



# ROWING, A RESPECTABLE MEMBER OF THE OLYMPIC FAMILY

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Right from the beginning, rowing was considered a respectable member of the Olympic family by the IOC and therefore included in all its programmes. It was only in 1896 (at the time of the Games held in Athens) that the rowing competition was cancelled because bad weather made the waterway impossible. For some time, many people had thought, and put their thinking into writing, that without athletics, swimming and rowing the Olympic Games would lose some of its meaning.

Yet we must face up to the fact that this discipline is rather burdensome for the organizers of the Games. A regatta area is costly to build and maintain.

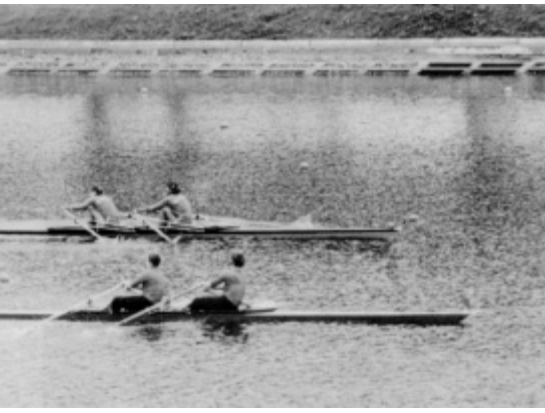
Since rowing became an Olympic sport in 1936, installations have served at least two sports. One cannot deny, however, that certain Olympic basins have, once the festivities are over, really become a problem. It is therefore natural that, in future, efforts may be made towards rational inclusion in overall sports complexes, as they already are in the Federal Republic of Germany, Denmark, Austria and elsewhere.

Despite the weighty prestige of the Olym-

pics, it still cannot offset certain adverse factors which remain in the way of promoting rowing amongst the countries of the entire five continents. Here are some of them:

### 1. THE RISKS OF COMPETITION

More than other disciplines, rowing is exposed to the hazards of the weather. The six competitive heats do not take place under the same conditions and this is something which happens in most cases. This means that not all the competitors start with an equal chance as is required by decent sporting rules. Up until now, heats have been drawn by lot. In this way, a crew, regard-



less of how good it may be, can already suffer a serious setback merely through bad luck of the draw. Beginning with the World Championships in Hazewinkel (August-September 1985), FISA has experimented, at least for the final races, with a new system. More specifically, they have assigned lanes 3 and 4, considered the most protected, to the best teams in the qualifying heats. A similar procedure, that is the reservation of the centre lanes for those obtaining the best results in the elimination rounds, has been used in swimming for some time. The remedy, however, is not complete. In fact, sometimes the “outside” water lanes are helped by the capriciousness of the wind. In conclusion, either FISA devises other solutions in cases of bad weather (for instance using only the “calm” water lanes, with a logical extension of competition times) or one resigns oneself to a kind of injustice not found elsewhere — apart from combative sports where lots are drawn (boxing, wrestling, etc.).

### 2. INCREASING DIFFICULTY IN REACHING THE FINALS

In the past, rowing was a very minor event in the Olympic Games; thus, finals with six people appeared reasonable and proportionate. Today, however, competitors are somewhat more numerous albeit their overall numbers are not very high. Moreover, considering the competitive difficulties, National Olympic Committees decline from entering small crews and ones that would have no chance of winning. The transition in the finals from six to eight makes the scope wider; in fact, the title of Olympic finalist, in all sports, has become rather much sought after. The little extra offered by FISA, i.e. participating in “minor finals” for classification from seventh to twelfth place, appears insufficient. Apart from the complication of the programmes and the indifference of the public, it fairly often happens that certain teams compete in minor finals without the least bit of enthusiasm. The winner of a minor final would prefer very much more to be seventh in a major final.

