

CUCBC Statement – Lent Bumps 2015 11 February 2015

In the light of the recent and often highly emotive and inaccurate debate played out on social media and elsewhere, it is appropriate for CUCBC to make a clear statement of our position on the structure and running of the Lent Bumps 2015, and of the options available for future discussion, in advance of tonight's Captains' Meeting.

Announcement of Lent Bumps structure

As required, the structure of the Lent Bumps 2015 was properly announced at the first captains' meeting of this term. This was followed by an extended and thorough discussion conducted by previous CUCBC Chair Dr Holly Hedgeland. That discussion had no requirement to be taken to a vote, and completed with general assent of the plans as presented. **It is therefore not appropriate for any form of vote to be taken at tonight's meeting with reference to the structure of Bumps this term.**

The number of divisions in Lent Bumps 2015 is **identical** to that in 2014, not, as appears to be claimed in social media and in various letters sent by poorly briefed 'senior' supporters, a further reduction. The races will take place over four days (Wed-Sat), and there is no option whatsoever to race on Tuesday this year. The racing divisions will commence at 1320 in order to be able to fit in all the required races. There is **no** possibility of adding in an extra division in this format. Indeed, the 1320 start is in breach of the existing agreement with the University (through the Senior Tutors' Committee), who have stipulated very clearly and forcefully that any scheduling of races that interferes with the University teaching (lecture) schedule for participants is unacceptable. In a very clear and uncompromising meeting with previous CUCBC Chair Prof Peter Convey, it has been made clear that the University both has the power and is prepared if pushed to ban any such attempt to race at this time, and furthermore they would be prepared to roll this in with a blanket ban on early morning training, which they separately view as also impacting lecture attendance and effectiveness, and bringing bad publicity to the University. It does not take much to work out that enforced loss of the 1320 racing slot would reduce the number of divisions to 5 in total. This is actually the original reason why CUCBC switched to a 5 day format a number of years ago, which does allow a maximum of one extra division (ie total of 7), and even then requires a 1320 start on one weekday.

Safety considerations: again, the 'public' debate on this matter contains fundamental misconceptions. The question at issue is **not** whether CUCBC can create and run a racing division structure, requiring the appropriate number of marshals, umpires etc – whilst it is a challenge to obtain commitment from an appropriate number of sufficiently experienced people to take on these vital roles, it can be achieved for whatever racing structure we have. The **fundamental** question is whether the crews that Colleges enter to race are **sufficiently experienced and competent** to do so. This question does not apply only to the 'lower' boats, or those in the 'getting on' zone. It has become increasingly clear and a matter of great concern to the Chief Umpires in the last three years or more that levels of skill are dropping alarmingly across the middle and even the top divisions. The 'blunt instrument' of the 10-

outing rule last year identified that even 2nd VIIIs of certain top and well established clubs had struggled to meet this commitment. Real accidents in recent events, including but not restricted to up to half of 2nd and 3rd division crews crashing into the outside of First Post or Grassy, and regular instances of this in the 1st Divisions, often into crews already stopped there, without any excuse of obstruction, wind etc, **demonstrate beyond any doubt the levels of competence are now dangerously low.**

While to spectators this is amusing, and it makes for good jokes in speeches at boat club dinners, Captains and Clubs must wake up to the seriousness and risk associated with this, and understand that CUCBC officials cannot knowingly agree to run an event for crews with this level of competence. The direct risks of serious and life threatening injury are very real, and the consequences unthinkable. Aside from what would be personal tragedy for any victim, any such occurrence would spell the end of any form of Bumps racing, as well as raising what very likely would be complex liability issues. Of course CUCBC has thorough insurance cover for all its events (and those of Colleges that choose to take it up to cover their events). But, if there is any evidence of ‘recklessness’ in the operation of an event – as for instance could very easily be argued if we go ahead with ‘races for everyone’ in the face very clearly and publicly recorded concerns over competence and safety – then an insurer might well conclude our cover is invalid, and then individual officials, rowers, coxes and clubs may well find themselves personally liable or the subject of legal action, with likely costs running into millions of pounds.

In the light of this, there is **no** possibility of expanding the number of participants in the Lent Bumps 2015. Further, the Chief Umpires have made it clear to both Senior and Junior Committees that the occurrence of clear acts of incompetence, or clear indication of inexperience leading to danger, including such as described above will result in the immediate removal of such crews, and even entire divisions, from subsequent races. The CUs and Committees also make it clear (see Future Options below) that they have no set view on the number of divisions that are appropriate to run, and rather any future decisions to maintain, increase, or decrease on current levels must be based on clear evidence of basic competence across Clubs changing.

Voting options at tonight’s meeting

As made clear above, CUCBC considers that there is no requirement or case for taking a vote at tonight’s meeting on the structure of the Lent Bumps 2015. That is fixed and will not change. Should captains continue as appears to be threatened in e-mail and social media traffic and insist on some form of vote – noting that no voting motion has actually been proposed as is required under the Constitution – then CUCBC has to state that this will *de facto* be considered a ‘vote of no confidence’ in the event organisers, i.e. the Senior and Junior Committees and the Chief Umpires. Should such a vote be passed, then members of those bodies would be forced to resign (and may choose to do so anyway; all are volunteers who give considerable time and energy to CUCBC, and Captains should not underestimate the negative impact of their actions and statements, including in the recent campaign).

