

GETTING COMPETITIVE



Martin Gough meets new recruit to the GB Rowing Team **Jordan Beecher** to find out about competitive opportunities for para-rowers

Former Paratrooper Jordan Beecher has got used to beating able-bodied rowers, despite having had part of his left leg amputated after an explosive attack while he was serving in Afghanistan.

However, he has been pleased to be able to compete against other athletes with disabilities as adaptive events – for anyone who has a physical, sensory or learning impairment – begin to take off across the country.

Beecher was second in the Legs Trunk and Arms (LTA) event at the British Rowing Indoor Championships in February, covering 1km in 3 minutes, 2.8 seconds, saying: “It’s the first time I’ve seen a large number of rowers with disabilities competing and it shows good promise for it all getting bigger.”

Adaptive events have been springing up within major events around the country this year, although poor weather conditions have forced some frustrating cancellations.

“My event at the British Rowing Championships was cancelled in October, although the week after that I beat the other scullers in the GB Rowing Team trials,” says Beecher. “I was going to do the Scullers Head then it was called off. Next year I’ll hopefully be able to get amongst it.”

Beecher, 27, was injured in October 2012. After having his left leg amputated below the knee he was talent-spotted by a GB Rowing Team coach during his first week at the military rehabilitation centre at Headley Court.

He got into a boat for the first time the following August. By April 2014 he was competing for Marlow Rowing Club in a single and his novice win came at Marlow Long Distance Sculls six months later, against able-bodied opponents, known in the Paralympic world as ‘AB’.

“I’m lucky in that I can compete in able-bodied events. Someone with a bilateral amputation is going to struggle more [to find opponents],” he says.

“Para-rowing isn’t huge, so I’m either racing at a disadvantage against AB people or at an advantage against people with more severe disabilities. But in the last year it has gone from no one competing to more getting involved.”

Beecher did the bulk of his early racing around the Thames Valley. Events offering adaptive rowing

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this summer include Marlow Spring, Marlow Town, Oxford City, Staines, Worcester and Evesham, to name just a few.

Claire Connon, a Rowability Fixed-Seat (RFS) sculler from Cantabrigian RC, warned events wanting to cater for para-rowers that they should not expect a deluge of entries as the number of competitors is still small, and cautioned against the potential ‘vicious cycle’ of

events being cancelled for lack of entries.

The route to rowing for your country can be considerably shorter in para-rowing than in the able-bodied side of the sport, as long as athletes are up to the mark.

Generally, Great Britain finds its Paralympic rowers by one of two tracks: candidates for the LTA events are often current rowers with mild impairments, who may not even realise they are eligible, while athletes with higher impairment levels arrive through talent identification.

However the team holds open trials each year and Paralympic programme manager Louise

Kingsley says: “I feel strongly that it is important to have open doors.”

The first assessment takes place in November each year at the GB Rowing Team HQ in Caversham, near Reading. There is a 2k ergo test in December then three training weekends in the spring, helping to sift through candidates and to give them an opportunity in crew boats.

A training camp takes place in Banyoles, Spain each February, where coaches get a





Jordan outside Marlow RC

NEW CLASSIFICATION SYSTEM FOR ROWERS WITH IMPAIRMENTS

British Rowing has launched a new system of classification for domestic events aimed at increasing participation.

There are now two main streams of adaptive rowing classification:

1. Para-rowing – eligible to compete at a Paralympic Games
2. Rowability – able to compete domestically up to but not including the British Rowing Championships (meets functional or learning disability criteria)

GB Rowing Team Paralympic programme manager Louise Kingsley says the change was in part inspired by a severely disabled rower who could not be classified because she did not have an acceptable condition within International Paralympic Committee rules and regulations.

“She could go out in a boat and train as a fixed seat rower but not race because she didn’t fit into any of the classifications as she did not have an eligible impairment,” Kingsley explains. “We didn’t want to change the rules – because that would be misleading.

“After much debate we decided that if someone meets the functional minimal disability requirement – so has a disability but doesn’t have the right paperwork or an eligible condition, or has a confirmed learning disability – then a classifier can award a Rowability grouping, which means they can compete in most domestic events in Great Britain.

“We’re doing this primarily to drive greater participation.”

The categories are as follows:

- RUS – Rowability Upright Seat
- RFS – Rowability Fixed Seat
- RSS-PD – Rowability Sliding Seat (Physical Disability)
- RSS-LD – Rowability Sliding Seat (Learning Disability)

These categories are far wider than World Rowing’s classifications for international competition. They became available in competition for the first time in February. Full rules and regulations are in the 2015 Rules of Racing, which came into force in April – see www.britishrowing.org/competing/rules

Find out more about Rowability online at www.britishrowing.org/taking-part/rowability and the Great Britain Rowing Team trials system at www.britishrowing.org/gb-rowing-team/events/trials

chance to see how candidates who have emerged over the winter might fare when given a more intensive programme.

Beecher – who is now training full-time with the GB Rowing Team – learned to row sweep for the first time in Banyoles this winter.

He has since been rowing in Marlow RC club crews and hopes that he will be able to progress through trials to gain one of the two seats for men in the mixed-gender LTA coxed four to compete at the World Championships in France next August.

His successful development along the pathway has only been possible as a result of support from Marlow RC, Row2Recovery and the Front Line to Start Line programme, to name but a few.

Part of the selection process is the annual Gavirate Regatta in Varese, Italy, which is an opportunity for rowers with disabilities to race in events that are not part of the Paralympic Games programme. It is also an opportunity for more athletes to gain top-level racing experience.

Beecher is eligible to race in the LTA double scull. An event for athletes with a higher level of disability than the four, it is held at the Worlds each year but will not feature at the Rio 2016 Paralympics.

“I’m taking it competition by competition,” he says. “Varese is the next step then I hope to go to the Worlds this year. If not I’ll just focus on getting more experience.

“Hopefully the double will be in the programme at Tokyo in six years’ time because I would rather scull than sweep. It’s nice rowing in a crew but I prefer being selfish in a single!”



Training hard