

## Safety

### 5.1 Introduction

**R**owing is a water sport and therefore has some inherent risks. Safety is a priority and RCA has developed safety standards for use by rowing clubs in Canada. These are available on the RCA web site and contain the following sections:

- ✦ RCA's Minimum Rowing Safety Standards
- ✦ Cold Water Guidelines
- ✦ RCA's Regatta Safety Rules
- ✦ Transport Canada's regulations for rowing shells
- ✦ Transport Canada's motor boat regulations



That document forms the background for this chapter and the discussion of safety with respect to adaptive rowing programs.

### 5.2 Safety Orientation and Training

**T**he RCA standards require every club to display prominently a “Code of Safety” or its equivalent, such as “Safety Rules and Regulations”. Everyone should be required to familiarize themselves with and to adhere to the safety procedures and to encourage other members to do so. Safety orientation and training should be provided prior to the first outing on the water. It can be done as a classroom session or can be provided by means of a hand-out with a review of the main issues by an instructor. Simply distributing or posting safety procedures on their own is not adequate.

**ORIENTATION**

New participants should be given a tour of the facilities during their first visit to the boathouse with emphasis on both hazards and safety features such as those set out below:

- ✦ Rowing club boathouses and docks have some inevitable safety hazards. These include overhead and protruding boat racks; suspended oars that can become dislodged; trip hazards from lines and cables; and, proximity to water. Such hazards may pose a greater danger for those with certain disabilities who may not be able to see or hear well or may be using a wheelchair. Everyone using the boathouse facilities should be aware of these potential hazards and be encouraged to stay alert to the risks that they pose to themselves and others.



- ✦ All participants should be made aware of the locations of emergency exits and the nearest telephone, which should be accessible by all adaptive rowers, as well the location of first aid kits; safety blankets; fire extinguishers; PFD's and other safety equipment.

- ✦ Participants should be warned about lifting hazards that lifting and carrying boats to and from the water without good technique or adequate numbers of people can lead to injury. Some participants with disabilities will not be able to assist with carrying the boat. An adequate number of volunteers will be needed to help.



## TRAINING

**The RCA standards require that clubs provide adequate instruction in watermanship and rowing technique, plus adequate supervision by coaches and experienced rowers, to ensure that no person boating from the clubhouse puts himself or herself at risk when on the water.**

- ✦ Most clubs require members to be able to swim. This requirement should also apply to participants in adaptive rowing programs. However, it should be recognized that swimming ability may be limited and that the participant may need some assistance from another crew member in an emergency.
- ✦ Consideration should be given to requiring all participants, at least early in the program, to wear PFD's while rowing. However, this should be assessed on a case by case basis based on the perceived level of risk, the comfort level of the participant, and the type of boat. (singles have a much higher risk of tipping than a four).
- ✦ A buddy system should be implemented, at least in the early stages of a program, so that each adaptive participant is paired with a volunteer rower who rows with them and who will advise and assist them during the outing and especially in the event of an emergency.
- ✦ All participants should be “talked through” individually as to what to do in an emergency. They should clearly understand how to disengage themselves from the foot stretchers or other supporting straps and how to use the boat and oars for floatation support. Those who row arms only may require a strap around their abdomen and/or thighs, for support. All such straps should use Velcro and have a quick release pull tab conveniently located at the front of the rower.



### 5.3 Safety Equipment

The Canadian Coast Guard *Safe Boating Guide* ([www.ccg-gcc.gc.ca](http://www.ccg-gcc.gc.ca)) specifies minimum safety equipment to be carried in a rowing shell or by the accompanying safety/coach boat. Currently a rowing shell must have a PFD for each member of the crew, a sound signaling device, a heaving line and, if

operated after sunset and before sunrise, a watertight flashlight. This equipment is not required when competing at a regatta or training at the regatta site during the regatta or when attended by a safety/coach boat carrying a PFD for each member of the crew of the largest boat being attended (in addition to its own safety equipment).



