

WHAT LIES BENEATH – a safety message to all Clubs

You've had a great regatta. Your crew has been victorious and clutching your hard won medals it's time for a well-earned celebration of the fact that all those cold and wet early morning starts, the pain of brutal ergo sessions, the muscle wrenching weights sessions have paid off and you are now the champions. And a key member of the crew who is definitely worth more than their weight in gold is your cox. So the celebrations begin with the cox being hurled into the water by the jubilant crew and because they are a crew the rest quickly follow by jumping and diving into the water - altogether a not untypical rowing activity.

Consider this though. Spinal cord injuries occur when someone diving into water strikes their head on an object such as a pool or lake bottom or a submerged object. Most serious injuries involve the cervical spine (neck) in the C-5 region and are classified as compression or flexion-compression injuries. If you dive into shallow water your extended hands and arms provide the only source of protection to the head from any underwater objects. Should the arms collapse upon impact or not be in a forward position, the head is vulnerable. Minimal force is needed to cause spinal injury especially when the neck is not in a neutral position. The diver's weight, underwater velocity and angle of impact are major determining factors on whether impact will result in injury. The heavier the individual and the greater the velocity the more likely injury will occur.

In 2013 within the UK, 18 people died as a result of diving or jumping into shallow water and this does not include fatalities from the practice of "Tombstoning". In the USA it is estimated that 800 spinal cord injuries occur each year as a result of people diving into a body of water with 90% of these incidents occurring in water depths of less than 2 metres.

And what about the coxswain? With no real control over what angle or where they enter the water the presence of a hidden underwater object poses the threat of them suffering a life changing injury. The majority of waters in the vicinity of pontoons and river or canal banks are relatively shallow and certainly for those in public areas can contain all manner of discarded objects ranging from hypodermic needles to fence posts or the ubiquitous shopping trolley. Not the sort of objects upon which you want to land your back.

Such dangers were given recent emphasis through an incident involving an individual member of Scottish Rowing. The person concerned was fortunate in that the injuries they sustained did not affect their spine but nonetheless they were significant and debilitating as can be seen from the images below of their face and stomach. They also sustained significant injury to one of their hands, the images of which are too graphic to display.



[Scottish Rowing acknowledges the consent given by the injured person to use their images]

The injuries were sustained as a result of the person diving into shallow water at a rowing venue and hitting submerged rocks that were hidden from view. It does not take too much imagination to consider what injuries could have been sustained had a cox landed on their back or head in the same location.

Even in familiar open waters unless the water is totally clear, it is usually difficult if not impossible to determine exactly what lies beneath the surface or how deep the water is and therefore diving or throwing people into such water is unsafe.

The practice of throwing coxswains into the water is not endorsed by Scottish Rowing and member clubs should act to discourage such activity. Whilst spontaneous displays of celebration are of course to be encouraged, they should be undertaken with due regard to the safety of all those concerned.

