

# **DRAFT** Proposal for revitalising "classification according to ability"



## **Overview**

At the start of each year approximately **95%** of all non-Novice athletes are eligible for Club-class. This is a huge bottleneck in the classification system. The proposal to revitalise the classification system is:

1. Leave the existing Novice-class unchanged, as a gateway experience to rowing.
2. Split the existing Club-class into two parts; making demonstration of ability the next step in an athlete's progression.
3. Adjust the pathway for promotion into Senior-class; so the threshold for getting to Senior-class is not so high.
4. Leave Premier-class unchanged.

This tackles the existing Club-class bottleneck at both ends:

- A) It acknowledges and moves the best of the current Club-class athletes into Senior-class, which is an under-utilised classification.
- B) By splitting Club-class it creates a buffer between Novices and those current club-Class rowers who have both experience and ability.

The revitalised "classification according to ability" provides a classification system that is worthy of that name. And it provides better opportunities for athletes to end up competing against peers of similar ability.

# The existing classes

"Classification according to ability" has evolved to the point where it is a serious misnomer. As it currently stands:

- Novice-class is a class you exit based on experience, not ability.
- Premier-class is a class you can only enter through selection into an RPC.
- Senior-class is mostly a selection-based class (for athletes who were previously selected to RPCs or national representative honours).<sup>1</sup>
- **Club-class is the holding class for everybody else.**

At present Club-class is continuously topped-up with ex-Novice athletes. These are athletes who have not necessarily demonstrated any ability; beyond the ability to complete a race.

And the threshold for moving out of Club-class is ridiculously high. To leave the class athletes have to:

1. demonstrate sufficient ability merit national selection; or
2. demonstrate sufficient ability to be selected into an RPC i.e. skip Senior-class and become Premier-class; or
3. demonstrate they have the ability to win events at Nationals for classes higher than Club-class i.e. demonstrate they already have sufficient ability to be at the top of higher classes

When you have a single class that does not distinguish between athletes who only have enough ability to complete a race and athletes who place as high as 2<sup>nd</sup> in Senior or Premier class events then those athletes are not really being classified by their ability.

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<sup>1</sup> Senior-class does include a small number of athletes who were promoted to the class; but only **after** demonstrating they already had the ability to win the Senior-class events they're moving up to.

## The current situation

At the start of the 2014-2015 Season there were 4962 athletes who had held a competition licence in the 2013-2014 Season. When you look at how those athletes were classified for the new Season it is astonishing.

At one end of classification according to ability, 576<sup>2</sup> of those athletes were potentially still eligible for Novice-class. Practically all the athletes who were genuinely still eligible for Novice-class are coxswains.



At the other end of classification according to ability, just 212 of the remaining 4386 athletes were ineligible for Club-class. They are the Senior-class and Premier-class athletes.

### **What this means is a disproportionately large number of the non-Novice athletes end up assigned to Club-class: 95%!**

Inevitably, because most non-Novice athletes are crowded into the same class, Club-class covers a very broad range of abilities. At one of end of Club-class you have athletes who have experienced as few as one regattas but have not yet acquired any particular proficiency in rowing. At the other end you have athletes who compete in Senior-class events but have not yet won one of those events at Nationals and thus have not been promoted out of Club-class.

Because we have reached a stage where the vast majority of athletes are all consider to have the same ability for the purposes of "classification according to ability", despite actually having a broad range of abilities, it is clear that classification is overdue a change. This proposal puts forward a way of doing that.

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<sup>2</sup> The actual number is somewhat lower because the results from all regattas are not yet available for checking i.e. some of those athletes would have lost their eligibility for Novice-class through having competed at a local regatta where the results were not accessible for this proposal.

# The refreshed classes

The proposal to revitalise classification according to ability involves bringing "ability" back into focus and splitting that block of 95% of non-Novice athletes who form Club-class into two parts.