Captains would then be faced with the task of approaching and appointing new officers to all these positions, who would then have to organise subsequent races from scratch. This would (a) be impossible on the timescale available to Lents 2015 and thus no races at all would be possible, and (b) would almost certainly result in our insurer removing cover from an event which could hardly be seen as anything other than 'reckless'.

Future options

CUCBC's central role is to try and foster the development of College rowing. However, this has to happen in the real world available to us and College Clubs. There is no 'magic wand', and clubs have to behave realistically and recognise what is possible. There is much argument that rowing is a participation sport, and it must be a 'good' thing to maximise this. Subsidiary to this, there is an unspoken assumption that whatever number of crews a Club manages to put out, CUCBC must be forced to provide races for them. One look at the size of the water available (ie the River Cam) and the clear fact that nearly all crews from our c. 35 (x 2, for men and women) clubs now only train, largely ineffectively, in the 1-1.5 hr slot on weekday early mornings, should make it blindingly obvious that this free for all is not possible and cannot continue. No other College or University sport sees its role as being to support as many teams as it is physically possible to put out, never mind to organise competitions for them all, and neither is rowing organised in this way at other Universities. Other College team sports (soccer, rugby, hockey, cricket...) routinely train in the daytime as well as competing 1-2 times per week – if rowing clubs really cannot do the same, then those Clubs have to take some responsibility for the fact that they now regard themselves as being 'enforced' to train in the early mornings.

In short, being restricted to the early morning slot both places an inevitable constraint on how many crews a club can put out, and the standard of training and hence level of competence they can achieve. In theory a crew can race in bumps after completing only 10 outings. For a novice crew or one containing several novices, this will be all the outings they have ever had. Even in their second term they may have completed only 20 outings or less in their entire rowing career. Is it really plausible that such a level of experience is sufficient to permit competing in a complex and potentially dangerous form of racing such as Bumps? These races' history is that they were developed in a world where 1st and 2nd crews routinely trained (and properly) 5-6 times per week, and lower crews 3-5 times. This is the world that continued until the rise of early morning rowing in the last two decades, and we are now at the point where virtually all training is early morning, as well as being largely ineffective through overcrowding and queuing. This is a very real change, and the competence problems we now face a very real consequence of it.

Where do we go next? As stated above, CUCBC has no preconceived view of the acceptable size of the Lent or indeed May Bumps. However, we have to balance participation, event type, and safety. As far as is practicable, we seek for College Clubs to encourage participation, but that cannot come with an automatic right to enter events of any given type. On a number of occasions in recent years we have attempted to stimulate a debate amongst captains as to the best way to accommodate those rowers that do train given the ever

decreasing access to water space, and the best way to structure racing available on the river over the year. Sadly, to date, all such attempts have descended into the sort of ineffective and uninformed debate and position defending that has characterised the current social media and e-mail campaigns.

There are very real options to consider what alternatives to bumps format racing might be appropriate for what are undeniably less experienced and competent crews – for instance could CUCBC instigate a ‘lower boats regatta’ at some point in the Lent Term to accommodate both failed GoR crews and others who may not be able to or wish to enter Lents? Is the current structure and timing of College-organised races still appropriate? For instance, certainly to some SC members, it would seem common sense that current races available in Michaelmas Term are not appropriate for college novice crews – there is sense in believing that a novice crew with around 10 ineffective outings completed might reasonably be expected to compete in a head race such as Fairbairns, but it is far less plausible that this is the case for competing in a side by side regatta such as the Clare Novices. Would there therefore be a case or an appetite for moving the Clares to the Lent Term and making it the main early target for novice crews? If we are to resolve the challenges facing us, ‘out of the box’ solutions are required, not minor tweaks and crockery shifting to the status quo.

Summary

CUCBC believes that the recent debate has got out of hand, probably unintentionally on the part of its initiators, and has become increasingly inflamed, misinformed and inaccurate. In some cases this may already have led to embarrassment for important senior supporters, who are discovering that what they have been led to believe is inaccurate and inappropriate.

Information on the Lent Bumps 2015 has been properly circulated, discussed and accepted at the proper time at the first captains meeting of term. There is no option or possibility now to change in any way the advertised structure. This is either accepted by Captains, or the event organisers will be forced to resign their positions. In that event there will be no Lent Bumps.

Safety and competence issues are very real, and relate to the very real constraints on clubs using only early morning training. If Clubs can find no way of reducing this reliance on the early morning period (even indeed in summer) then these constraints and competency issues will only increase. Thus there has to be a full debate and engagement from Clubs to enable them in any way possible to increase use of the water at other times of day. In parallel with this, there needs to be recognition, full debate and engagement from Clubs over what would be the best and most useful structure for CUCBC and College-organised racing events through the year. CUCBC has attempted to stimulate such debate and engagement on a number of occasions over recent years, to no avail as clubs retreat to ‘defend their own corners’. If we can harness the energy and intensity stimulated by the current campaign into a more useful direction, this may represent our last real chance to make some reverses to the declining trends of recent years.

Drafted by Prof Peter Convey (past Chair, Senior Committee Member and Chief Umpire)
On behalf of CUCBC Senior and Junior Committees, and Chief Umpires.

