

November 14, 2017

Dear NW Rowing Council,

We, the undersigned, support a return of the NW Masters Regional Championship regatta to the traditional format of “heats and finals”. We appreciate the recent effort to reach out to the masters racing community for opinions and comments, and that the Council is considering reversing the 2017 decision to change the format of this regatta.

Background

On January 28, 2017 the NW Rowing council entertained a proposal to switch the NW Masters Regional Championship from a “heats and finals” format to a “finals-only” regatta. There was no masters breakout session at the meeting. A straw poll was taken of the coaches present. A written proposal was submitted Feb 18, 2017. The change to a finals-only format was implemented at the June 2017 NW Masters Regional regatta. This action appears to have been largely driven by a change proposed by referees that regatta schedules start no earlier than 8am and end no later than 6pm, with a mandatory 1.5 hr lunch.

We appreciate that the growth in the size of this regatta creates challenges, but do not feel that the switch to a finals-only format provides the best long term solution. We encourage the Council to consider alternative solutions that do not diminish the identity of a “Championship regatta”, and potentially position NW Masters Regionals for even greater growth moving forward.

Data from 2017 Regionals:

Addressing a few of the assertions offered in the Feb. 18th finals-only proposal:

“More medals!” “No heats!”

Yes, lots of medals were awarded at the 2017 Masters Regionals. There were 58 races with four competitors or less. In 10 races everyone received a medal. In 48 races $\frac{3}{4}$ of the competitors received medals.

But most masters who compete are seeking more than just medals. NW Masters is our regional Championship regatta. Switching to a finals-only format diminishes this regatta in a very fundamental way. This view is widely held in the community, as shown in a poll (N=181) taken at this years Regionals (Carolyn Thompson, VBC):

“Does the finals-only format provide a meaningful championship regatta”:

yes	19/181	11%
no	145/181	80%
no opinion	17/181	9%

“Reduction in Handicapped races”

In fact, the finals-only format had no impact on the number of handicapped races. There were 50 handicapped races in 2016 (before the switch) and 51 handicapped races in 2017. It is not the well subscribed events that are handicapped; these were the events affected by the new format. It is the smaller events at both ends of the age groups, older (F+, G+) and younger, plus novice (A+) and lightweight (AA-D, A-C, H+, F-G) groups that are handicapped.

“There is no room for expansion if the regatta continues to grow”

We agree that planning for growth of masters regattas is an important issue that must be addressed. But we believe that the finals-only format is not the needed solution; additionally, it is not an appropriate format for a Championship regatta. Lifting the cap on races for 2017 Regionals did bring in more entries (and revenue), but in the end the finals-only format change produced a difference of only 18 races over the course of the three day regatta. Regionals 2016 had 253 races; Regionals 2017 had 235 [scheduled] races. If “bursting at the seams” was a primary driver of the format switch, we think further consideration is needed to provide for expansion as the regatta continues to move forward and grow.

Masters Championships Regattas should be maintained

Why do competitive masters commit time and expense for travel and trailering of equipment to Championship regattas? We go to compete, to row head to head against the best competition in our age category, to be challenged, to be pushed. The process of progression filters the fastest rowers to the final. Lane assignments greatly increase the chance that the athlete next to you will most closely match your speed, providing the type of racing that is memorable, and makes worthwhile the time and trouble of an expensive trip. Racing is not just a time trial. It matters if your toughest competition is in the next lane, or six lanes over.

Planning ahead

As a community, we celebrate the growth of competitive masters rowing in the NW. This is good for our sport. It promotes healthy aging in masters athletes – a benefit to families and more generally, to our health care system. Successful masters rowers train hard. And this only gets tougher as we get older! We lose conditioning fast and it's more difficult to get back. Competition provides training targets, and motivation. We should all want to encourage this. We appreciate that growth in the size of regional master competitions present challenges, but we encourage the NW Rowing Council and other rowing administrative bodies to find solutions that don't diminish the masters Championship regattas. It is important to be positioned to handle growth, and also *improve* our sporting events over time. We will all benefit from a vibrant masters community focused on rowing and competition.

Growth of NW Regionals

A stimulus behind changing the format of NW Regionals was the claim that “NW Masters is breaking

at the seams”. NW Regionals is indeed a popular regatta and has shown substantial growth. But we believe this rate of growth is manageable.

In the eight years leading up to 2017, growth was steady, but not extreme. In some years attendance went up, other years it went down. From 2008 to 2016, overall growth in the number of entries at Regionals increased by **28%**, averaging 3.5% /yr. Yearly percentage growth is shown below.