Note: the following names used for the new classes are purely there for convenience. The final names can easily be something completely different (e.g. Maiden+Club, Intermediate+Club, Club+Journeyman, etc.) and should not be allowed to become a distraction from the substance of the proposal.

## 1. Novice-class

It is not proposed to tinker with Novice-class. Everybody already enters Novice-class on an equal basis: zero experience and no demonstrated ability at rowing. It makes a very good gateway class for rowing because athletes can be assured they're not being asked to compete against other athletes who have prior experience rowing.

The breadth of Novice-class does mean some athletes will have a physical advantage within the class. But that can be addressed by combining Novice-class with other classifications e.g. there are already Masters Novice and U18 Novice events, where age-group classifications help restrict Novice-class.

However, on exiting Novice-class athletes are thrust into a very unequal class where there is a huge range of abilities. Instead of trying to change the exit criteria for Novice-class to take ability into account it is proposed to begin using ability to distinguish between athletes in the next class up.

## 2. The existing Club-class

It is proposed to split this class in two. After leaving the gateway Novice-class athletes will enter a class where they all have some experience but are not yet presumed to have gained any particular level of ability. Demonstrated ability will be the key for athletes to leave this first part of Club-class.

For the purposes of the proposal this part of Club-class will be referred to as Club\*-class.

### a) The new Club\*-class

Club\*-class becomes the starting point for athletes who have experienced rowing and decided to continue in our sport. It will be a class where athletes can gain ability before moving on to more competitive classes. It is a class similar to one there used to be, called Maiden-class. Athletes used to leave Maiden-class when they demonstrated the ability to win races. A related principal will apply to Club\*-class.

- i. Championships and Major Regattas (as defined in the NZRA Rules of Racing) will be used to assess ability.
- ii. A podium finish of 1<sup>st</sup> 2<sup>nd</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup>, in a Club\*-class (or higher class) event will be evidence an athlete has demonstrated enough ability to be classified by their ability and progressed to the next class.

- iii. Progression will take place on a Season-by-Season basis (not immediately after the regatta where the athlete demonstrates they're ready for the next class).

For the purposes of the proposal the next class, which is the other part of the existing Club-class, will be called Intermediate-class.

## **b) The new Intermediate-class**

Intermediate-class eventually becomes the class where the largest number of athletes will end up. These are the existing Club-class athletes who are capable and competitive rowers. At the moment, because there is a tremendously high threshold for Senior-class eligibility, the current Club-class group of athletes includes some very capable rowers. The best of those would be a better fit in an expanded Senior-class. So, to further reduce the bottleneck found in the existing Club-class, it is proposed to lower the threshold for leaving Intermediate-class and provide better recognition of the range of abilities that exist.

## **3. Senior-class**

Currently this is the smallest of all classes for ability. Smaller even than Premier-class. The majority of athletes in Senior-class get there by having previously been selected for national or RPC representation but there are limited opportunities to gain such selection. The only pathway for an athlete to get to Senior-class directly through their own ability is by winning Senior-class, Premier-class or U20/U22 events (where Premier-class RPC crews compete) at Nationals. In other words, athletes have to prove they are already better than the athletes in the classes above them in order to join them.

It is proposed the pathway from Intermediate-class to Senior-class be based on winning Intermediate-class events (as well as retaining the existing selection-based criteria) at Major events and Championships. Winning a class should be sufficient evidence the athlete has demonstrated enough ability to be progressed to the next class.

## **4. Premier-class**

It is not proposed to alter this class. The class consists of RPC athletes who are unavailable to their clubs for most of the regular Season. Adding a few athletes to Premier-class from outside RPCs would leave those athletes in an awkward position. Instead Senior-class should be left to be the pinnacle of what an athlete can achieve through their own ability; before getting further recognition through selection to a national crew or RPC.