In practice, adaptive rowers whose swimming abilities may be limited by their disability should wear PFD's while rowing. This should be assessed on a case by case basis. But, relatively inexperienced rowers in small boats, i.e. singles and doubles should carry PFD's in their boats. Recreational boats typically have lots of room to stow PFD's. Alternatively, they can be attached to the boat deck with a bungee cord. Coxswains should be encouraged to wear PFD's at all times when on the water. In many clubs this is part of the standard operating procedures.

The coach/safety boat should be operated by a competent boat operator who is fully aware of the crews and individuals on the water that he/she is responsibility for and any special needs in the event of an emergency. For example, the boat operator or instructor/coach must be capable of affecting a rescue from the water and getting the rower safely on board, in light of the rower's particular disability.

### Important Note

*If a boat operator was born after April, 1983 or if the safety/coach boat is less than 4 metres long, the operator is required to have a proof of competency certificate (all operators of motor craft will require such a certificate after September 15, 2009).*

## 5.4 Weather

The operating guidelines for taking rowing shells on the water should be governed by a club's Standard Operating Procedures/Code of Safety. This document, which should be posted and readily accessible in the boathouse, should clearly describe the limiting weather conditions for all rowing operations.

Since the actual weather and water conditions can only be assessed at the dock, the final decision on whether to proceed with a training session should be made on site by an experienced coach or other designated, qualified individual. The type of rowing shells to be used (e.g. singles, recreational fours, etc.), the temperature of the air and water and the experience and the disabilities of the crew members should influence the decision.



In the event that crews encounter adverse weather conditions while on the water, they should return to the boathouse as quickly as possible. If unable to return, they should seek a safe haven until the conditions have improved.

### Helpful Hint

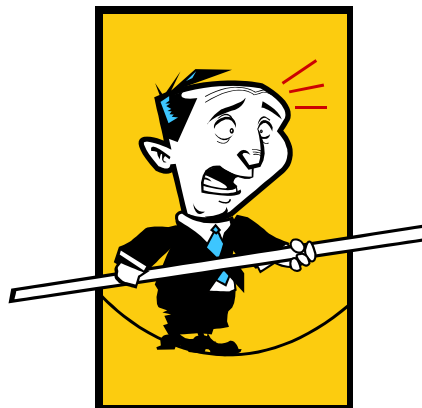
In an emergency, it is possible for a coach boat to tow a rowing shell, with the crew aboard, using the heaving line from the safety kit. This can be necessary where a sudden squall overpowers the ability of a crew to control the rowing shell and to prevent it from blowing ashore. The heaving line can be secured to a solid section of the shell hull beneath the bow seat. Two people are needed in the coach boat, one to monitor the rowing shell and the other to control the coach boat.

## 5.5 Special Requirements for Adaptive Rowers

**W**hat other special safety procedures need to be implemented for an adaptive rowing program? This is a difficult question to answer as it depends on the specific disabilities of the adaptive rowers and the anticipated hazards at the club's location.

Every rowing club needs to evaluate the specific risks associated with its own unique situation. When evaluating the risk, these interrelated aspects should be considered:

- (a) the likelihood of an incident occurring;
- (b) the possible severity of the consequences should that incident occur; and
- (c) the extent to which those consequences can be effectively mitigated.



For example, the likelihood of a novice rower flipping on their first time out in a single skull is high. If the water is very cold the consequences could be serious. The instructor or coach must consider whether such consequences can be effectively mitigated before allowing the novice to take out the single. A possible decision might be that the novice sculler takes the single out only when the water temperature is high and/or when there is a safety boat always close at hand.

**For consideration**

Rowing programs for participants who have limited swimming abilities or mobility challenges should probably not commence until water temperatures are consistently above 15° C.

