

AMATEUR ROWING ASSOCIATION

6 Lower Mall, London, W6 9DJ. T:0870 060 7100 F: 0870 060 7101
www.ara-rowing.org

Mr. Peter J. Bedford,
H.M. Coroner Berkshire,
Yeomanry House,
131, Castle Hill,
Reading,
Berkshire.
RG1 7TA

August 19th, 2005.

Dear Mr. Bedford,

Inquest into the death of Sikander Farooq

I am writing to you in response to your letter of 5th July 2005 containing your observations on the ARA Water Safety Code.

I would like to start by stating that the ARA is committed to promoting safe practice in rowing. Our commitment is demonstrated by the lead we have taken by developing the Water Safety Code, which is the most comprehensive of its kind in the world of rowing, and by our continuing monitoring of water safety and regular refinement of our guidance and training.

In response to your observations we have initiated a review of the sections of the Code you have highlighted as part of the continuous process of monitoring and review of water safety we already have in place. The review of these particular sections will include consultation with the wider membership of the ARA and careful consideration by the Water Safety Committee and the Executive Committee. This process will be thorough and, in view of the wide consultations, may take some time to bring to a conclusion. Therefore, I am writing to you now to offer an interim response which will set out some of the factors we will take into account.

1. Wearing buoyancy aids during training.

As you are aware, rowing is a high performance sport requiring lengthy, strenuous and rigorous training as preparation for competition. In training and competition buoyancy aids impede performance and, in some instances, they can be a hazard. That is the reason why the Code does not require rowers to wear buoyancy aids. I do not expect our review to change this world-wide practice.

2. The use of buoyancy aids by beginners.

The use of buoyancy aids and other safety measures when introducing beginners of all ages to rowing is covered in the first level of the ARA Coaching Award Scheme, the Instructor Award. Our guidance in the Water Safety Code is being reviewed to assess the need for changes. Hitherto, it has been common practice that an athlete, who is deemed a competent swimmer and demonstrates sufficient sculling skills, as in the case of Sikander Farooq, would not be required to use a buoyancy aid when training in a fine single sculling boat. The ARA has encouraged the use of buoyancy aids when introducing beginners to the sport: specifically during their first few outings in single sculling boats while they are being trained in the first steps of skill acquisition. Such teaching sessions would be conducted under close supervision near the bank. One of the first lessons taught is a series of drills aimed at building confidence. Our experience has been that there are some individuals, commonly adults, who do take some time to build their confidence in a single sculling boat, even a wide stable one. It is in this context that the reference in the Water Safety Code to the use of buoyancy aids to give confidence should be read.

This year a new life jacket specifically developed for use by single scullers has come onto the market. This new design has been developed jointly by the ARA and the manufacturers for use by single scullers who are out alone or in low temperatures. The ARA is assisting with the

marketing of this new jacket and we will be monitoring the response to it from our members. If this design is accepted as overcoming the limitations of previous designs we will be able to take this into account in our guidance on water safety. There would be no point in making a recommendation or ruling which is impracticable, and thus one that would be ignored.

3. Appropriate clothing.

A uniform, in the sense of club colours, is required in competition for the purpose of recognition. There are no other clothing requirements as such. Clothing in training and competition can be diverse, with many variations of shorts, vests and one piece suits in warm weather, and leggings, track suit bottoms, thermal vests and water-proof tops in the winter. The precise combination of clothing will depend on the weather and the activity undertaken, so any guidance can only be of a general nature. We can also make it clear that some types of clothing are not suitable, but it is not practicable to supply a comprehensive list of unsuitable clothing, and the ARA will not attempt to do so. At some point we do have to rely on the common sense of clubs, coaches and athletes.

4. Compulsory capsize drills and swimming tests for novice juniors.

The use of swimming tests and capsize drills are entirely sensible measures when introducing beginners of all ages to a water sport such as rowing. For many years the ARA has stressed the value of them and recommended them. They are compulsory elements in the first level of coach education, the Instructor Award. The ARA does not make capsize drills and swimming tests compulsory for all beginners because rowing clubs do not generally have access to swimming pools. Local authorities and schools often refuse access to their pools for rowing clubs wishing to conduct safety training. Where access is available, and the charges imposed are not prohibitive, it is often limited and, in practice, the club is often only able to conduct this training on one or two occasions each year, and for groups rather than for individuals. It is possible for swimming tests and capsize drills to be performed in the rivers, lakes and reservoirs where rowing clubs are located if the water is of a suitable quality. Even if the water quality is normally suitable, and there are no other hazards or prohibitions on bathing in the local water, there are occasions when it would not be prudent to conduct swimming tests and capsize drills. Examples include, when the water temperature is low in the autumn, winter and spring, or when there are algal blooms or warnings of Weil's Disease during hot weather in the summer. We have weighed these factors against the benefits of swimming tests and capsize drills when we have considered the introduction of a rule requiring such training for beginners in all ARA clubs. We have decided against introducing a compulsory requirement because it would frequently be impracticable and consequently, either the rule would be ignored, or many beginners would have to be turned away by the clubs.

