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July 31, 2024

British Rowing
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Subject: Lightweight Rowing

To whom it may concern,

I am writing to you today because I believe that the sport of Rowing within the UK is on the verge of irrevocable damage. Damage that, with your help, may be prevented.

The removal of lightweight rowing from the Olympic games has been met with dismay from the rowing community, and as such has been well discussed. Less well discussed however has been the resulting effects that this may have on the sport in general, in particular with regards to participation, accessibility, diversity and inclusivity.

Rowing is a sport where a fundamental competitive advantage is given to those of above average height and weight. Lightweight rowing was introduced to provide more people with opportunities to become involved in the sport. By introducing a pathway of competition from local, through to national and international level, rowing succeeded in becoming more accessible to a much wider demographic, more fairly represented by average height and weight statistics.

As a simple but important illustration, on the 25th July 2024, World Rowing published a graphic (see Figure 1 below) showing the average height of rowers entered at the upcoming Olympic games. From this graphic, the average height of male and female heavyweight rowers at the games is 190.5cm and 178.5cm respectively. In the same image, global averages are reported for reference as 171cm and 158cm. More relevant to the UK specifically, compare these values to the datasetⁱ shown in Figure 2, where instead we have average values of 178.4cm and 164.7cmⁱⁱ, both much closer to the average heights of this year's Olympic lightweight rowers (181cm and 170cm). For both men and women then, the average height of an Olympic heavyweight rower can generally be assumed at least above ~ 95% of the general UK and global populations.

ⁱ Available at <https://ourworldindata.org/human-height#height-is-normally-distributed>

ⁱⁱ These values are supported by the NHS Health Survey for England, 2021. Available at: <https://digital.nhs.uk/data-and-information/publications/statistical/health-survey-for-england/2021>

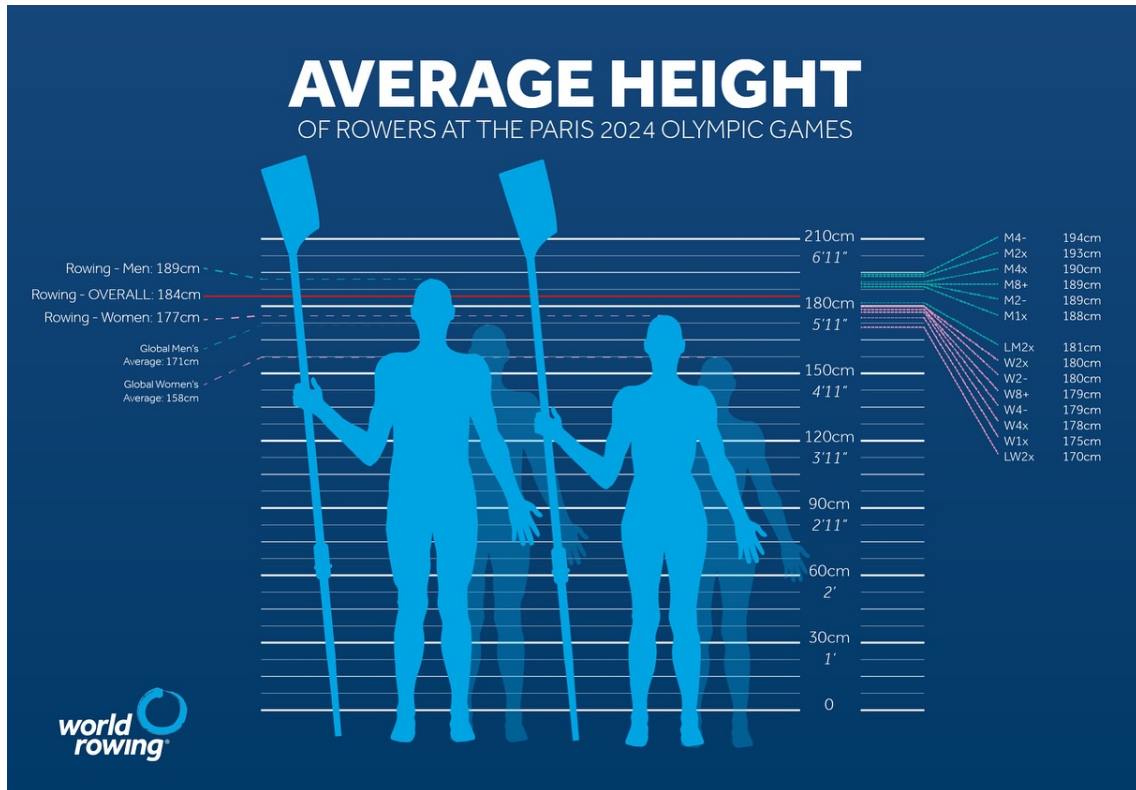


Figure 1: Average height of rowers at the Paris 2024 Olympic games.