### 3. THE COST OF CRAFT

Building skills continue to advance and boats themselves become ever more sophisticated and lighter. No Federation, no Olympic Committee, can deny its own athletes equipment on a par with that of their competitors. The exaggerated increases in the cost of boats are known; but these too, and they are quite sizeable, must be offset. This means spiralling costs. The malaise is evident not only during major international meetings; it is an ongoing daily experience for rowing societies which constitute the linchpin of the individual National Rowing Federations.

### 4. THE PROBLEMS OF SELECTION

Given the enormous development in sport today, it was natural that more and more young people of both sexes would feel attracted towards the various disciplines. Thus every shop hesitates as to what it should have in stock. Young, physically well-developed people who could engage in rowing are nevertheless lured away by other



attractions. Team sports like basketball and volleyball have now followed the path of professionalism. They offer simple and less tiring training, the undeniable pleasure to be got from a ball game and the chance of taking part in future Olympic Games; but they also bring with them immediate gain — quite a lot of money indeed — plus the prospect of earning considerably more in the future.

It almost always happens that a boy who was attracted to the sport of rowing, egged on by flattery and at times influenced by his own family, has finally opted for it just out of sheer expediency. This explains the undeniable difficulties in which this sports finds itself; at the same time it

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justifies the pride of athletes who, by deigning to select it as their favourite, confer on it a special dignity which, alas, is not very highly thought of by sporting profiteers.

## 5. DISSEMINATION FROM CONTINENT TO CONTINENT

Like her sister Federations, FISA simply wishes to increase the number of nations participating in its sport. Such a programme comes up against many difficulties of a social, economic, traditional, geographical, etc. nature. Indeed one must not overlook another detail: rowing is increasingly becoming a sport engaged in by super-gifted people. The technical aspect (systems for training and preparation) takes second place. In fact, it has been shown that, however highly talented a person may be and however highly prepared, there remains the stumbling block of overpowering physical superiority and the weight to match. In the Rome Games of 1960, male participants had an average height of 184.70 cm and weighed 82.80 kg. In Los Angeles twenty-four years later, the average height had increased to 189.88 cm and the weight to 87.93 kg.

As regards those who won medals the respective differences changed as follows: height 185.36 cm and weight 82.70 kg in Rome; height 191.80 cm and weight 89.78 kg in Los Angeles. The data regarding the women rowers are also significant. The average height of the participants in Los Angeles was 176.82 cm and weight 72.27 kg. The data for the female winners were: height 177.69 cm, weight 73.96 kg.

One does not have to be a great expert in demography to see what all this means. Not all countries, nor all continents, are in a position to provide male and female rowers of such stature. At Hazewinkel, the site of the 1985 World Championships, Africa was almost totally unrepresented. South America participated in the "two with" (Brazil), in the "two without" (again Brazil), in the "singles" (Argentina) and in the "doubles" (Chile).

The only Asian country present was the Republic of Korea which participated in the "singles", "two with" and "four without" trials. But, as is known, Korea will be organizing the 1988 Olympic Games and could not but make a token appearance in one of the traditional Olympic sports in the World Championships.



Considering all the factors set out above, it has to be admitted that participation in sporting trials dominated by athletes who are increasingly capable and strong becomes an expensive undertaking which does not justify even the slightest hope of winning a respectable position at the finishing line. The relevant International Federation is clearly aware of these facts, to such an extent that, although unable to alter certain by now well-entrenched positions, the way has been opened to a new category of athletes: lightweights whose maximum weights have been set at 72.5 kg for men and 59 kg for women. The response to this innovation has been so encouraging that FISA has recognized a World Championship class for this type of competition. At Hazewinkel men have competed in the "singles", "doubles", "four without" and "eight"; women in the "singles", "doubles" and "four without". Enrolment figures are not exceptional; but at least two "disheartened" Asian countries (China and Japan) have shown an interest.

This is why the dispute between FISA and the IOC concerning the inclusion of lightweights in trials should be studied with reason and mutual understanding.

D. M.