The club or coach should recognize that an adaptive rower’s disability can increase the possible severity of the consequences and reduce the extent to which they can be effectively mitigated. For example, a rower who flips, even in warm water, could be at severe risk if they have difficulty swimming or a tendency to become disoriented or to panic and the extent to which that risk can be mitigated may likewise be limited.

Another example is the case of an experienced coxed four crew going out for a practice on a cold April morning soon after ice break-up. While the likelihood of the crew flipping is extremely low, the consequences should that remote event occur are extremely serious. So even with a low risk of occurrence, special precautions will be needed, where the consequences of such an incident are life-threatening.

**So a club or coach should always consider the likelihood of occurrence and the consequences of occurrence in combination when evaluating risk and determining the need for special safety precautions.**

**RISK FACTORS**

The following is a check list to assist you in identifying what are the special risk factors associated with rowing activities and to put adaptive rowing programs in context of the other programs at your club.

1. **BOAT TYPE:** The risk of small boats getting into difficulty, i.e. singles and doubles, is much higher than for fours and eights.
2. **ENVIRONMENTAL CONDITIONS:** Water temperature, unpredictable weather conditions.
3. **EXPERIENCE LEVEL OF CREW:** Obviously, novice crews are at greater risk of getting into difficulty than experienced crews, and may also be less prepared to deal with an unexpected problem. Another aspect of this risk factor, is the ability of the crew members to deal with an adverse situation. For example, if a crew member has a disability that would require assistance from another crew member in the event of the boat flipping, this would heighten the consequences of an incident, and so may warrant additional mitigative measures.



4. **COURSE CHARACTERISTICS:** Remote rowing courses where a rower may be some distance from the shore or those that have heavy motor boat traffic are higher risk than those that are close to shore at all times and that are protected from other boat users.

There is no “one size fits all” approach to developing standard operating procedures for a particular club. Club executive committees are encouraged to network with other clubs with adaptive rowing programs and to use the resources available through RCA and their provincial rowing association to develop their own operating procedures.

**Clearly, as in all aspects of rowing, common sense must be exercised at all times. As the knowledgeable person, the rowing coach, makes the final decision as to who goes out and under what circumstances. A prudent coach will strictly enforce all safety precautions for the safety and enjoyment of all participants.**

A useful exercise for a coach or program manager to undertake periodically, is to visualize a specific crew getting into difficulty and mentally working through the safety response. If the coach is not satisfied that the safety of all participants can be guaranteed, further improvements should be made to the safety system and procedures. In the case of adaptive rowers the coach must take into account the extent to which a rower’s disability might limit his or her ability to respond effectively to an emergency situation and the extent to which additional precautions are required and whether additional safety resources should accompany the rower.



## 5.6 Avoiding Rowing Injuries

Rowing is a very safe activity provided reasonable precautions and common sense are exercised. People new to rowing, especially those who have not been involved in regular training or fitness workouts, are susceptible to minor physical discomfort and some aches and pains. Potential physical distress includes:

- ✦ Lower back pain
- ✦ Knee pain
- ✦ Wrist Tendonitis
- ✦ Blisters



Adaptive rowers face the same risks. In addition, however, there may be the risk of injuries associated with a disability. For example, participants with poor circulation or who are paralyzed from below the waist face the risk of seat abrasion. For those who row fixed seat, pay particular attention to the selection of an appropriate seat or consider the use of a foam or gel pad. Consult a medical equipment supplier for advice on appropriate equipment.

Encourage participants to speak up and let the coach or cox'n know if they are experiencing a particular discomfort or pain or would like to take a break. This allows the coach to review whether technique or equipment needs to be modified, or whether the participant needs to take some time off, reduce training intensity or see their family physician.

## 5.7 Insurance

Rowing Canada Aviron's insurance policies provide coverage with respect to adaptive rowing activities for rowing clubs that are in good standing with RCA and for their members, including adaptive rowers, who are registered with RCA. Details can be found on the RCA website under *The Organization/ Policy & Guidelines*.

