

# Recommended Practices for Rowing Clubs and Associations



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## Recommended Practices for Rowing Clubs and Associations

In relation to the sport of crewing, the State Navigation Law provides the following as an exemption to the term vessel:

*Section 2(6) d of the New York State Navigation Law.*

“The term “vessel” as used in this chapter shall not include a crew racing shell. “Crew racing shell” shall mean any shell, gig, barge or other sweep boat designed primarily for practice or racing, propelled by oars or sweeps, in the sport of crew or scull racing conducted by a private or public educational institution, school, academy, college, university or association of any of the preceding, or by an amateur sports club or association or by the United States or International Olympics Committee and shall not include canoes, rowboats or lifeboats.

The boat or launch accompanying a crew racing shell shall have sufficient safety devices to aid members of the crew should the need arise.”

*It is apparent that the Legislature intended that the requirements of the State Navigation Law not apply to racing shells which were part of an organized group while they either practiced or participated in competitions. It should be noted that these exemptions do not apply to individuals when rowing independent of an organization. It is unclear whether the exemption applies when a chase boat is not utilized.*

Notwithstanding the Legislature's intent, water safety is a common concern shared by all who use the waters of the state for recreation and sport. The following is offered to improve water safety and the safety of those who participate in the sport of crewing.



The following recommendations are provided to serve as basic guidance to those organizations engaged in rowing activities otherwise exempt from federal and state boating safety regulations, particularly those involving individuals less than 18 years of age. This guidance is an attempt to ensure greater safety through standardized practice for participants engaged in this waterborne activity. It is intended to guide organizations through the issues they need to consider when organizing events and practice sessions.

By their very nature any waterborne recreational activity has a number of inherent risks associated with its undertaking. Lakes and rivers can be extremely dangerous particularly in the early spring and late fall when water temperatures may be relatively low. The risks of sudden unexpected immersion, hypothermia and drowning are ever present especially with small low freeboard craft and particularly for non-swimmers.

New York's waterways are growing increasingly more crowded with a multitude of diverse recreational boating activities all competing for their space on the water. Many of these activities attract boaters to the same sheltered waters for fishing, water skiing, canoeing or rowing. In order to ensure the safety of these diverse activities there are numerous federal and state regulations governing items such as safety equipment, speed limits and operator education to name a few. Surprisingly little, if any, of these regulations apply to the activity of rowing whether during practice or in competition. While it is not unusual for competitive activities to be exempt from the specific provisions of the law, it may be imprudent not to apply a minimum level of safety during practice sessions.

In order to ensure the safety of rowers, the New York State Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation is proposing the following guidance to better assist rowing organizations in establishing their own safety plans and practices. Through a better understanding of the risks associated with boating and the reasons why certain items of safety are routinely required on recreational craft these organizations may better appreciate the need to require them as a matter of policy.

## Recommended Equipment Requirements

### Sound Signaling Devices

This piece of safety equipment may be as inexpensive as a mouth whistle or portable air horn. This simple device can be used to alert other vessels to one's position while also permitting a vessel to exchange the prescribed whistle signals between watercraft so as to avoid collisions. Coxswains should be educated as to the proper sound signals between vessels especially the signal for danger or imminent collision.



Whistles



Portable air horns

### Personal Flotation Devices (PFD) or Life Jackets

All recreational watercraft today, whether power, sail, or rowed need to have one US Coast Guard Approved PFD on board for each person. State law further requires children less than 12 years of age to wear a PFD at all times when on the water. It is important to understand that PFDs can be extremely crucial in ultimately determining if one survives an unexpected immersion into cold water. Last year nearly 80% of those who died in recreational boating accidents might have survived had they been wearing a PFD. None of those unexpectedly entering the water ever planned on it, unfortunately it happens too frequently. Even a good swimmer can run into difficulty when suddenly capsized or immersed into cold water.

The recommendation would be to wear a PFD if under age 12 and to have one aboard for each person in the shell. Obviously it may be impractical, if not impossible, to carry a life jacket in the crew shell. See further discussion of this issue under "Chase Boat".



Type III PFD



Type III PFD especially designed for rowing activities



Auto - Inflate PFD



Regatta Vest – Not USCG Approved

## Other Recommendations

### The Chase Boat

State law makes reference to the boat or launch accompanying a crew shell as needing to carry a sufficient number of “safety devices” should the need arise. Often times one chase boat must cover a number of shells separated by a considerable distance and on occasion out of sight of one of these watercraft. The term “safety device” may imply PFD or life jacket, however that is not clear. It would be wise to assume it does and carry them.

While it is clear that the law requires a chase boat, the ratio of shells to chase boat is not specified. This should be determined, in part, by the skill level of the participants as well as the proximity of the shells to one another. Rowing organizations might wish to consider a ratio of 2:1 for shells to chase boats for beginners and novices, and no more than 3:1 for experienced rowers. Not to be overlooked is the chase boat’s capacity to carry 100% of the necessary PFDs for the boats for which it is responsible. Given the size of a typical chase boat that alone might limit the number of shells such a vessel can practically be responsible for, not to mention the people in the chase boat itself.



