

H M Coroner
Greater Manchester South District
John S Pollard LL.B. Hons.

Your ref:
My ref JSP/KMB

Date: 12th October 2005

Mr. S. Ward
Water Safety Adviser
Amateur Rowing Association
6 Lower Mall
Hammersmith
London W6 9DJ

Dear Mr. Ward,

Re: Inquest into the death of Leo John Blockley

I recently conducted a second inquest into the death of Leo John Blockley who died on the 29th December 2000 at Amposta in Spain whilst taking part in a training exercise with the Oxford University Lightweight Rowing Club.

At the conclusion of the inquest I indicated that I would be writing to the Amateur Rowing Association pursuant to Rule 43 of the Coroners' Rules 1984.

I am aware of, and indeed have seen a copy of, a letter dated the 5th July 2005 written to you by my brother Coroner, Peter Bedford, Her Majesty's Coroner for Berkshire in connection with the inquest into the death of Sikander Farooq.

I will ask you to read this letter in conjunction with Peter Bedford's letter and, as it were, following on from it because although matters relating directly to the death of Leo Blockley were different from those in the Sikander Farooq inquest, nonetheless there are overlaps and similarities.

In his letter Mr. Bedford set forth Rule 43 of the Coroners' Rules but for completeness I will repeat the Rule which states as follows:-

"A Coroner who believes that action should be taken to prevent the recurrence of fatalities similar to that in respect of which the inquest is being held may announce at the inquest that he is reporting the matter in writing to the person or authority who may have power to take such action and he may report the matter accordingly".

On hearing the evidence in the inquest into the death of Leo Blockley a number of "rowing" matters became apparent particularly relating to the safety aspect of the sport as follows:-

1. I entirely concur with the view set forth in paragraph numbered 1 in Mr. Bedford's letter to yourself. I too feel that there is a lack of clear guidance to rowing clubs and individual rowers and indeed I would extend that to include individual coxswains and coaches in connection with certain key areas of safety in relation to their participation in the sport. I believe that clearer guidance could and should be given by the ARA which would to a large extent cover the present paucity of such information and indeed that those guidelines should be adopted by the ARA as compulsory safety requirements.

2. I understand that even if international guidelines and protocols are issued by FISA it is still then a matter of choice for the ARA as to whether they are adopted by British rowing.
3. It is so obvious as to barely merit mention that those involved in the safety of crews during rowing exercises should not and indeed must not have partaken of alcohol such that they are still in any way affected by that alcohol or the after-effects thereof.
4. All rowers, coxswains and coaches should be given full and appropriate training as to matters of safety before such time as they are allowed to go out on any water.
5. There should be a clear and definite differentiation between the administrative responsibilities of those organising training camps and those who are then responsible for the safety of the participants whilst at the training camp. It should be a matter that has to be reduced to writing and confirmed and signed as accepted by the appointed safety officer.
6. It would seem that the wearing of personal buoyancy aids certainly in training exercises could add a degree of safety in the event of a capsize and I would suggest that with the advent of modern safety and buoyancy aids this ought to be possible without any or any significant reduction in the efficiency of the rowing.
7. Capsize drills - I heard evidence in the inquest that some of the participants, both crews and coxes, had not undergone any form of capsize drill or training and I would suggest that this should be compulsory before they are allowed out on the water.
8. Boat buoyancy - I heard a considerable amount of evidence delivered with a degree of passion about the effect of fitting full buoyancy to the racing boats. The evidence given to me was that it would not in any way detract from the racing abilities of the vessel for there to be full buoyancy installed but would ensure that in the event of severely adverse weather conditions the boat would not capsize, thus meaning that the crews were not thrust into very cold and dangerous water and thus hopefully reducing considerably the likelihood of death from either drowning or from hypothermia. I would suggest, with respect, that a rule could be introduced whereby all boats should comply with the full buoyancy provision by a certain date with a reasonably long lead-in time to enable clubs to alter, amend or re-equip with the boats that they have in stock.
9. The coaching launches accompanying eight boats (and other boats of course) should be themselves of a reasonable standard of construction and repair, should carry compulsory safety equipment and it should be the absolute duty of the appointed safety officer to have checked that safety equipment before each and every training session where the coaching launch is accompanying the eight boat. In the inquest into the death of Leo Blockley it was apparent that a sheath knife was missing from the safety equipment on the catamaran launch and this could have made it extremely difficult to remove the rope which snagged round the propeller. (As it turned out a pair of scissors was used for the task which proved to be satisfactory).
10. Finally, I would concur with point 2 vi. in Mr. Bedford's letter to the effect that the clubs and/or coaches should maintain a written log setting out the competence and experience of rowers. I would extend this request to include the experience of coxswains and of coaches themselves. In the present inquest it became apparent that the coxswains had a rather limited amount of experience and this I think was a factor. Nobody seemed to have any clear idea as to what experience the various coxswains, crews and indeed coaches did have.

Like my fellow Coroner, I have no desire whatsoever unreasonably to restrict the enjoyment of the sport of rowing and indeed I am content to acknowledge that any sport of this nature will necessarily involve a certain amount of danger. It is my duty as one of Her Majesty's Coroners to try to reduce the risks to the participants as much as possible and I believe it would be your wish as a serious and appropriate governing body of the sport to do the same whilst maintaining the enjoyment.

I would be grateful if you would be good enough to let me have your views on the above at your early convenience.

I have forwarded a copy of this letter to Mr. Peter Bedford, Her Majesty's Coroner for Berkshire, the solicitors for the Blockley family, the solicitors for Oxford University et al and particularly I have forwarded a copy to the Council for Oxford University Rowing.

Yours sincerely,

J. S. Pollard
H. M. CORONER