

SAFETY ALERT 03/23 – Heel Restraints

What happened?

During the Scottish Rowing Spring Regatta (22-23 April 23) several boats were found at Control Commission checks to have heel restraints that did not comply with equipment safety requirements as identified in the Conditions of Entry. The Conditions of Entry clearly specified the following, consistent with World Rowing byelaws:

Foot Release. In all boats, the foot stretchers, shoes or other devices holding the feet of the rowers shall be a type which allows the rowers to get clear of the boat with no delay in an emergency.

- *Where shoes or other devices holding the feet will remain in the boat, each shoe or device shall be independently restrained such that when the heel reaches the horizontal position the foot will be released from the shoe.*
- *Where shoes or other devices holding the feet will not remain in the boat, each shoe or device shall be able to be released by the rower without using their hands or with a single quick hand action of pulling on one easily accessible strap or release device.*
- *In addition, where laces, Velcro or similar materials needs to be opened before the rower can remove their feet from the shoes or other device, all such materials shall be able to be released immediately by the rower with a single quick hand action of pulling on one easily accessible strap.*

The heel restraint issues fell into 3 categories:

1. Separate heel restraints for each shoe as required but one or both not secured properly.
2. A single heel restraint connected to one shoe that passed under the rear of the footplate to connect to the other shoe. This had the effect that when you lifted up the heel on one it pulled down the heel of the other and so wouldn't have been effective in enabling foot extraction.
3. No heel restraints at all.

The majority were in category 1 but there were also a number in category 2 and what was most concerning was that there were several in category 3.

Why did it happen?

Failures by coaches, clubs and/or boat owners, to carry out basic safety checks on their boats.

What action was taken?

Crews were not permitted to boat until the heel restraints were made compliant.

What can others learn from this?

The ability of a rower to be able to extract themselves from a capsized boat is severely impeded if heel restraints are not able to act to allow the rower's feet to be pulled out of the shoes. This has been demonstrated on many occasions when rowers have capsized and their feet remain trapped in the boat resulting in the rower being unable to self-rescue and struggle to keep their head above water. The requirement for clubs to carry out heel restraint checks is specified in Club's annual safety audit reports and should form a basic part of boat safety checks prior to any outing, not just races.