of RowSafe, Competition Navigational Arrangements.

It is clear that young people are particularly susceptible to getting cold because of their relatively low body mass. Particular care is needed with Juniors.

In the past there have been two problems with people getting cold at heads. The first, and easiest to avoid, is that some people were not dressed and equipped for the weather. This is a matter for them and their coaches.

The second is that some crews were required to stay afloat for a protracted time before and after racing. This can be avoided by care and good planning and management. The following may help: -

- There should be a warm space ashore so that crews do not get cold before they launch
- Crews should not be permitted to go afloat early
- There should be adequate provision for launching so that crews do not have to wait to go afloat
- Launching and landing should be well marshalled
- The number of entries in the event should be limited
- There should be First Aid provision afloat to support anyone starting to suffer from the cold
- Crews should not be kept stationary but should be allowed to row to keep warm
- Divisions should be small so that all their races can be completed in a short time
- There should be adequate provision for landing so that crews do not have to wait to go ashore
- There should be a warm space ashore, and adequate First Aid support to assist rowers who are suffering, when they return.

The need to limit the number of competing crews would be particularly relevant in if the Competition is in December or January when the day length is so short. It would not be safe to row in the dark in a head race.

Work with British Canoeing

There were several incidents in August that involved the interaction of rowing boats and canoes. These were shared with the Head of Safety at British Canoeing.

The need for rowers to be able to swim

In last month's report I wrote "we no longer advise that rowers must be able to swim..." and someone wrote to question this and ask for the reference in RowSafe.

The response was that this is described in section 3.6 of [RowSafe](#), Competence in the Water. This was new in the 2022 revision. Here are a few abstracts: -

It is important that rowers who find themselves in the water do not panic and are able to respond so that they can keep themselves safe. In effect, this means that they should be able to swim or float. Floating, rather than swimming, is recommended by the RNLI, RLSS and NWSF because it tends to conserve heat and energy when in cold water.

Everyone taking part in rowing should be able to:

- Float unaided for at least five minutes

And ideally

- Swim at least 50 metres in light clothing (rowing kit).
- Tread water for at least two minutes.
- Swim under water for at least five metres.

Those rowers who can only float or swim when wearing a buoyancy aid should also wear such an aid, or a lifejacket if coxing, whenever they are afloat.

If anyone is not convinced that floating is a better response to being in deep water, than trying to swim, then they should see the videos [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#).

This was added in this year's revision: -

The Royal National Lifeboat Institution has published a series of "how to" videos as follows: -

- [How to Teach your Child to Tread Water](#) -
- [How to Teach your Child to Float](#) -
- [How to Teach your Child to Signal for Help](#) -
- [How to Teach your Child a Survival Stroke](#) -

These are intended to show parents how to teach their children but could also be used to teach rowers of any age to improve their competence in the water.

Hi Viz jackets?

It has been suggested at one club that rowers should wear Hi-Viz jackets or tops and that this is mandated by British rowing. I was asked whether this is true.

The response was that RowSafe contains advice and guidance, these are not requirements. However, I can see no reason why the people in the bow and stern of a boat should not wear hi-vis kit although I would not recommend that they wear Hi-Viz waistcoats. Anything that makes the crew easier to see must contribute to their safety.

Rowers with Epilepsy

There have been several enquiries about the safety of rowers who have epilepsy going afloat. Reference was made to the British Rowing guidance here [Rowing and Epilepsy - British Rowing](#).

It helps to understand that "epilepsy" is an umbrella term that covers a wide variety of clinical illnesses and pathologies and as such it presents in a multitude of ways. Everyone should be treated as an individual.

Our fear is that if a person suffers a seizure afloat and enters the water when they are not in control of their breathing, then in their first breath they may inhale a sufficient volume of water to threaten their chances of survival. I wrote about this in my [Monthly Report of February this year](#).

Our epilepsy guidance contains the following: -

"In these cases, where there is significant risk of further seizures, rowers, coaches (driving launches) and coxswains should not be allowed on the water, except where there is a special individualised risk assessment of the individual and the event."

In my view this "special individualised risk assessment" should focus on the opinion of the individual's medical team on the probability of a rower suffering an episode when rowing and on the harm that they will come to should they suffer such an episode. The topics that I would recommend include: -

- the probability of this rower suffering a seizure when afloat
- would the rower have any warning that they were about to have a seizure
- the likely extent or severity of a seizure
- the likely duration of a seizure
- the condition of the rower during the recovery phase
- the ability (or not) of other rowers to be able to provide support in the event of a seizure
- the support that the club can provide to this rower in the event of a seizure

The rower's medical team should be able to help with most of these considerations.

