

Comments of the Royal Dutch Rowing Federation on the ‘Principles of a Rowing Event Programme’

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Introduction

The Dutch Rowing Federation fully supports addressing the issues around rowing that are identified in the Agenda2020 discussion. Increasing participation across the population and globe, improving the appeal and attractiveness of racing and lowering the cost of venues and facilities are good objectives that will benefit the sport as a whole.

The Olympic Movement and Games are both the pinnacle of our beloved sport and trend setting for the direction in which our sport will evolve. The Olympic events in rowing build on a long tradition that has produced a substantial and capital intensive infrastructure of boat houses, boats, training facilities, racing venues and last but not least people who live our sport passionately as athletes, coaches, sport managers and racing officials, and who have developed their skills and knowledge over many years, for many a life time.

The sport has changed during its long history and will no doubt continue to change in the future, but in our view and against the backdrop of this existing infrastructure, change can only be gradual and needs to build on what is already there. We do not see a need, nor an opportunity, for ‘revolutionizing’ the sport as we know it.

The Olympic Games are key for attracting people to our sport and attracting media attention and hence investment money from public and private institutions. In an Olympic cycle of 208 weeks, only 2 weeks or 1% is devoted to the Games. The other 99% of the time, rowing is minding its own business, although much of what we do in our high performance programmes is clearly with the Olympics in mind. What we propose for the Olympic Agenda2020 therefore needs to be put in the context of what we want for the sport as a whole.

In the next paragraphs we will comment on the questions raised in the FISA Working Draft as presented in the Lucerne meeting in July 2015.

Regatta Structure

1. Race Distance: should Olympic Rowing remain an endurance sport?

Behind this question is a more fundamental question: Should we make a distinction between what we normally do in our own races and regattas and what we do during the Olympics? Making such a distinction would in our view be a bad idea that will only make our sport less transparent, more complicated and more costly. Hence redefining the character of the sport itself is a fundamental choice, not a choice that we would only make for the Olympics.

Because we see ‘endurance’ and the training that is needed to be successful in endurance sports as a core sport value in rowing, we would be strongly opposed to redefining rowing as a non-endurance (recreational?) sport. Rowing a boat at maximum speed is both fun and exhausting and this is one of the reasons why we love this sport in the first place.

This does not mean that an endurance athlete can not do other distance than 2000m. In our view any distance beyond 1500m or racing time over 5 minutes would require an 'endurance' training approach and would therefore qualify.

2. Number of Lanes

The number of lanes is both a race attractiveness issue, a fairness issue and a cost issue. Compared to a time trial, parallel racing in lanes provides more interesting races for both competitors and spectators. Since weather conditions can not be controlled like in indoor events, fairness will always be an issue to be concerned about, also in a time trial format.

A wide race track may create differences between the outer lanes. A narrow track (2 lanes) will generally be more fair.

The Henley format is a very popular race format that draws huge crowds. A form of round robin match racing in preliminary rounds with quarter finals, semi's and finals may create an attractive race format with little to no fairness issues to be concerned about.

Suitable venues for a 2 lane, 1750-2500m race will probably be easier to find than for the current standard FISA format. This approach could create a substantial cost advantage.

We expect that it will be difficult to reach consensus on a new 'one-size-fits-all' format for Olympic rowing that radically differs from the current FISA standard. Perhaps the Olympics are best served if we allow more flexibility in possible formats for competitive rowing during the Olympics. A country (or group of countries) that wants to bid for the Olympics can then choose a format that suits the local conditions, be it the standard FISA format, a Henley-type match racing format, or even (least preferred) a time trial format, if that secures fair competition at acceptable cost. As long as the teams need to prepare for racing at maximum speed across 2000m or thereabout, the essence of competitive rowing is not compromised.

3. Number of days

We see the number of days more as a logistical issue. Compressing the time needed by racing 2 times a day would be acceptable. This may help in reducing (variable) cost somewhat, especially in housing and food.

4. Number of final days

This again is more an issue for the Olympic event as a whole. As a prime time media event broadcasters and sponsors will have a say in how events are spread over time or, alternatively, how they should be concentrated to create exiting content for viewers. From a rowing (spectator & media) perspective concentrating the (semi-)finals on a few days (1-3) in a fixed time slot (weather permitting) is preferable.

Racing Structure

5. Balance of long and short boats

We are strongly in favor of maintaining the four current boat lengths for 1, 2, 4 and 8(+cox) athletes, because it reflects the existing infrastructure of our sport. Bigger boats also make our sport more spectacular to watch. We could however support an approach whereby we only race in one version of these boat-types in the Olympic Games, hence 1x, 2x or 2-, 4x or 4- and 8+ per discipline only.