## Downward classification - gaining re-eligibility for a lower class

The existing system for classification according to ability includes a pathway for dropping down classes. Athletes leave Premier-class when they are no longer selected into an RPC. Athletes leave Senior-class two years after that, or two years after the last time they prove they have the ability to beat Senior-class or Premier-class crews at Nationals. Because so few athletes are being promoted up out of the existing Club-class this pathway contributes to bringing athletes back into Club-class and keeping higher classes minimal in size.

It is proposed the ability-based pathway for exiting a class be better re-aligned with ability. An exit pathway will be added to Intermediate-class and Club\*-class. However, it will be tied to demonstrated ability at Major and Championships regattas; not simply time-based.

For Senior-class and Intermediate-class a podium finish should be sufficient evidence the crew still has the requisite ability to be in their class. So the ability-based threshold for dropping down from Senior-class or Intermediate-class should apply to athletes who are competing but have not achieved a podium finish in their class (or higher) in two consecutive Seasons.

There will also be athletes who struggle with the transition from Club\*-class to Intermediate-class. Because the goal with the new Club\*-class is to create a class where athletes can acquire and demonstrate ability it would be counter-productive to bring a lot of athletes who've already demonstrated that ability back into Club\*-class.

Intermediate-class is also expected to still be considerably bigger than Senior-class, which means there will be fewer opportunities (more competition) to achieve a podium finish. So the threshold for becoming re-eligible for Club\*-class should be tougher than coming down from the higher classes.

It is proposed only athletes who fail to make it into the top half of any of their events over two Season should become re-eligible for Club\*-class.

An athlete who goes up a class will then have two Season's to make some headway in that class; after which time they become re-eligible for the lower class if they cannot compete successfully in the higher class.

**Existing**      2 year off rowing is sufficient to go from Premier to Club

**Premier** + *dropped from RPC* = **Senior** + 2 years *w/o winning Snr at Nationals nor being NZ rep* = **Club**

**Revitalised**    4 years of declining performance is required to go from Premier to Club

**Premier** + *dropped from RPC* = **Senior** + 2 years *finishing off podium nor being NZ rep* = **Intermediate** + 2 years *in bottom half of fields* = **Club**

# Summary

"Classification according to ability" is failing to meet its description. 45% of athletes are classified by experience (Novice = no prior experience) and 51% of the remaining 55% of athletes are considered to have the same ability: Club-class. Premier-class is a classification based on selection. And Senior-class, which is the top-most class athletes can aspire to based purely on their own efforts, is both ridiculously hard to get into and the smallest of all classes.

The existing Club-class has become a major bottleneck for ability-based classification. This proposal provides for "classification according to ability" to be revitalised by clearing the bottleneck at both ends. It does that by preventing the accumulation of former Novice-class rowers in a class based on ability before they have a fair chance to develop that ability. And also by increasing the number of very able athletes who progress into Senior-class.

Under the proposal:

1. **the existing Novice-class remains unchanged**, as a gateway experience to rowing.
2. **the existing Club-class is split into two parts:**
  - a) When athletes have gained their initial experience with rowing in Novice class they become Club\*-class athletes. Athletes remain in the new Club\*-class until the end of the Season when they demonstrate their ability has progressed sufficiently to warrant moving up a class. That is done by achieving a podium finish within the class at a Championship or Major Regatta.
  - b) Athletes who have demonstrated ability in the new Club\*-class become Intermediate-class rowers. The new Intermediate-class offers athletes a real opportunity to progress further with the development of their ability and move up to Senior-class. That is done by achieving a podium finish within the class at a Championship or Major Regatta.
3. **the existing Senior-class is kept and expanded**. That expansion is a consequence of adjusting the classification pathway so the threshold for eligibility is not so high.
4. **the existing Premier-class is unchanged** and marks the top end of the selection pathway.
5. there are ample opportunities for athletes to reach a classification that corresponds to their ability; including becoming re-eligible for classes.

The ultimate outcome is a system for "classification according to ability" that is actually based on ability!