What conclusions then are likely to be drawn by the average man or woman that see this image? They might be forgiven for thinking that rowing is simply a sport for the abnormally tall, and has no place for them in a competitive sense. Whilst sadly this may indeed be true as far as the next Olympics is concerned, this does not, *should not*, need to be the case for the wider sport outside of the Olympics.

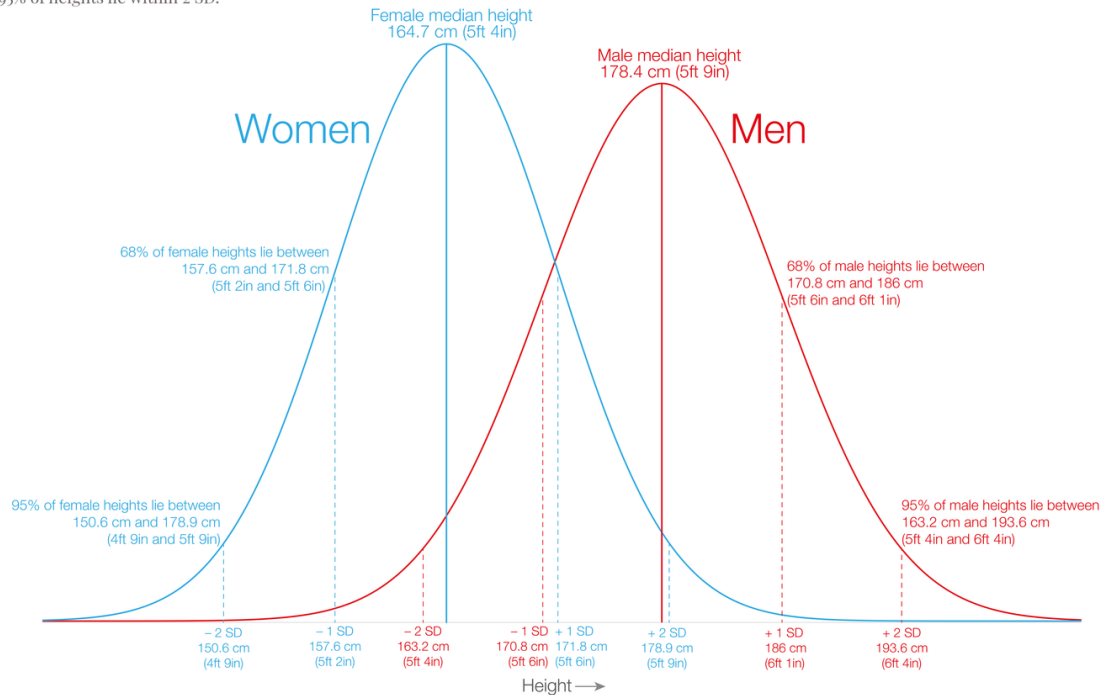
British Rowing now has the opportunity to show that on the contrary, rowing *is* a sport for everyone, and an average person can still achieve their athletic ambitions by virtue of their own hard work and determination, rather than their genetic gifts, or indeed their educational or social background.

The distribution of male and female heights



The distribution of adult heights for men and women based on large cohort studies across 20 countries in North America, Europe, East Asia and Australia. Shown is the sample-weighted distribution across all cohorts born between 1980 and 1994 (so reaching the age of 18 between 1998 and 2012).

Since human heights within a population typically form a normal distribution:
 - 68% of heights lie within 1 standard deviation (SD) of the median height;
 - 95% of heights lie within 2 SD.



Note: this distribution of heights is not globally representative since it does not include all world regions due to data availability.
 Data source: Jelenkovic et al. (2016). Genetic and environmental influences on height from infancy to early adulthood: An individual-based pooled analysis of 45 twin cohorts. This is a visualization from OurWorldinData.org, where you find data and research on how the world is changing. Licensed under CC-BY by the author Cameron Appel.

Figure 2: The distribution of male and female heights.

Perhaps the most commonly repeated argument for dropping support of lightweight rowing at the National Governing Body (NGB) level, is the cost of maintenance outside of the Olympic programme. Many NGBs are allocated funding based solely on Olympic performance, or the potential to win Olympic medals. As such, this funding cannot be put towards any endeavour not directly supporting the Olympic mandate.