We do not see a strong correlation between boat types and body measures or muscle fibers, hence in principle all categories (heavyweight, lightweight, men and women) can race these boats, although for lightweight women we would prefer sculling only. This because there currently is no 'market' for high performance lightweight women sweep rowers in most countries and we don't see much additional value in developing one.

Boats are an important cost item. We see cost reduction potential in a model whereby the organizing committee provides boats for the regatta on request. National Federations would still be free to bring their own boats, but to encourage participation emerging countries in rowing could be supported by providing standard boats (especially 1x and 2x/-). After the event the boats could be sold locally as training boats for the benefit of the rowing infrastructure of the organizing country.

6. Balance of sculling and sweep rowing

The two types reflect both history and skills. In the Netherlands (top)scullers are usually recruited from junior athletes who start rowing at younger ages. Sweep rowing is the standard for student rowers, who start rowing between 18-20 years of age. Sweep rowing is easier for entry-level rowers to learn. In the Olympic Regatta both types should be present, although not necessarily in the same boat length (see 9). This would also make the Olympic rowing sport easier to understand for the media and the general public who usually have trouble with the distinction between scull and sweep anyway.

7. Balance of heavyweight and lightweight

Having two weight categories greatly benefits participation in our sport on a national level, but will also benefit participation on an international level. Greater participation is advantageous in many dimensions.

8. Excellence versus universality

The Olympic Games should always strive to have the best athletes the world has to offer competing. Limiting entries to one team per country is justifiable to allow more countries to participate (within a set fixed quota of participants). The fewer the number of events per discipline the more we get into a situation where for some countries not all international top-athletes will be able to compete in the Olympics, simply because there are not enough 'seats' in the available boat types. We currently already have this situation in the lightweight disciplines. Nevertheless we are in favor of rebalancing events across gender and weight.

9. Gender balance

We fully support gender balance. Including the previous observation and maintaining the current set of 14 events, we could support the following set of events. The quota numbers are indicative and would lead to 548 participants when all quota are filled.

M: 1x, 2-, 4x, 8+ (quota # of entries: 20, 12, 12, 10)

W: 1x, 2-, 4x, 8+ (quota # of entries: 20, 12, 12, 10)

LM: 1x, 2x, 4- (quota # of entries: 20, 12, 12)

LW: 1x, 2x, 4x (quota # of entries: 20, 12, 12)

Whether this will lead to a full 50-50 gender balance in participating athletes will depend on the actual number of entries per event.

Quota management in general will determine the total number of participating athletes in these events, whereby we would strongly be in favor of maintaining the number of around 550 participating athletes.

Significant reduction, leading to marginalization of rowing as a national Olympic sport, would compromise the critical size of an Olympic programme in a country like the Netherlands. Size is needed to carry an adequate volume of professional athletes, staff and training facilities, and the funding and sponsoring that goes with it.

10. Inclusiveness

Para-Rowing is a valued but independent discipline within the sport. Participation in the Netherlands is limited. Infrastructure is organized according to demand. Organizing attractive Paralympic Games is a different question, not covered in these comments.

11. Integrity/rowing values

We do not see specific issues from an integrity/rowing values perspective in the Netherlands or for rowing in the Olympic Games.

12. Spectator experience

Moving towards a match-racing format (see above) would improve the spectator experience since spectators can watch the race and the crews up-close instead of far away on a wide race track. But modern image technology can improve the spectator experience in any race format.

13. Image production

For television match-racing is probably an attractive format. The use of modern technology, trackers, small on-board camera's, drones, etc. can greatly improve the image quality and 'drama' of rowing competition in any format.

14. Variety

We do not see other disciplines as mature enough yet. In time coastal rowing might develop into a new attractive discipline.

15. Mixed events

We do not see putting men and women in one boat as a interesting option from a high performance perspective. Physical differences are too big in our opinion. It is conceivable however to introduce a team event where the team consists of men and women crews who race each other for a consolidated team medal. This could be done over a shorter race distance (e.g. 500m). Another option is to identify 1 event per discipline (e.g. 1x) and introduce a team medal for the country that has overall the best performance over these 4 events. This would limit participation to 20 countries (see item 9), each sending 4 single scullers as a minimum.

16. Doubling up

We see athletes participating in more than one rowing event as a (rare) exception, not as something we should start to promote. This does not apply to a team event as described before (see 15). Such a team could very well be recruited from athletes already present for their own event.