

What does it take to become a FISA umpire?

Umpires are the unsung heroes of every rowing regatta, silently working behind the scenes as the attention is focused on the medals won and lost at the finish line. Without these volunteers monitoring each race from start to finish, maintaining safety and fairness during FISA regattas, and applying the rules specific to FISA, World Rowing events could not be staged. Far from an easy duty to perform, the process of becoming an international umpire requires practical and written testing, as well as three years' experience umpiring for a national federation.

At any World Rowing regatta, a jury of eighteen to twenty umpires, a president of the jury, and two spare umpires will be present and the various umpiring roles are shared amongst them. Patrick Rombaut, Chair of FISA's Umpiring Commission since 2001, has had the pleasure of umpiring at all major World Rowing events in the last twenty years, more often acting as president of the jury. When asked what it takes to be a good umpire, Rombaut emphasised how multifunctional the role is.

"Nearly all jury members will be the starter at least once a session during a multiday competition, so in educational programmes we underline the fact that we need to be multifunctional."

"An umpire must also be calm, ready to listen to crews and coaches, a good communicator and strict when he/she has to make a decision. Neutrality and respect for the competitors, whilst bearing in mind safety and fairness, are the main skills an umpire should have."

The path to becoming an international umpire starts with the national federation, who take an active role in scouting out umpiring talent. Once selected by a national federation, an umpire must take written and practical examinations, if he/she wishes to become a FISA umpire. The written exam is a multiple choice questionnaire which covers all aspects of the role of an umpire, from the structure of FISA itself to the rules in specific umpiring situations. If successful at this stage, an umpire will then undertake a practical examination on four categories: the start, the finish, umpiring and the control commission.

Rombaut emphasised that one cannot underestimate the number of hours an umpire must spend at the regatta course and also highlighted the difficult decision an umpire is sometimes forced to make.

"As president of the jury in Beijing, I had to disqualify a crew from the host nation, as they did

not fulfil the Olympic qualification rules. However, we have umpires because we have rowers, not the other way round. To exclude or disqualify athletes, who have prepared for many months of years for such important competitions will not make any umpire happy."

The pressure of such decisions on an international scale is noted. Rombaut states: "We are all human beings, which means we can all make mistakes. We have to accept a mistake >

Umpires in the the start tower at the 1972 Olympic regatta course near Munich, Germany.



SINGAPORE 2010 YOUTH OLYMPIC GAMES



Umpire observing the course from the start tower at Marina Bay Reservoir during the 2010 Youth Olympic Games in Singapore.

> has been made and then aim to correct it in the most suitable way."

Despite the inevitable pressure of policing an international sports event, umpiring certainly has its advantages. Not only are they at the forefront of a rowing regatta, umpires also get the chance to visit many different locations and meet a wide variety of athletes, organising committees, volunteers and spectators. Rombaut believes that the greatest things about umpiring are the relationships, the teamwork and the camaraderie that stem from it.

"There are not so many sports where we can still use the word 'family' and I am very proud that without a doubt, rowing is a major exception. It is even truer within the umpiring family. I do wish however that a greater number of former athletes would join this family. It would only contribute further to the mutual respect between athletes and umpires."

Once securing an international umpiring license, an umpire, if called to jury, can umpire any international regatta. However certain iconic rowing regattas and events around the world, such as Oxford vs. Cambridge Boat Race and Henley Royal Regatta which are not covered by the FISA commission but are events Rombaut believes are on every umpire's wishlist.

As the World Rowing season creeps ever closer, with the first stage of the Samsung World Rowing Cup, held in Munich, Germany from 27 to 29 May, FISA's total number of umpires continues to grow. In total there are 451 FISA licensed umpires. If a national federation wishes to submit a candidate for examination, they should inform FISA one month before the next scheduled examination, which are held at numerous points throughout the year, details of which can be found at www.worldrowing.com.

● Laura Fell

Umpire stopping a race due to a buoy problem during the 2010 Rowing World Cup in Lucerne, Switzerland.

