DECISION SCIENCES INSTITUTE
Trouble on the Thames: Event Disruption, Public Protest or Public Disorder

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ABSTRACT
This case examines targeting of an elite sporting event, the 2012 Oxford Cambridge Boat Race on the River Thames, for the purpose of public protest. It raises issues of governance, athlete safety, ethical behaviour, venue security in open spaces, risk management, use of sport as a media vehicle for protest.

KEYWORDS: event management, sport, risk management, ethical behavior, athlete safety, governance, political protest.

INTRODUCTION
The Boat Race is a highlight event on Britain’s sporting calendar, with a standing and importance in the sporting psyche of the nation that denies it being just a race between two amateur crews of eight, plus a cox, from Oxford and Cambridge universities, aka Oxbridge. The race has taken place on the River Thames almost without break since 1845 on a winding 4 miles 374 yards (6.8km) course up river between Putney Bridge and Chiswick Bridge, Mortlake, in South West London (BNY, 2014) (The race is timed to start on the incoming flood tide, an hour before high tide, so that the crews are rowing with the fastest possible current). The Boat Race, started as a private challenge between undergraduate friends on the river at Henley, in 1829 (CUBC, 2014). Nowadays, the Boat Race is organised by The Boat Race Company Ltd. (BRCL) and receives multi-million dollar Title sponsorship from the BNY Mellon investment management organisation, and others (Cam, 2012), and from 2014, Nike will be the official Performance Wear Partner.

Figure 1: The BNY Mellon Boat Race Course and Logo

Spectators, many of whom have little or involvement in rowing, will line the eight miles of riverbank and Putney, Hammersmith, Barnes and Chiswick Bridges to catch a glimpse of the event, or just to say ‘I was there!’ The event is not without drama, and weather conditions and choppy tides have sometimes resulted in boats capsizing! The event was one of the first to be covered as an outside broadcast (by the BBC) and has been a land mark media event since the first days of mass TV broadcasting in the 1950s. The Boat Race is also a major social event providing opportunity for ‘old boys’ reunions, and latterly for the sponsors, like BNY Mellon, to use the Boat Race and associated hospitality functions to build relationships with business partners.
Whereas at one time, the crews were entirely made up of British students, in recent years, the prestige of the event and the gaining of a ‘blue’ – dark blue for Oxford and light blue for Cambridge – has attracted scholar athletes to Oxbridge from the Americas, Europe, Australasia and Africa. Many of these athletes set their ‘blues’ alongside their Olympic and World Championship rowing medals in terms of pride and achievement.

THE ACT OF PROTEST AT THE OXFORD CAMBRIDGE BOAT RACE

On Saturday 8 April 2012, with just over half of the 158th annual Boat Race completed, Trenton Oldfield jumped into the Thames to swim in front of and between the boats as they approached the Chiswick Eyot. The race was immediately stopped for safety reasons by Assistant Umpire, former Olympic gold medallist rower, Sir Matthew Pinsent.

![Figure 2: Trenton Oldfield during his protest at the BNY Mellon Boat Race Course](Image)

The race was restarted 30 minutes later at the eastern end of the Chiswick Eyot, by Umpire John Garrett, with unfortunate consequences. The boats collided, and the oar of Oxford rower, Hanno Wienhausen, was broken, putting Oxford at a considerable disadvantage. However, Umpire Garrett let the race to continue, allowing Cambridge to take the win by the surprisingly small margin of 4 lengths – a victory that was appealed, but allowed to stand.

The disruption and halt to the race meant that it was the first time since 1849 that a crew had won the boat race without an official recorded winning time. Not surprisingly, the post-race celebrations of the Cambridge crew were muted, and the awards ceremony cancelled.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Sport</th>
<th>Protest Event</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4 June 1913</td>
<td>Horse Racing</td>
<td>Suffragette Emily Davison throws herself under King George V’s horse Anmer at the Epsom Derby.</td>
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<tr>
<td>22 Nov 1969</td>
<td>Rugby</td>
<td>An anti-apartheid demonstrator entered the field of play at the Twickenham ground during the London Counties v South Africa match Springboks Tour.</td>
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<tr>
<td>19 Aug 1975</td>
<td>Cricket</td>
<td>The Headingley cricket pitch was vandalised by a ‘Free George Davis’ campaigner – protesting a wrongful conviction - leading to the abandonment of a cricket Test Match.</td>
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<td>25 July 1981</td>
<td>Rugby</td>
<td>Anti-tour, anti-apartheid protesters entered the field of play at Waikato Stadium, Hamilton, New Zealand, to stop a match during the tour of South Africa’s Springbok rugby union team. Following the cancellation of the match, the tour continued with further hostile protest against South Africa’s system of apartheid/racial segregation.</td>
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<tr>
<td>July 2003</td>
<td>Motor Racing</td>
<td>Catholic priest Neil Horan ran on to the track at the Silverstone British Grand Prix.</td>
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<tr>
<td>31 Jan 2012</td>
<td>Football</td>
<td>John Foley handcuffed himself to the goal posts during the English Premier League match between Everton and Manchester City at Goodison Park, Liverpool.</td>
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THE PROTESTER

At the time of his protest, Trenton Oldfield was 35 years old, living in a small flat in the East End of London with his wife, Deepa Naik. Together with his wife, he ran an independent publishing house, organized urban festivals, ran two not-for-profit organisations promoting community involvement in urban policy development, as well as being engaged as a community worker. (Cassidy, 2013).

