

<b>DATE:</b>	Friday 11 October 2024
<b>TITLE:</b>	Lightweight Participation in International Events for GB Athletes
<b>SUBJECT:</b>	In the absence of lightweight competition at an Olympic level, is it appropriate to retain a pathway to international competition for lightweight rowers, and if so how can we do so?
<b>AUTHOR</b>	Alastair Marks

## **I. OVERVIEW:**

Post the Paris 2024 Olympic Games, Lightweight Rowing will no longer be included in the racing programme of future Olympic Games. Subject to the outcome of any changes to rule 25 at the World Rowing's Extraordinary Congress, Lightweight rowing will continue at the World Rowing Championships.

UK Sport funding is awarded on the basis of pursuing success at the Olympic and Paralympic Games, and cannot be put towards any endeavour not directly supporting the Olympic mandate. The option of using our own funds to support a lightweight programme therefore no longer exists. GB Rowing Team's resources will be directed wholly towards potential Olympians and Paralympians.

A number of people within the Lightweight community fear that without a path to international competition, lightweight rowing will fall away at club level. They argue that this will have a negative impact on broader participation, diversity and inclusion, and believe that lightweights should be able to fund their own way to compete internationally. This case is laid out in papers 6.1 and 6.2, which are written by Ben Parsonage, a member of the Lightweight community in Britain.

The challenge for us is three-fold:

- first, to determine whether on-going international participation is inextricably linked from broader participation at grassroots level;
- second, whether future international participation of lightweights should be supported; and
- third, if so, by what mechanism.

The important underlying context to what might on the face of it seem like an obvious and sensible set of proposals from the lightweight community (as outlined in those two papers, 6.1 and 6.2) is that the full focus of the GB Rowing Team is on events that develop future Olympic and Paralympic champions with the ultimate remit of securing funding. Anything else is a distraction – seen by the

team at Caversham to be “a potential banana skin” – which puts that funding, and the broader GB Rowing Team’s future, at risk. We saw in Tokyo 2020 how minor distractions have big impacts: our six fourth-place finishes led to a 25% funding cut from UK Sport.

A final important piece of context is that at the time of writing, it is unclear what the future is of any Lightweight rowing competition at World or European Events. In some quarters, it has been mooted that the category will cease to exist in future years, including at age group levels. World Rowing may choose to propose future changes at the annual congress in a few months’ time or at the quadrennial congress in March 2025. For the purposes of the decisions in front of us now, we must assume that lightweight competition will remain, especially in the smallest boat classes.

Equally, there is an argument to say that our decision-making could play a role in the future of lightweight rowing internationally as well as nationally. It would seem inherently more likely that World Rowing will abandon lightweight rowing events if major nations like ours have no competitors taking part. Bearing in mind that creating opportunities for everyone to participate in rowing at every age and stage to the best level they can be is at the core of all we do, the decisions we make need to be considered with our wider remit as a custodian of the sport, rather than in the isolation of our Olympic funding. At the same time, though, decisions which negatively impact the GBRT, our funding, and our wider team at Caversham come with obvious implications for all three.

## **2. CASE ANALYSIS**

In examining the case for lightweight inclusion in GB Rowing Team Trials, providing a pathway to GBRT International representation, and ultimately selecting British Lightweights to international competitions without the funding of the GB Rowing Team, it is important to consider:

- 1) Whether trialling and selection of lightweight rowers be achieved without placing additional burden on GB Rowing Team resources (human and monetary)
- 2) Once selected, what the relevant considerations for a GB Lightweight team competing internationally without the funding and support of the GB Rowing Team are; and
- 3) Whether there are any broader philosophical implications of permitting a self-funded approach.

All three of these points have been put to the management team at Caversham, who have responded in the following way:

- 1) Lightweight rowers could be included within the GB Rowing Team trialling process. This has been the case in the previous Olympiads. However, with GB Rowing Team resources under strain, including them would necessitate additional entry numbers, an increased number of races, and oversight of an additional group of trialists. As a thought experiment, lowering the

entry standards for GB Trials, by removing the ergometer standards for example, would create a similar increase in entry numbers to including lightweights. It would be hard to conceive that supporting a further 100 trialists to those already falling outside of the team's selection would be relevant in serving the purpose of supporting future Olympic success.

From a selection perspective, the oversight of a lightweight trialling process is no small task and is not reflected fully in the paper submitted in support of lightweight inclusion(6.1). To form lightweight crew boats would require interrogation of trialling results, the undertaking of crew formation races and the assessment of a selection standard. Even the selection of a single sculler would require comparison against known standards and may be contentious if ultimately unsuccessful. The human resource involved in such oversight would be considerable, while merely paying lip service to selection could put British Rowing at risk of legal appeals. Any proposal to outsource selection would come with significant risk relating to safeguarding, the meeting of minimum eligibility criteria and the upholding of selection standards.

