



Irish Rowing Archives

Irish Amateur Rowing Association 1883 - 1886

Irish Amateur Rowing Association

Before reviewing the story of the short lived Irish Amateur Rowing Association (IARA), it is important that we set the scene. Competitive rowing as we know it today in Ireland is believed to have commenced with the foundation of The Pembroke Club in Dublin in 1836. There were no formal rules and rowing competitions often took place as part of a sailing regatta. The lack of a uniform code of rules led to frequent misunderstandings. There are numerous accounts in the newspapers of disputes arising from the conduct of such races. In other parts of the United Kingdom, of which Ireland was part at the time, there was also an absence of rules and such occurrences were commonplace. Henley Regatta, which commenced in 1839, had its own rules for the administration of the regatta. In 1878 it added a definition of amateur which read as follows:¹

“An amateur oarsman or sculler must be an officer of Her Majesty’s Army or Navy or Civil Service, a member of the Liberal professions, or of the Universities or Public Schools, or of any established boat or rowing club not containing mechanics or professionals; and must not have competed in any competition for either a stake, or money, or entrance fee, or with or against a professional for any prize; nor have ever taught, or assisted in the pursuit of athletic exercises of any kind as a means of livelihood, nor have ever been employed in or about boats, or in manual labour; nor be a mechanic, artisan, or labourer”.

The intention was to exclude those engaged in manual labour as they were perceived to have an unfair advantage from their physical exertions. In reality this was an exercise in preserving the sport for “gentlemen”.

In 1879 the Metropolitan Rowing Association was founded by the clubs on the Thames to attempt to bring some order to rowing in the area. In 1882 it was succeeded by the Amateur Rowing Association which had attracted clubs outside the Thames area. Interestingly from an Irish perspective, one of the founding bodies was Dublin University which uniquely had two votes, one for the Boat Club (DUBC) and one for the Rowing Club (DURC) which were separate at the time.

On 7th November 1883 a letter from DUBC to DURC suggested that they might join together with the intention of creating the IARA.² By December a meeting had been held³ in the Royal Arcade Hotel and the IARA had been formed. It is believed that 23 clubs formed the Association but this quickly grew to 28⁴ and included the following:

Bann Rowing Club
Belfast Boat Club
Belfast Commercial Boating Club (now Belfast Rowing Club)
Cappoquin Rowing Club
Carrickfergus Amateur Rowing Club
City of Derry Boating Club
Clonmel Rowing Club
Clontarf Rowing Club
Commercial Rowing Club (Dublin)

¹ Henley Regatta, a History – R.D.Burnell

² In Black and white – Raymond Blake

³ Freemans Journal – 20th December 1883

⁴ History of Boat Racing in Ireland – T.F.Hall

Commercial Rowing Club (Galway)
Cork Boat Club
Cork Harbour Rowing Club
Corrib Rowing Club
Dolphin Rowing Club
Drogheda Rowing Club
Dublin University Boat Club
Dublin University Rowing Club (merged with DUBC 1898)
Limerick Boat Club
Neptune Rowing Club (the original Neptune – ceased 1902)
Newry Rowing Club
Pembroke Rowing Club
Royal Yacht and Boat Club
Shandon Boat Club
Shannon Rowing Club
St Patrick's Rowing Club
Tyro Rowing Club
Waterford Boat Club
Wexford Harbour Rowing Club

The first Secretary was J.Humphrey Cathrew, a member of Dublin University Rowing Club. The government and management of the Association was vested in a committee consisting of representatives of the various clubs of the Association having not less than thirty paying members, all amateur oarsmen. This committee was to meet at least once every six months.

It is believed that the Association met in January 1884 for the purpose of establishing rules and agreeing a calendar of events for the year. At this meeting the Association adopted the following definition of an amateur:⁵

“An amateur oarsman or sculler must be an officer of Her Majesty’s Army or Navy or Civil Service, a member of the learned professions, or of the Universities or Public Schools, or of any established boat or rowing club not containing mechanics or professionals; and must not have competed for either a stake or money or entrance fee, or with or against a professional for any prizes; nor have ever taught, pursued or assisted in the pursuit of athletic exercises of any kind as a means of livelihood, nor have ever been employed in or about boats, or in manual labour; nor be a mechanic, artisan, or labourer”.

