Racing for Equality in Women’s Competitive International Rowing: The Change of Women’s Racing Distance from 1000 Meters to 2000 Meters

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In 1954 the Fédération Internationale des Sociétés d’Aviron (FISA) hosted the first-ever Women’s European Rowing Championships, in Maçon, France. However, the FISA delegates of the 1950s, all of whom were men, were reluctant to allow oarswomen unbridled access to international competition, and thus oarswomen were limited in the number and type of events available for their participation. In parts of the Western world, “highly conventional, idealized notions of female desirability” were emphasized.\(^1\) Robust women were considered vulgar, and women’s physical activity was “carefully monitored, regulated and circumscribed” because “feminine demeanor was insisted upon.”\(^2\) Some FISA delegates supported this ideology and argued for the creation of “another form of rowing for women, one that wouldn’t develop muscles.”\(^3\) It was agreed that FISA would establish international regulations for women’s competitive rowing that took into account both the physiological and cultural considerations of the nations involved.\(^4\) The men made the decision to shorten the women’s racing distance to half that of the men’s—1,000 m rather than 2,000 m—as a way to prevent oarswomen from overexerting their delicate bodies.\(^5\) Anita DeFrantz, a former international oarswoman and current FISA vice-president, reminisced about this restriction and pointed out the following: “we raced a 1000 metres and we objected to it from the beginning because we knew that we were racing 1000 metres because that was half what the men raced. There was no other justification and that’s not a justification.”\(^6\)

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, many in the international rowing community, including several FISA delegates, became aware of a particular problem associated with the women’s racing distance—a problem that appeared to be magnified because Eastern Bloc countries had dominated women’s international rowing since the first women’s European championships. Although the number of countries that entered women’s crews at international regattas had increased since 1954, many were concerned with the number of medals won by Eastern European nations. Di Ellis—a former international coxswain and rower for Great Britain and currently the president of the British Amateur Rowing Association (ARA)—indicated that during the Cold War it was common to have “five Eastern Bloc countries [racing]
against” one boat from the West in the final. Tricia Smith, Canada’s most successful female rower during the 1970s and 1980s and a current FISA Executive Council member—concurred with Ellis and added that there was always this force [from the Eastern Bloc countries], the Romanians, the Bulgarians, East Germans . . . Russians, Poles. Most finals that Betty [my pair partner] and I were in were all Eastern Bloc countries except us. There were occasionally good crews in our event from Great Britain, the Netherlands, or the United States, but the norm was all Eastern Bloc, except us [in the finals].

The physical size and athletic superiority of oarswomen from the East prompted many to question the legitimacy of the Eastern Bloc oarswomen’s gender—were they in fact women? Furthermore, the size, strength, and dominance of Eastern Bloc oarswomen made some in the international rowing community question whether these athletes were using performance-enhancing substances. It was argued that the 1,000-m racing distance ensured that women’s rowing was a power event, and thus the use of anabolic steroids could easily influence the outcomes of women’s races. Thus, in order to address these concerns, it was suggested that the women’s international racing distance be doubled to 2,000 m.

This article documents the process through which the women’s international racing distance was changed from 1,000 m to 2,000 m in 1985 using data collected from a variety of sources, including meeting minutes, correspondence, and interviews with current and former international oarswomen. I suggest that even though the eventual equalization of the women’s racing distance with the men’s was a progressive step forward in the development of women’s competitive international rowing, many male and female rowing administrators were not solely concerned with gender equity. Rather, the doubling of the women’s racing distance was largely motivated by the desire to change the image of female international oarswomen to a more aesthetically pleasing and feminine physique.

### The Change of Women’s Racing Distance to 2000 Meters

After gaining entrance into the European championships in 1954, the world championships in 1974, and the Olympic Games in 1976, many female and male rowing administrators set their attention to change the distance of oarswomen’s international racing events. Originally shortened because of the alleged biologically determined physical inferiority of women and furthermore designed to maintain the femininity of female participants, during the 1970s and 1980s, the international rowing community came to realize that the 1,000-m racing distance actually solidified women’s rowing as a power event, making the use of anabolic steroids an attractive option to those seeking to win competitions. In a 1983 letter to FISA President Thomas Keller, men’s Senior National Coach and Director of Coaching for the British ARA Penny Chuter argued that in order for women to win a medal at the international level, the use of steroids, “particularly in the ‘crew’ events,” was a necessity.

In particular, Eastern European athletes were targeted as steroid abusers throughout the Cold War. From the beginning of women’s inclusion in the 1954 European championships, Eastern Bloc crews dominated women’s competitive