## APPENDIX 1: Some figures

There is no shortage of proposals for changing rowing classification but most rely on guesswork about how the distribution of athletes will be affected. If the proposed classes had been put into effect this Season then of the 4962 athletes who held a competition licence in the 2013-2014 Season:

1. 576 of those athletes were potentially still eligible Novice class. This is a figure unchanged as **Novice class is unchanged**
2. 440 of the athletes would be ineligible for Club\*-class and Intermediate-class (based on winning old Club-class or higher). This is more than double the 212 that are shifted out of Club-class this Season. At the moment the non-Club-class group gets split into Senior-class and Premier-class. Premier-class always ends up a little bigger than Senior-class. Under the revitalised classification the additional 228 non-Club-class athletes would all be Senior-class athletes. This means **Senior-class immediately effectively triples in size.**
3. 328 of the athletes would be ineligible for the new Club\*-class and end up in the new Intermediate-class (based on getting a Club-class podium finish and not being among the ones above who're also ineligible for Intermediate-class). This is initially a small number of athletes moving into Intermediate-class but it will already be three times as large as Senior class usually ends up. However, for this exercise the old Club-class is a mix of the new Club\*-class and Intermediate-class. Looking past the overlap to a normal year shows you get a figure of 550-600 athletes who will usually be promoted out of Club\*-class into Intermediate-class.
4. This would leave 3618 athletes eligible for Club\*-class. That is an immediate drop from 95% to 82% of non-Novice athletes. The revitalised system for classification according to ability has a two-year cycle before athletes start becoming re-eligible for lower classes. Because of that and due to there no longer being a major over-lap of athletes exiting Club\*-class and Intermediate-class there would be an even bigger drop in the size of Club\*-class the following year.
5. After two years Club\*-class would shrink to roughly 70-75% of the previous Season's athletes. In the following years there would continue to be some more athletes shifted out of Club\*-class (but at a reduced rate) and the Intermediate and Senior classes would also see further growth; until all three classes stabilize.

However, that's not the full picture. Far less than 100% of athletes return each year. In fact roughly 36% of athletes don't return year-on-year. So, although there are 4174 athletes from last Season who are eligible for Club-class under the existing classifications the actual number who return is

more likely to be around 2600-2700.

A relatively easy extrapolation is to say the drop-out rate of the existing Club-class athletes will carry through equally to the athletes under the proposed classification system. Then when the revitalised progression system is in place you end up with a mix of classes that is approximately:



**45% Novice, 36% Club\*, 10% Intermediate, 6% Senior, 3% Premier.**

If you accept that athletes who are winning races and being promoted up classes are more likely to continue rowing then the final mix might actually be weighted more toward the upper end.

Either way, that mix should be compared with the 2013-2014 Season mix of:



**45% Novice, 51% Club, 1% Senior, 3% Premier.**

More importantly though, according to anecdotes, the large disparity in ability created by having most athletes being lumped together in Club-class contributes to the drop-out rate. If this is true then the revitalised classification system will significantly reduce that disparity and provide a better environment for athletes to develop within. It could be expected that would reduce the overall drop-out rate.

The net result of that would be Novice and Premier class would remain the same size in absolute terms but would start making up a smaller a percentage of the rowing community because more rowers would be staying on and growing the Club, Intermediate, and Senior classes.

## APPENDIX 2: FAQ

Following are some of the questions that have already been raised about the proposal:

### 1. What is the purpose of the classification system?

The purpose of any classification system is to make a sport accessible to a wide range of people. Classification in rowing is the same.

All sports have an optimum competitor demographic. These are people who will excel at the sport in open competition. Anybody who does not share those characteristics is at a disadvantage when competing. Some people can legitimately aspire to become part of the optimum demographic but for most others it will always be out of reach.