With a few minor alterations, it can be seen that the definition is almost identical to the Henley definition. Since 1870 DUBC had been a regular participant at Henley Regatta. Whether it was deemed the definition was necessary to ensure the continued participation by Irish clubs at Henley, or whether it was a simply a desire by some of the stronger clubs in the Association to preserve the sport for the elite is not known.

It was felt by many of the clubs that while the amateur definition was probably necessary in England due to the large number who made their living out of rowing, such circumstances were totally absent in Ireland. In addition the added money in most cases went to the club rather than the individuals. This view was expressed to the various British clubs suggesting an alteration in the rule. The response was to the effect that no Irish crew would be recognised as amateurs in Great Britain unless the

⁵ History of Boat Racing in Ireland – T.F.Hall

disputed definition was accepted and acted on in its entirety. It was therefore obvious that if Irish crews were to be permitted compete at Henley or any other British regatta then the definition had to be applied. The matter was put to a vote and it was decided to adhere to the definition by a majority of one.⁶

On 16th May 1884, a meeting of some of the Northern clubs took place in the committee rooms of the Belfast Commercial Boating Club with the Captain of St Nicholas Amateur Rowing Club in the Chair. St Nicholas was the working men's club in Carrickfergus and were therefore likely to be excluded from the new IARA. "The definition of an amateur was discussed and the different representatives were unanimous in agreeing that the rule of the Irish Amateur Rowing Association debarring artisans and mechanics was unjust and not in conformity with the term amateur in general and also tended to the detriment of amateur rowing clubs". A motion was passed with the purpose of calling a further meeting of the Northern clubs with a view to forming an Association having a wider and more appropriate definition of an amateur oarsman.⁷ The adjourned meeting took place on 3rd May and was attended by representatives of a number of Northern clubs and Hollywood Regatta. The Chairman read correspondence from Dundalk, City of Derry, Carrickfergus and Bann in support of the formation of the Northern Amateur Rowing Association which had a more encompassing definition of an amateur.⁸ A meeting of the committee of Belfast Commercial in June however agreed a motion "That insomuch as the clubs of the North have not properly responded to the circular issued for the purpose of forming a Northern Amateur Rowing Association, this club for its protection as an amateur rowing club, resigns its present connection therewith and joins the Irish Amateur Rowing Association".⁹ It would appear that the new rival association was still born and never controlled rowing in the North. The implications for St Nicholas were significant as thereafter they were only permitted to participate in special events for "non-associated" clubs at regattas. They ceased as a club a few years later.

In July another dispute arose in relation to the Amateur definition. Dublin Metropolitan Regatta refused to apply the amateur definition to their regatta and a public spat developed between Humphrey Cathrew, Secretary of the association and a Mr Proud, Secretary of Metropolitan Regatta Committee. The difficulty arose from the custom at Irish regattas of giving added money with the cups or other prizes. According to the new amateur definition this could no longer be permissible. At first Metropolitan refused to run the regatta run under IARA rules. A meeting of the Association was summoned at short notice and it was unanimously agreed that the clubs could not participate unless the regatta was run under IARA rules. A deputation was appointed to meet with the Metropolitan Committee to ask that they reconsider their decision.¹⁰ At a meeting of the Metropolitan Committee the following evening the Secretary read a communication he had received from several of the Ringsend clubs asking that the Committee reconsider. Having received the deputation from the Association it was agreed that the regatta would proceed under the rules of the Association.¹¹

While the 1885 season proceeded without any significant disagreements, there continued a simmering disquiet in relation to the inability of regattas to offer money prizes. A report in the Cork Examiner stated "The late rule defining an amateur oarsman, as laid down by the Irish Amateur Rowing Association, has injured the regattas to a very serious extent. By this rule the clubs cannot take any