2008	811 entries	
2009	875 entries	+8%
2010	827 entries	-5%
2011	921 entries	+11%
2012	no data on Regatta Central	
2013	984 entries	+7%
2014	940 entries	-5%
2015	988 entries	+5%
2016	1038 entries	+5%

In the 2017 proposal to change NW Regional's format, the World Rowing Masters Regatta was put forward as a model (“Proposal to change the format of the NW Masters Regionals Regatta ... to a “finals only” regatta, as is done at the Masters World Championships”). In fact, this FISA regatta is not a “World Championship”. It’s a “masters regatta”. The scale of the two regattas is also vastly different:

NW Masters Regionals 2017:	1,252 entries	
FISA Masters Regatta 2017:	6,424 entries	
NW Regionals largest event:	wAA-A 2x	22 entries
FISA Masters largest event:	mD1x	193 entries
NW Masters Regionals 2017 ran:	235 races over 3 days (1 long day, 2 short)	
FISA Masters Regatta 2017 ran:	909 races over 5 days (3 long days, 2 short)	

Nonetheless, it's interesting to look at the 2017 FISA regatta in Bled, Slovenia, as an example of a well run regatta that was able to handle significant growth this year (no doubt due to the beauty of the venue!)

Two highly successful 2017 Master Regattas

FISA regatta, Bled, Slovenia

In introductory comments at the World Rowing FISA regatta on Lake Bled, organizers admitted that being the “World Rowing's largest regatta ever” created challenges. Bled is not a large venue and it has limited dock space. The town has a small population (6,322 in 2002), and operation of the regatta clearly relied heavily on volunteers. But despite the daunting logistics the organizers were proud of the size of the regatta and proclaimed that they were “happy to accept the challenge”!

With such a large number of entries, it seemed impossible this regatta could run on time. But it did! Races were held over five days, the first & last being half days.

Wednesday:	126 races (duration 6:29)	ended on time
Thursday:	218 races (duration 11:23)	ended 5 min early
Friday:	235 races (duration 11:56)	ended 3 min late
Saturday:	226 races (duration 11:51)	ended 2 min early
Sunday:	104 races (duration 5:42)	ended 3 min early

It was pouring rain on Sunday and amazing that racing went off without a hitch. Nothing was shortchanged in this regatta. Every boat was checked for heel ties and a quick release system before going on the water. Athlete credentials were checked before launching and again before receipt of medals on the awards dock.



Races were run on 3 minute centers. Racers in the next few events were lined up in their lanes behind the starting blocks. As soon as a race went off competitors pulled into the blocks, received a 2 minute warning, and there was a quick start. If racing fell behind, due to the inability of a boat to line up in the blocks, the effort was made to quickly catch up and races were soon back on schedule.

Lake Karapiro, New Zealand

The 2017 World Master Games regatta on Lake Karapiro, New Zealand was also impressively organized and run, by Rowing New Zealand. Like Bled, the Karapiro course has 8 lanes. The start blocks formed a connected barrier, so racers in lanes 1-4 waited on one side of the course, racers in

lanes 5-8 waited on the other side. When a race went off, they pulled into the course from the two sides. Boats were precisely lined up at Karapiro, down to centimeters, and races ran on time, with 3 minute centers.

Three boats qualified out of both heats and semi-finals. The approach was somewhat unique. Rowers could only enter a single event in each AM & PM block each day. Semi-finals and finals were scheduled within 60-90 min of the previous heat/semi in the event. So one might race three times in an AM or PM block, in one event. This added an interesting challenge to the 5 day regatta; indeed the true “champions” were those who still had some speed at the end of the week! This added interesting elements to events, requiring strategy and “smart racing” as well as raw speed. It benefited those who had trained hard and built endurance. Given the regatta organization, extensive heats and semi-finals, this indeed felt like a true “Championship” regatta. Combined with perfect water and weather, it was an apex of masters competitive racing.

Neither of the above regattas used chase boats. Static referee boats were positioned along the course, on both sides. At Regionals many of us have been complaining for years about chase boats. While we understand their necessity for novice events, the wakes on the race course as they speed back to the start line are always a source of frustration.

Suggestions

As noted above we, and others in the competitive masters community, believe that “finals-only” is not a suitable format for a Championship regatta, and request that the NW Rowing Council consider alternative solutions to accommodate anticipated growth in masters regatta as we move forward. Our suggestions for handling large Masters competitions, influenced by the above examples of 2017 International Masters Regattas, are:

- 1) Increase marketing in this region and work to attract more people in the rowing community to train as referees and serve as volunteers at regattas.