Some sports are recreational and offer opportunities for non-competitive involvement. When a sport is recreational the inability to be competitive is not an impediment to involvement. Yet, rowing is a highly competitive sport. There are very few opportunities for recreational rowing.

Rowing was a sport developed by and for men in their prime to prove their expertise in a boat. Being female puts you at an immediate disadvantage. Being young puts you at a temporary disadvantage. Being old puts you at a worsening disadvantage. Physical characteristics such as weight, height, and reach will also create disadvantage.

If rowing only offered open competition that would leave a large proportion of the population at a disadvantage. It would provide a significant disincentive for those people to ever become involved in rowing.

Having classifications mitigates these disadvantages. It makes it possible for a broader demographic to compete in rowing.

### 2. Why change the system for classification by ability?

An effective classification system makes a sport accessible to a wider range of people. Rowing does not currently have such a system.

Rowing uses four systems of classification: sex, age, weight, and ability. The first three of those are essentially proxies for ability. There is a general correlation between an athlete's sex, age, and weight and their potential in open competition. But those three classifications all have known shortcomings. And, as discussed in this paper, proper classification by ability has evolved so much it no longer achieves its purpose.

It makes more sense to try and fix classification by ability than to try and make sex and age or weight a better proxy.

Fixing classification by ability addresses the essence of competition. It provides an opportunity for closely matched crews to find out which is the best crew. Grouping crews based on ability mitigates the effect of demographics. It makes competitive rowing more accessible to a wider range of people.

### **3. Why leave Novice-class as it is?**

We left Novice-class unaltered because there is a huge difference between those athletes and others.

NZSSRA researched this difference. They found being a non-Novice increased a pupil's chances of earning a medal by three times (compared with their Novice counterparts). That's an advantage measured in hundreds of percent; not just a few per cent.

Extending Novice-class would create a new inequality within the class. One that is just as bad as the existing inequalities within Club-class. This carries a significant risk of discouraging athletes who are trying rowing for the first time.

The current problem for Novices is they shift into a class that covers a huge range of ability. The proposal tackles this problem by shifting athletes with good ability out of Club-class. This creates a class that's more competitive for the incoming ex-Novices.

It leaves Novice-class as a gateway experience for rowing. One followed by a class more suited to the athletes' developing ability.

### **4. Why leave Premier-class as it is?**

The proposal does not create additional opportunities for athletes to become Premier-class. This is because those athletes would be extremely isolated. The situation for such athletes would be even worse than the current situation for the small pool of existing Senior-class athletes.

A Premier-class athlete who was not in an RPC would be unable to train with their peers. Clubs would either need to restrict those athletes to small boats or commit non-Premier athletes to support them race against RPC crews.

By leaving Premier-class as it is Senior-class becomes the highest class obtainable for athletes who are active in their clubs. More importantly, there are sufficient numbers of Senior-class athletes to sustain that class as a viable class outside Major regattas.

5. **Why include downward classification?**

There is provision for downward classification because we want athletes to remain involved in rowing for as long as possible.

Unless athletes retire at their peak it is inevitable they will reach a stage where their ability is no longer what it used to be. There can be many reason for that. For example: age, or changing priorities e.g. work, family, competitive aspirations.

If athletes cannot become re-eligible for a more appropriate classification then they face the prospect of being permanently stuck in a class where they're no longer competitive.

Downward classification provides an incentive to remain involved in rowing.

6. **Why use Major Regattas and Championships and not other regattas?**

We use Major Regatta and Championships for classification purposes because they bring together a broad range of athletes at the best facilities.

Outside of non-Major regattas competitors are far more likely to face small fields. They are also more likely to encounter uneven fields e.g. particularly strong or weak fields. Both of these things make it difficult to objectively assess ability.

The majority of non-Major regattas are also held under less ideal conditions e.g. shorter courses, unheld starts, moving water, etc. These variations make it difficult to benchmark ability between regattas.

Major Regattas and Championships are more uniform. Restricting classification to these regattas makes the assessment of ability fairer and more consistent.