⁶ The Irish Times – 26th September 1884

⁷ Belfast Newsletter – 17th April 1884

⁸ Belfast Newsletter – 5th May 1884

⁹ Belfast Newsletter – 16th June 1884

¹⁰ Freemans Journal – 11th July 1884

¹¹ Freemans Journal – 12th July 1884

money prizes as they used formerly, but must be content with pieces of plate etc. They cannot therefore, in most instances, afford to send crews to foreign regattas at an expense of sometimes over £100. Some of the Dublin clubs telegraphed that they would send crews but for this. The only reason adduced by the supporters when this rule was laid down was that Irish crews could not row in England and vice versa. Yet Irishmen scarcely ever do row in England or English crews in Ireland.”¹²

It would appear that the majority of the clubs which did not aspire to compete in England were resenting the restriction which was seen to only benefit a small number of Henley bound clubs. At the AGM in November a proposal was placed before the members by Drogheda Rowing Club to the effect that an amateur would be eligible to compete for money prizes on condition that the money went to the club and not to the individual oarsmen. This was passed by 19 votes to 7.¹³

While one would imagine the relaxation of the amateur rule would have appeased the aggrieved clubs and brought the matter to a close it was not to be. At the February 1896 IARA committee meeting one of the matters to be considered was letters of resignation from 5 clubs.¹⁴ While we do not know the identities of the clubs which tendered their resignation, it is highly likely that they were clubs which were likely to attend Henley. A split had therefore manifested itself in Irish rowing with some clubs effectively challenging the authority of the Association by choosing to not be bound by its rules.

At a meeting of Metropolitan Regatta in May a letter was read from Mr Proud announcing his resignation as Secretary. It will be recalled that this was the gentleman who had clashed with the Association two years previously in relation to the latter’s imposition of the new amateur definition. Having prevailed on him to reconsider his position, the Committee passed the following motion: “That the following regatta be held solely under the rules of the Metropolitan Regatta Committee”. The following resolution was also carried: “That the Committee of the Dublin Metropolitan Regatta request the Irish Amateur Rowing Association to reconsider their definition of an amateur, as this committee find that it is not in their interest to hold their regatta under the rules of the Irish Amateur Rowing Association as at present formed and that a copy of this resolution be forwarded to the secretary of the Irish Amateur Rowing Association.”¹⁵

It appears that the Association had been mortally wounded by the defection of a number of its constituent clubs and one of the Premier regattas. At the AGM of the Association in November the only item of significance discussed was the adoption of a resolution proposed by Commercial Rowing Club (Dublin) and seconded by Clonmel “That a special general meeting be called for Friday 10th December at which will be discussed a motion that the Irish Amateur Rowing Association, as at present constituted, be disbanded.”¹⁶ We do not have an account of the December meeting but as there is no further mention of the IARA after 1886 we can safely conclude that the resolution was passed.

No further attempts were made to establish a governing body for rowing in Ireland until 3rd February 1899 when Bann Rowing Club, City of Derry Boating Club, Drogheda Rowing Club, Newry Rowing Club, Pembroke Rowing Club, Shandon Boat Club, Dublin University Boat Club and Waterford Boat Club became the founding members of the Irish Amateur Rowing Union or Rowing Ireland as it would subsequently become known.

¹² Cork Examiner – 27th July 1885

¹³ Freemans Journal – 28 November 1885

¹⁴ Freemans Journal – 27 January 1886

¹⁵ Freemans Journal – 12th May 1886

¹⁶ Freemans Journal – 27th November 1886

At the outset we detailed the situation prevailing in Great Britain as it had a bearing on the development of the rowing administration in Ireland, particularly in relation to the amateur definition. We will conclude by detailing what subsequently transpired across the water. In 1885 or 1886 the Amateur Rowing Association applied the restrictive Henley definition of an amateur. As in Ireland this did not sit well with many clubs and there were considerable objections to the definition. Such was the disquiet that in 1890 a split occurred with the National Amateur Rowing Association being formed. This Association adopted an almost identical definition of amateur with the exception of the omission of the exclusion of mechanics and artisans. It was not until 1937 that the Amateur Rowing Association removed the objectionable definition and a further 20 years before both organisations merged.

It was regrettable that the IARA were unable to achieve their objective of administering the sport and quietly dissolved. With the benefit of hindsight it was probably a wise measure as the twelve years before another attempt at forming an Association permitted wounds to heal and differences to be forgotten.

Kieran Kerr
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