Life jackets should always be readily accessible in the event they are needed.

The chase boat should never be out of sight of any shell for which it is responsible. Coxswains should be instructed to stop if they lose sight of the chase boat and return in the direction from which they came until visual contact can be re-established.

Launch operators should be a minimum of 18 years of age however if they are less than 18 they must possess a NYS Safe Boating Certificate. The launch is not exempt from state equipment and safe operation requirements and must carry and be equipped as otherwise provided for by law (see section 40 of the New York State Navigation Law or visit [www.nysparks.com/boats](http://www.nysparks.com/boats)). Depending on the size of the chase boat, this may include the requirement that it carry PFDs, an anchor, a sound signaling device, visual distress equipment, a fire extinguisher and a throwable rescue device. In addition it is recommended that the vessel also carry emergency blankets, ice packs, bandages and other similar first aid gear. Each organization should evaluate the appropriateness of adopting a “must wear PFD” policy in relation to the launch operator. Remember that the launch operator is there to assist the crew and the crew may not be in a position to assist the launch operator.





While not required, certain equipment such as a first aid kit, throw lines, boat hooks and binoculars are recommended.

### **Swimming Ability**

It is strongly recommended that all rowing organizations require every member of the team demonstrate that he or she is a capable swimmer by passing a swim test. The standard by which the participants swimming ability is tested should reflect those typical conditions experienced by rowers on the waters upon which they operate. This may include such factors as water temperature, currents, distances from shore etc. The American Red Cross has some excellent water safety and swimming programs, which may be referenced at <http://www.americanredcross.com/services/hss/aquatics/>.

### **Waterway Orientation**

Of particular importance is that every rower be given a thorough presentation on general boating safety including such areas of concentration as rules of the road, aids to navigation, restricted visibility, vessel lighting and sound signals.



### **The Weather**

A rowing shell should not be on the water during periods of thunderstorm activity, lightning or strong wind conditions. The coach should be responsible for monitoring the weather reports and conditions and for recalling the rowers should unfavorable conditions be forecast or appear imminent. Each organization should establish standards by which the coach should be guided.

### **Visibility**

Coaches should also be aware of any conditions that may arise which may reduce a shell's visibility on the water's surface. In particular, during daylight low-lying advection fog, rain or snow may diminish a shell's visibility to other boaters thus placing the shell and occupants at risk. Each organization should establish a policy on operations before sunrise or after sunset. The state navigation law requires that every vessel



Advection fog is often present during early morning hours

between sunset and sunrise display lights. While lights could be carried on the shell, low lighting and reduced visibility would make recovering participants who un-expectantly entered the water extremely difficult. We strongly recommend that operating after sunset or before sunrise not be considered as options. Each organization should set a standard by which the coach should be guided.

### **Hazards on the water**



Coaches and coxswains need to also be aware of the many hazards inherent to their particular waterway. The location of natural and man made hazards such as dams, spillways, bridge piers, rapids, currents and the like should be known, discussed and avoided. Locations such as marked navigable channels, boat ramps, marinas and other high volume use areas, where larger craft are limited in the ability to maneuver, should also be avoided. The rules of the nautical road specifically require that small, more maneuverable watercraft not impede the passage of larger, less maneuverable vessels in restricted channels.

### **Communications**

Coaches and coxswains need to consider a direct communications option with each other in the event of emergency. Coaches also need to have a predetermined emergency response plan, which would include the necessary communications with local ambulance and rescue personnel should they be needed. The plan should specify the specific type of communication equipment that is to be carried by the coaching team (marine radio, portable phone, etc).



### **Conclusion**

In conclusion it should be reiterated that these recommendations are simply basic safety practices that should be considered before placing individuals on the water in racing shells. It is imperative that every consideration to basic water safety be given before placing any watercraft upon the water. Sometimes this means thinking beyond the minimum requirements and to include consideration for any eventuality that might likely occur while on the water. It is hoped that these recommendations, which are supported by the United States Rowing Association, will be embraced by rowing organizations and in time strengthened so as to improve the overall safety of the sport.

#### **Coaching Resources**

United States Rowing Association. [www.usrowing.org](http://www.usrowing.org)

#### **Boating Safety Resources**

NYS Parks and Recreation. [www.nysparks.com/](http://www.nysparks.com/)

Empire State Plaza, Bldg 1, Albany, NY 12238

518-474-0445

US Coast Guard Auxiliary. [www.cgaux.org](http://www.cgaux.org)

US Power Squadron. [www.usps.org](http://www.usps.org)

National Safe Boating Council. [www.safeboatingcouncil.org](http://www.safeboatingcouncil.org)