7. **Will all events at Major Regattas/Championships be classification events?**

No. There will need to be consideration given to the number of entries received. Clearly it is far easier to achieve a podium finish if there is only 4 crews compared with when there is 40 crews.

The most simple approach will be to only recognise events when there are sufficient entries to require heats i.e. the fact crews have to qualify for an A final is a strong indicator ability is being demonstrated.

8. **Is the threshold for {insert class here}-class progression final?**

No. This is a draft proposal. The important thing is to get agreement to the general principals: split Club-class and promote more athletes into Senior-class.

The specific thresholds and mechanisms for classification may need changing. In fact, it is almost certain they will need fine-tuning over subsequent years; once their effect in action can be reviewed.

**9. Why re-classify athletes Season-by-Season instead of more frequently?**

There are examples of classification systems that have been implemented on a regatta-by-regatta basis. These are often accompanied by stories of crews throwing races because it will affect their classification at subsequent regattas.

We didn't want a situation where a good crew would ever need to decide between racing to its best ability or not racing to its ability so it can remain in class until later in the Season.

**10. What about an athlete who {insert special case for re-classification here}?**

The expectation is the revised classifications will be accompanied by a new Rule giving the Domestic Committee a clear and transparent process for re-classifying athletes.

**11. What is the effect on the programme at {insert regatta here}?**

Age-group regattas (e.g. Masters and School regattas) will be unaffected by re-vitalised classes. Most other regattas will need to update their programme of events.

Nationals

This regatta will need a serious programme review. It currently has 72 events. Yet 34 of those target Premier-class athletes (U20/U22/Lightweight/Premier). That's 47% of events targeting 3% of athletes. This suggests the programme needs re-balancing to better reflect participation. The addition of Intermediate-class provides an excellent opportunity for review.

In general

Under the re-vitalised classes there will be enough Senior-class athletes in clubs to warrant separate events for them; even outside Major Regattas. Yet it would not always be necessary to add events. Instead open-class events (which are currently needed for the handful of Senior-class athletes) could be re-purposed e.g. hold Snr 1X/2-/2X and Open 4-/4X-/8+

There will also be an entirely new Intermediate-class to cater for. This will require hosts to consider extra events. But this does not mean providing all boat types for every class. Some Club-class events could become Intermediate-class instead of being offered as both Club\* and Intermediate e.g. 2-/8+

Further offsetting the requirement for extra events is the fact Club\*-class will be smaller. This means its events will require less races or rounds of racing.

Also, there is an excellent opportunity to decrease the number of age-group events.

Classification by ability is supposed to apply to all athletes; not just non-age-group rowers. The current Club-class covers a wide range of ability and is an uncomfortable fit for many Masters and school pupils. The re-vitalised classes provide better opportunities for age-group athletes to compete without it being necessary for to have separate age-group events for them.

We hope the wider range of abilities covered by the classes will encourage more Masters athletes to compete outside of Masters regattas. This could increase engagement between Masters and other athletes. The best outcome would be more Masters involved during the general club Season and more athletes encouraged to remain involved and become Masters.

The re-vitalised classes will also provide better opportunities for properly dividing school pupils by ability. This reduces the need for age-group events. Removing the older age-group events for pupils altogether would put them firmly on the ability pathway; rather than leaving them on an age-group pathway that ends at school. This should help blur the lines between school and club rowing. That could result in more pupils staying involved in clubs after school.

## **12. What other benefits are there to changing classification by ability?**

The re-vitalised classification system should provide many athletes with an incentive to remain involved with rowing for longer.

Not all athletes aspire to, or can make it onto, the elite athlete pathway. The re-vitalised classification by ability provides a secondary pathway. One that lets athletes aspire to reaching a higher class without getting caught in the current bottle-neck at Club-class.

With more goals available to be achieved there is more motivation to keep rowing a little bit longer.