However, the ARA has put in place other measures. Firstly, we recommend to our clubs that before any new member goes on the water they obtain a signed application form that includes a declaration that the individual is able to swim 50 metres in rowing kit. A parent or guardian, in the case of persons under the age of 18 years, must sign this declaration. We were very surprised to hear evidence at the Inquest that Reading Rowing Club did not obtain a signed application for Sikander Farooq until the very day of his tragic death, even though he had been attending the club for several months and he had been on the water on more than eight occasions. Secondly, it is a mandatory requirement under the Water Safety Code that no athlete who is unable to swim 50 metres is allowed out on the water unless they wear a personal flotation device. This provision allows the inclusion in rowing of individuals who are unable to swim due to a physical disability.

Since 1999 the ARA has been working, through Project Oarsome, to significantly increase junior participation in the sport, particularly encouraging juniors of 11 years and upwards to take up the sport, whereas previously the most common age group taking up rowing was 14 years and older. The ARA considers that safety is of prime importance when conducting activities on the water with this age group, and we decided to use this initiative to help to raise the standards for safety and skills training in the participating clubs. This is the reason why there are differences between the provisions in the Water Safety Code, which represents the minimum safety standard we generally expect, and the guidance in the materials provided for Project Oarsome clubs. In the case of Project Oarsome, the ARA has established this junior participation programme in clubs where it is possible to conduct swimming tests and capsize

drills before the juniors start training on the water. Reading Rowing Club is a Project Oarsome club and the ARA requires them to provide training in capsized drills and swimming tests for the juniors in the programme. It is disappointing that the club did not extend this compulsory training to the other, non-Project Oarsome novice juniors, such as Sikander Farooq. They were invited to attend, but they were not compelled.

The ARA will look again at how we can extend the implementation of capsized drills and swimming tests by encouraging local authorities and schools to make their pools available. Given your observations on the importance of swimming tests and capsized drills, you may be able to help by recommending to local authorities and schools that they help us by making their swimming pools available for safety training.

5. The use of throw lines.

You draw attention to the lack of guidance on the potential use of throw lines by coaches when they are coaching from the bank, in contrast to the requirement for throw lines to be carried in launches used by coaches. This rule was developed when the ARA Code first specified the safety equipment to be carried in a launch. Launches can be used for coaching and for rescue, and the throw line was seen as a piece of equipment of value in a launch being used to perform a rescue. Throw lines could be of some value if a bank-side coach is attempting a rescue as well, but there is a limit to the distance over which a person on a bank can effectively deploy them. On some rivers the distance between banks can be so large as to render a throw line of limited value. Nevertheless, we will review our guidance on the use of throw lines.

6. Staying with the boat.

You draw attention to the apparent lack of emphasis placed on the importance of the “stay with the boat” rule in the Code. Whilst we will consider giving more prominence to it in our guidance on this point in the next edition of the Code, the rule is a common place in the sport and one of the cardinal rules of basic watermanship. Furthermore, the education of coaches, and through them athletes, takes place through the Coaching Award Scheme and this rule is drummed into beginner coaches at the first level of coach education. Unfortunately, we cannot reach everyone who coaches, as there are many volunteers in clubs and universities who have not undertaken any formal coach education or training. We do not have the power to compel volunteers to attend education and training courses.

We will look again at how we communicate this cardinal rule to clubs, coaches and athletes, but we are not sure that we can make this any plainer than it is now.

7. The communication of water safety guidance to athletes via information leaflets and booklets.

We think that this can be improved and the review will concentrate on this issue.

8. The use of written logs of competence and progress for novice juniors.

The use of personal log books for juniors and of central club log books kept for reference in the boat house are sensible ideas, and they have been recommended by the ARA, but there is not a general acceptance in our clubs that these are useful and practical measures. Individual athletes can forget to bring their log books to training sessions, use someone else's, or simply lose them. Central club log books need to be routinely kept up to date and to be available at all times, but kept securely so that they do not disappear. Nevertheless, in an attempt to raise standards in our clubs, the ARA has been encouraging the use of written logs since 1999 through the GoRow competence based teaching scheme for novice juniors. This scheme is compulsory for clubs, like Reading Rowing Club, engaged in Project Oarsome. Reading Rowing Club joined Project Oarsome in December 1999, and the ARA made available athlete log books for every new junior coming into the scheme at Reading. The club could have obtained as many copies as it wished to have for all their juniors, whether or not they were in Project Oarsome. The club was also asked to keep a central record of the progress of every junior entering Project Oarsome, but the club had to be repeatedly pressed to record this information, as there seemed to be a reluctance to do so. The club appear not to

have maintained such records for juniors, like Sikander Farooq, who were not in Project Oarsome.

This guidance on good practice will be re-emphasised, as you suggest.

When the review of the Code we have initiated is completed, I will write to you again and inform you of the outcome, any changes we will make to the Code and to the communication of our guidance on safe rowing.

I would like to close by thanking you for your observations on the Code and water safety, and I will be pleased to respond to any further observations you may wish to make.

Yours sincerely,

Gary Harris,

Deputy Chairman.