- 2) If it were determined a team could be selected without placing any burden on the GB Rowing Team, the following elements would need consideration in seeing this through to the point of competition:
  - a. Responsibility for the welfare of the selected individuals. Who would have a duty of care for the individuals concerned between the point of selection and the completion of racing? It does not seem practical to suggest, in a weight-managed sport, that the Chief Medical Officer would not need to retain some oversight regarding fitness to train, make weight, and compete.
  - b. Responsibility for safeguarding and antidoping: how would we uphold consistent standards across the team relating to these areas? Any failure to do so would represent a reputational risk to both the GB Rowing Team and British Rowing.
  - c. Team Management and support: World Rowing's accreditation policy restricts the number of permitted accreditations per team, and as one of the larger teams, GB Rowing Team routinely maximises use of accreditations at World Rowing events. How would any proposal for staffing a lightweight element separately be managed in this context? Any lightweight team members would require liaison with the existing team management and support structure. It is not clear how this could be done without distraction for the current set-up.
  - d. Event Entry, Accreditation, Accommodation & Transportation: these elements are primarily coordinated through the organising committee on a National Federation basis. It would not be possible to complete all of these elements without working with the relevant GBRT staff member.

- e. Team Kit: Any GBRT team member at a World Rowing/European Rowing event must wear the approved racing strip. It is not possible for a national federation to have kits bearing differing logos. With delivery timelines requiring 8+ weeks and lightweights acknowledged as requiring different sizes to other team members this would require the holding of stock to cover potential lightweight participants that cannot be repurposed to other team members.
- 3) Before permitting a self-funded approach, the following consequences should be considered:
- a. If we move down the route of accepting athletes self-funding, how would we handle an openweight athlete presenting a case to self-fund attendance at an event in the event of non-selection? How would refusing such self-funding differ from allowing it within the lightweight category, and would British Rowing be open to accusations of discrimination if it restricted the opportunity to self-fund in one area but not another?
  - b. How do we view the premise of self-funded athletes in a context where privilege of wealth is not meant to be a ticket into the sport? What do we do when someone outside the funded programme clearly meets the thresholds set for qualification – perhaps better than someone with means – but is not able to self-fund?
  - c. Would we be fundamentally happy to accept a mixed economy at events with two GB rowing teams elements, competing in parallel, but with very different support systems in place?

This disruption to the GBRT of allowing a two-tier system is one factor to consider. A second is what the impact is on the wider sport of not having a pathway to international competition, with the lightweight contention being that this threatens the existence of the category domestically.

It is, however, unclear how or why a choice not to support Lightweight athletes being selected to the GB Rowing Team for the World Rowing Championships would impact the available competitions domestically. Clearly, not everyone gets into rowing with the expectation of making the international team or competing at the World Championships. BUCS, and Women's Henley have not previously formed part of the pathway to GB Rowing Team Lightweight representation, and it is hard to conclude that the 4 lightweight Olympic seats available in 2024 were the sole driver for their participation levels. Opportunities to race internationally in open lightweight categories exist at events such as Holland Beker, and would not require a GB Rowing Team pathway to compete. The possibility of a European Club Lightweight competition is currently being considered by European Rowing.

### 3. DECISION

In summary, the Board needs to consider the strategic arguments for and against supporting the continued inclusion of lightweight rowing at World and European Rowing competitions, competing under the GB Rowing Team banner.

As noted above, this is not as simple an issue as it sounds. The Performance Directorate's view is that lightweight inclusion at these events no longer fits within the strategic purpose or funded remit of British Rowing, and the Board needs to decide whether to support that inclination or to go against it after considering issues from a wider perspective and assessing any risk to broader participation. In the second instance, the Board would need to understand that it was imposing the NGB's wider objectives onto a team in Caversham which is neither incentivised nor set up to deliver them. Rather, the GBRT is given a much narrower focus – by the Government.

If it opted to find ways to allow self-funded lightweights, the Board would need to task the Performance team with finding solutions to the problems arising from self-funded athletes meeting selection thresholds (as outlined above). The Board would have to do this with a full and complete understanding that the Performance team is already significantly stretched, and is about to come under increasing financial constraint, in delivering their core focus.

#### 4. STRATEGIC RISK CONSIDERATIONS:

4.1	Members	Key audience could be reduced by lack of opportunity	
4.2	Volunteers		None
4.3	Athletes	Pathway for lightweight rowers severely impacted	
4.4	Staff		None
4.5	Diversity and Inclusion		None
4.6	Risk Considerations (includes safety and safeguarding)		None
4.7	Reputational / strategic		Included in paper
4.8	Third Party Involvement		None
4.9	Regulatory / Compliance / Governance		None