In our poll at 2017 Regionals (Carolyn Thompson, VBC) 64% of the respondents (88/138) thought that Regionals had become too expensive. Entry fees at NW Regionals have increased rapidly:

2008	2017	
1x: \$25	\$55	(increase of +120%)
2x: \$45	\$88	(increase of +97%)
8+: \$85	\$215	(increase of +153%)

We appreciate that the expense of running this regatta has unavoidably increased well beyond the rate of inflation (2008 2017, 13.7%), in large part due to expense of necessary travel and lodging for referees (James Rawson, 11/4/17 NW Rowing Council AGM). We suggest that some of the revenue from NW Regionals be put back into marketing and recruitment efforts for referees and volunteers.

At NW Masters Regionals 2017 racing ran for 4:50 hr on Friday, 8:25 hr on Saturday and 5:55 hr on Sunday. On Friday and Saturday there was an 1:30 hr lunch. Racing on Sunday started at 8 am and

ran straight through 1:55 pm. If lunches could be staggered, 2:40 hr could be added on Friday (inc. running to 6 pm), 1:30 hr on Saturday, for a total of 4:10 hr additional racing. Depending on race centers, this could accommodate an additional 50 -> 80 races, representing significant growth, with no adjustment in the current start or end points of NW Masters Regionals.

2) Reduce race centers to 3 or 4 minutes (from 5).

With the heats and finals format, 2016 NW Masters Regionals ran 253 races over 3 days. Without changing regatta hours per day, dropping to 4 min centers could increase the number of races by 25%. That is comparable to the level of growth seen in NW Regionals entries over 8 years (2008 - 2016). Dropping to 3 min racing centers would add 67% more racing than was achieved at the 2016 masters Regionals, without increasing the length of race days. The FISA regatta in Bled this year illustrated that one can expect masters rowers to lock on and line up on time with only 3 minutes between races.

3) Eliminate chase boats

Neither the Karapiro or Bled masters regattas used chase boats. Static referee boats were positioned along the course. At the Nov 4th NW Council meeting Tiffany argued that just the presence of chase boats can divert potential difficulties. She may have a point, although it does seem that the presence of buoys, and the danger of potentially catching a crab when hitting one is a significant deterrent to straying from the center of your race lane. It doesn't seem like chase boats would be necessary for all races, such as coxed events.¹ And other successful masters regattas do show effective and safe racing without chase boats.

4) Combine small events

NW regionals had 10 races with less than three competitors. For example, the wAA-A Novice 1x and the wB Novice 1x were held consecutively, with only two entries each. Increasing the number of boats in the race would be more fun for competitors, even when including multiple events, and would save time. Medals could be awarded for each event separately. Other races that could have been combined at the 2017 Regionals include lwt wG+ 1x and lwt wH+1x; lwt wC 2x and lwt wD 2x. All four of these races had only two entries each.

5) Consider expanding the Vancouver Lake course to 8 lanes for racing

NW Regionals has been based in Vancouver Lake the past few years, although it has moved around some in the past. If it appears that Vancouver Lake may be a permanent home for NW Championship regattas we think it would be worthwhile to explore the possibility of enhancing the infrastructure, including the possibility of eight lanes for racing.

¹ There is also the potential for using drones with static referee boats. Some in our group are quite enthusiastic about this idea, thinking it would be fun for referees and potentially help recruiting.

Summary

We have offered a few suggestions and hope to stimulate further discussion on alternatives to the finals-only format for dealing with additional growth in masters Championship regattas. The recent regattas on at Lake Karapiro and Bled are good examples of quite large regattas being successfully handled by small communities.

We feel that a finals-only format downgrades a Championship regatta. In an ideal world, to have true “Championship” regattas we would favor removing race caps on individual events and using semi-finals as well as heats when necessary. We hope that the NW Rowing Council will embrace the view that we can rise to the challenge and strive to make our Championship regattas the *best!*

Respectively submitted,

Jill Gardner	<i>College Club Seattle</i>
Laurence Yaffe	<i>College Club Seattle</i>
Rachael Alexander	<i>Lake Washington Rowing Club</i>
KC Dietz	<i>Lake Washington Rowing Club</i>
Norma Andreadis	<i>Orcas Island Rowing</i>
Joan Pendleton	<i>Palo Alto Rowing Club</i>
Stephanie Duncan	<i>Pocock Rowing Center</i>
Carolyn Thompson	<i>Vancouver Rowing Club</i>
Dimas Craveiro	<i>Vancouver Rowing Club</i>