The task for the club is to understand these issues, and possibly more, and define the actions that they would need to take to keep this rower safe. If they are unable to take the required actions (if any) then they may conclude that it is not advisable for them to go afloat. They would, of course, consider the effect of the hazards and risks at this venue.

The club can then work out what it can reasonably do to reduce the risk to an acceptable level and conclude whether, taking all this into account, it feels that it is safe for this person to row at this venue.

I do not believe that an auto-inflation lifejacket will provide sufficient protection to a person who is not aware that they are about to have a seizure. If they have this awareness and can inflate their lifejacket manually before the seizure starts, then that may provide some protection. The problem with auto-inflation lifejackets is that they are triggered by immersion in water, and it takes some time for them to inflate. Please see the demonstration here [TOP TIPS - LIFEJACKET TEST - HOW TO FIT A LIFE JACKET CORRECTLY - with the RNLI - YouTube](#). It is possible, in that time, for the wearer's head to be immersed and for them to inhale water.

There is no such thing as zero risk. The challenge for safety advisers is to find a safe way that people can do what they want to do, rather than tell them that they cannot do it. I think that the problem with epilepsy is that we never really know what is safe.

It is always difficult to assess "high severity - low probability" events like these because we do not have much "history" or experience to guide us. We must be careful not to be too risk averse.

Safety of Rowers with Disabilities

It is not unusual for people with disabilities to consider participating in rowing. Rowing is a sport where people with some disabilities can be integrated relatively easily, and others can be helped to row provided we make some adaptations to equipment. None of this is difficult. Rowing is better able to do this than most other sports.

People can have a vast variety of different disabilities that can be accommodated by rowing. Disabilities can be physiological, sensory, psychological, learning related, etc. and many do not have any external signs. In some cases, simple adaptations can make it possible for people with disabilities to compete with people who do not have disabilities on a "level playing field". The fact that there is such a vast variety of disabilities makes it imperative that the people are considered as individuals rather than "people with disabilities" as a group or class. The best approach is to talk to them and focus on what they can do rather than what they cannot do. Find out what they each can do and where they may need help to enjoy our sport safely.

I have recently been told that some clubs are reluctant to accept rowers with disabilities because of their exaggerated perception of safety concerns. In most cases these perceptions are inaccurate.

Further information has been prepared and published; this can be found by following these links: -

- ["Not Myths of Adaptive Rowing"](#)
- ["Myths of Adaptive Rowing"](#)

Within British Rowing there is extensive expertise in adaptive rowing and people who would be happy to assist any club with issues relating to adaptive rowing risk assessment or any other safety concerns about adaptive rowing. Please contact adaptiverowing@britishrowing.org.

Please do not let misapprehensions about safety impede inclusiveness.

Lifejackets for Rowers

There was feedback from readers in the Netherlands in response to the article on lifejackets in the July Monthly report. This comment related to the statement that “*Lifejackets and buoyancy aids are bulky and tend to get in the way when rowingIt would be very difficult to climb onto a boat when wearing an inflated lifejacket and it would be fairly difficult when wearing a buoyancy aid*”.

Most members at their club use Secumar Vivo 100 lightweight lifejackets when rowing on cold water. They say that bulkiness is not an issue, and it is possible to reenter a lx when wearing an inflated one.

There is more information on these lifejackets here [VIVO 100 - SECUMAR](#). The website contains the following information: -

100N adult inflatable lifejacket approved to ISO 12402-4 for paddlers and rowers. Light weight, very short length. Reflective strips on the back for increased safety in poor light.

I responded by saying that the problem we have in the UK is that there is a general assumption that everyone who goes afloat should wear a lifejacket or buoyancy aid. I agree with this generally but do not think that it always applies to rowers for the reasons previously explained. However, there are some rowers who wish to wear them (or whose parents think they should wear them) and there may be some circumstances where they would be helpful.

It is not unusual for rowers to capsize here, particularly if they row in lxs. However, it is very unusual for rowers to suffer serious harm. The most recent rower to drown here was in January 2005. Perhaps we are lucky that our rivers are not chilled by the melt water of ice on mountains and that they do not have much large commercial shipping.

The Secumar Vivo 100N lifejacket is an option for those rowers who wish to wear a lifejacket as it is not bulky. However, it is not suitable for coxes and coaches in launches because the reduced buoyancy (100 Newtons rather than 150 or 175 Newtons) will be insufficient for people wearing bulky clothing (as they tend to do, particularly in winter).

There is a new RYA/RNLI video on the correct fitting of lifejackets, and what can happen if they are not fitted correctly here, [TOP TIPS - LIFEJACKET TEST - HOW TO FIT A LIFE JACKET CORRECTLY - with the RNLI - YouTube](#)