

OCEAN RACING PRESENTATION

ICF CONGRESS. THAILAND 2022

There are so many distinguished guests, and paddling heavyweights, in this room, I wouldn't know where to start a greeting, so, I will keep it short and simply say - Thomas, colleagues.

A brief introduction. My name is Colin Simpkins. I am the newly elected chairman of the Ocean Racing committee. I have served on the ICF Ocean Racing Committee for the past 8 years.

My association with the sport started with surfing, which led to participation in Surf Lifesaving events, including short surfski paddling races.

When I went to university I started to paddle more competitively. It was back in the days of apartheid and sports boycotts in our country. Due to our sporting isolation there was very little incentive to specialise in any specific discipline. Our national paddling calendar during that era consisted of various "seasons" of disciplines, where the majority of the paddlers in the country took part in a variety of paddling activities throughout the year.

My paddling career has consisted of participation in canoe polo, slalom and sprints. On readmission to international competition, I was selected to represent my country at wild water. I have participated in numerous world championships

in marathon and ocean racing, and even represented South Africa twice at the world rafting championships. My passion for the majority of my paddling career, however, as with most paddlers in our country, lay in marathon river paddling.

I have had the privilege of sampling the majority of the smorgasbord of marvellous paddle sport disciplines that make up our federation.

On moving back to the coast about 15 years ago, my love for the ocean was rekindled. Surfski paddling was going through a metamorphosis and drifting away from being purely lifesaving based and allowing non qualified lifesavers to participate. There was an increase in interest in long downwind races, and a new discipline was formed.

The approach to the ICF to become integrated, in order to host a recognised world championships, was a natural progression, and the first ever world championships was held in Portugal in 2013.

Nine years later we, once again returned to Portugal, where the event took place a few weeks ago. (A massive thanks to Nelo - Andre – and the Portuguese federation for picking the event up at very late notice when New Zealand had to withdraw, due to covid restrictions.

Australia and South Africa are universally recognised as the founding countries of the discipline. Ironically, neither have ever hosted a world championships. That will change next

year when the world's best will head down to Australia to contest the bragging rights. We all look forward to a fantastic event in one of the homes of ocean paddling.

Our new committee has proposed a number of rule changes.

I would like to take this opportunity to give you some context into the mindset that resulted in these proposals.

My opportunity to participate in many disciplines has underlined the fact that each has its own unique culture and characteristics.

None of us here, as individuals, invented them. We don't own them. We are just brief custodians of their administration.

Our goal, as an international federation, should be to provide structure and support to allow them to flourish.

The vastly different nature of our disciplines presents varying degrees of opportunities, and challenges, for those who are tasked with developing them, and hosting events.

Very few disciplines does this apply to more, than Ocean Racing.

We have unique opportunities regarding the size of our playing field, and unique challenges, especially in the area of safety.

Unlike all other disciplines, Ocean racing does not consist of a number of events or races within a competition, usually in full view of spectators and officials.

It is characterised by a mass start, with all age groups and genders being able to test themselves against each other, simultaneously.

For the vast majority of ocean racing events the competitors are out of sight of spectators and officials. And, in extreme conditions, even out of sight of each other. It is a fairly selfish discipline.

The requirement for a large number of qualified officials does not, therefore, exist, but the necessity to have a very knowledgeable race director and an extremely efficient safety crew is absolutely essential.

The core culture of ocean racing lies in paddling in extreme downwind conditions, with strong winds and large swells.

Unless you have experienced it, the exhilaration of harnessing the oceans power and subtleties, in an effort to dominate your opposition, is very difficult to describe. It is a skill that is not easily learnt and takes years to master.

Herein, though, lies a dilemma.

The success of the development of a discipline is often gauged by the number of continents, and countries, that are present at major events, like a world championships. Many

countries around the world do not have the conditions that would simulate those that would be classed as ideal for seasoned ocean racers. Paddlers from these countries would not be proficient in the preferred downwind conditions.

Applying the mass participation success criteria would be counterproductive in our discipline if it were to adversely impacting the safety profile.

Our challenge will be to attempt to grow the discipline without compromising the integrity of the culture, but, at the same time maintaining control on safety. We need to ensure that every competitor who gets onto the water at the start of an ICF sanctioned event is proficient enough to manage the potential conditions on the day, and that there is a comprehensive list of safety protocols in place to ensure their safety.

There is an attraction in setting standards and expectations for our disciplines, and the events that they host.

However, there is a fine balance between wanting to maintain these standards, and stifling the unique culture of the discipline.

As mentioned earlier, ocean Racing is the only discipline where the competitors are out of sight for the majority of any event. This poses a massive safety risk. There have been incidents in the past where competitors have been lost at sea. A number of them have been tragic.

Being a race director, waiting at the end of an event, and having competitors unaccounted for is not an enviable position to be in. This has previously been compounded by the fact that there has been no certainty of the possible location of the individuals. In a previous rule change we have insisted on the carrying of a tracking device by all competitors in open ocean events. This rule has been applied haphazardly. Our challenge is to find an internationally available device or app. That can become the standardised norm for our events.

Many of our disciplines have an element of risk. Incidents or accidents are inevitable. In these cases, we would need to prove that we had done everything in our power to mitigate these risks.

A further challenge/opportunity for our discipline is the fact that the vast majority of the major international events are organised outside the auspices of the ICF. For there to be any incentive for these private individuals and organisations to join our family, we need to be seen to be in a position to add value to their event. Maintaining standards, without being overly demanding.

Lastly. The potential for growth in our discipline is huge. We need no infrastructure and very few officials. There are approximately 620 000 kilometres of coastline around the world. Nearly 2.4 billion people, over one third of the total

human population, live within 100 kilometres of an oceanic coast. There is a huge market to tap into.

However, for any sport to develop, it must be seen. Providing visual coverage for events like football, canoe polo, marathon and sprinting are relatively easy. There are massive challenges and opportunities in providing adequate visual coverage for an ocean race, especially if the conditions are ideally extreme.

The use of drones, off moving boats, in strong winds is going to have to be a skill that is developed.

So, in summary. The aim of the new Ocean Racing Committee is the following:

- Maintain the “open” culture of the discipline
- Place a far higher emphasis on safety at ICF sanctioned events
- Ensure that all paddlers who enter ICF sanctioned events are proficient
- Seek an internationally recognise and standardised tracking devise.
- Look for innovative ways in which we can improve the visual media of the discipline.

The proposed changes to our rules reflect this.

Thank you for your time.