Fortunately, there is a practical and reasonable course of action that may yet still be implemented at virtually zero cost to British Rowing. Our proposal is as follows:

1. **Allow British lightweight rowers to compete at the GB Rowing Team Trials:** These trials, including the November and February 'open' assessments, the December crew formation trials and the April Final trials are already established events in the British Rowing calendar, and operate in a format such that additional athletes may be easily incorporated at no additional cost. The current barrier to lightweight athletes entering these competitions is the required Concept2 ergometer standards, largely inappropriate for lightweight rowersⁱⁱⁱ.
2. **Through these trials, provide British lightweights a pathway to earn the right to represent GB at international competition:** In addition to meeting some appropriate physical fitness/strength standard(s), this may take the form of (for example) a certain level of performance relative to the heavyweight trialists, or a target 2000m time to achieve for a particular lightweight boat class. The latter is

ⁱⁱⁱSee Appendix Table 1

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the method currently employed by US Rowing^{iv}, for example. Again, this may be implemented without any changes to existing infrastructure.

- 3. Allow selected British lightweights to be entered into international competition, with or without the funding of the GB Rowing Team:** This ensures that athletes meeting a competitive international standard have a viable path to compete at world-level. Where necessary, athletes should be allowed to source external funding for themselves so as not to impose on existing GB Rowing Team funding infrastructure. This is the system adopted by many other countries, and indeed is the way British lightweight rowers successfully operated during the ~ 20 years prior to inclusion into the Olympic games. Importantly, this will also help ensure the survival of the lightweight categories at world-level events, which are currently fully dependant on consistent entries from NGBs.

But why focus on international competition? Common across all sports is the power of representation. As consistently demonstrated throughout the sporting community, participation can be heavily driven by the visibility of a diverse and inclusive range of athletes at international level competition (particularly for those not previously involved in sport). There are several sports which include different weight categories (e.g. boxing and weightlifting) for this reason among others. Many more include a wide array of events to cater for people with different strengths and statures (e.g. 100m and marathon in running). By allowing the best British lightweight athletes to compete on the world stage, British Rowing can both promote and maintain the recruitment and retention of a wider, more diverse population into the rowing community.

British lightweight athletes in the past have been phenomenally successful on the international stage. In fact, GB has medalled in at least one lightweight boat class at 43 out of the last 48 World Championships, an astounding legacy. To this day, despite the constant negative press surrounding it's removal from the Olympics, lightweight rowing in the UK continues to be popular and successful. A typical BUCS regatta (consistently the largest regatta of it's kind in Europe) for example, has an entry composed of 40-50% lightweight athletes. However, it would be naive to assume that this number will be maintained should the lightweight events disappear from the competitive circuit, as current and potential future lightweight athletes may be pushed away from the sport towards alternative disciplines, or out of sport altogether. This will have the ultimate effect of simply reducing both the total number of people participating in rowing, and the diversity of those that remain.

As a member of the British Rowing board, you have both the power and the platform to speak up for our sport in a way that we, the athletes and the advocates, do not. Please, consider our request. Listen to our arguments. Discuss them fairly amongst your colleagues. Consider the legacy of the last 50 years of British lightweight rowing, and the role this has played in establishing the UK as a global leader in our sport. Finally, consider the future of rowing in the UK, and the role that you would wish to take in shaping that future given the opportunity that you now have.

Where would British Rowing be today without the athletes and individuals that owe their careers to the lightweight categories? How many inspirational role models and sporting leaders will we as a community be deprived of in the future were lightweight rowing to disappear?

^{iv}See the *2024 Senior National Team Selection Procedures*, available at <http://www.usrowing.org/>

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The existence of lightweight competition marks the sport of rowing as progressive and inclusive in a world where diversity and representation are at the forefront of social issues in sport, and society in general. Lightweight rowing deserves to be supported and maintained in recognition of the positive effects it thus has on our national membership.

Thank you for your time and your consideration.

Yours Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "B. Parsonage". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a prominent initial "B" and a long, sweeping tail.

Ben Parsonage

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Appendix

	2000m cutoff		5000m cutoff	
	%WBT (HWT)	%WBT (LWT)	%WBT (HWT)	%WBT (LWT)
Senior M	92.0	97.7	93.1	98.9
Senior F	90.7	98.5	92.6	98.8
u23 M	89.8	95.4	90.3	95.9
u23 F	89.3	96.9	90.6	96.6

Table 1: Current GB Rowing Team minimum Concept2 ergometer standards^a relative to both heavyweight (HWT) and lightweight (LWT) world best times (WBTs).

^aAvailable from: <https://www.britishrowing.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/2025-Selection-Trials-Notice.pdf>