He had grown up in Sydney, Australia, and had been educated at one of Australia’s exclusive private schools, the Sydney Church of England Grammar School, leaving at 16 ‘because I couldn’t stand the elitism’. He eventually gained a scholarship to study at LSE - the London School of Economics – working his way through his studies, and completing an MSc in contemporary urbanism. It was there he became disturbed by visible inequalities in society.

‘I protest their injustices - ask anyone that knows me.’

(Davies & Bull, 2013)

At the time of the Boat Race, Oldfield had just returned from six months in Canada following a period of caring for his wife’s terminally ill father. In the week before his protest, he had been upset by legislation ‘privatising the NHS’, by the introduction of the Data Communications Act, and by a Government minister urging the public to report their neighbours if ‘they suspected them of planning to protest at the Olympics’. He implied that these events had been ‘the final straw’ for him; had led to the idea of using the Boat Race for protest; and - ‘the next day, I went out and bought the wetsuit.’ (Aitkenhead, 2013).

THE IMMEDIATE AFTERMATH

As Oldfield was being lifted out of the water by the river police lifeboat crew, he had

‘... no feeling of threat – it was very smooth, not dramatic. People were joking and laughing, and the police were saying: ‘What was all that about then?’

He appeared to have a broad smile on his face - before police arrested him on suspicion of a public order offence and took him into custody (ABC News, 2012).

Figure 3: Trenton Oldfield immediately after his protest

He was in custody overnight unaware that ‘Twitter was hissing with fury and death threats’ (Aitkenhead, 2013), and was surprised at the media attention received when he was released the following morning.

He claimed that his protest arose from a feeling of ‘heartbreak’ at the deepening inequality in British society, and was a protest against ‘elitism and inequality’, the growing culture of elitism demonstrated by the spending cuts of the Coalition government, and the erosion of civil liberties (Booth, 2013).
THE REACTION

The Media

‘Trenton Oldfield ruined a sporting event which I and millions of others enjoy watching.
The boat race represents the best of amateur competition,
and coming from a country which is passionate about sport,
Mr Oldfield ought to have respected that.’
‘Mr Oldfield’s motivations may have been misguided,
but he clearly never sought to hurt others, or to gain financially from his actions.
His protest was against elitism,
and yet he chose to disrupt a meritocratic contest.
In the manner of the dumbest, noisiest protesters,
he wanted to make a bold statement.
If you’ll forgive me, he wanted to make a splash.
Ill-thought through, aimed at pissing off some Oxbridge types,
and justified with platitudes,
it was the sort of protest that might have raised a cheer from the People’s Assembly’.
(Rupert Myers, 2013)

The Athletes/Rowers

‘My team went through seven months of hell.
This was the culmination of our careers and you took it from us.’
Karl Hudspith, President OUBC in 2012

‘The Boat Race is all about 18 students testing themselves to the ultimate
... for no reward other than that of winning itself
The Boat Race is no place for such callous and selfish action.’
David Nelson, President, CUBC (ABC, 2013)

‘When I missed your head with my blade,
I knew only that you were a swimmer,
and if you say you are a protester
then no matter what you say your cause may be,
your action speaks too loudly for me to hear you.
I know ... exactly what you were protesting.
You were protesting the right of 17 young men and one woman
to compete fairly and honourably,
to demonstrate their hard work and desire in a proud tradition.
You were protesting their right to devote years of their lives, their friendships,
and their souls to the fair pursuits of the joys and the hardships of sport.
You, who would make a mockery of their dedication and their courage,
are a mockery of a man’
William Zeng, OU rower, formerly of Yale
Rhodes Scholar, DPhil in computer science at Oriel College
(Davies & Bull, 2012)

‘Rowing is elitist, but not in the way Trenton Oldfield thinks’
The sport’s international success has helped drive an elitist agenda
– not one based on social class but instead performance.
The two crews that Oldfield recklessly stopped in the middle of an enthralling contest
were actually far more representative of the level of excellence ...
... that we see in elite-level international sportsmen and women,
... than of any social elitism of a bygone era.
Those eighteen blues had won their places on the start-line
through their willingness to submit to an extraordinarily tough training programme.
They, in common with the vast majority of rowers in the world today, did that, not for financial gain – there is no money to be had in rowing – but for challenge, team-spirit and the deep satisfaction of personal achievement.

The rowing community at least, will remember Oldfield’s stunt as a misguided assault on the values they hold dear.

Martin Cross, 1984 Olympian (Cross, 2012)

The Officials/Organisers

Four-time Olympic gold medallist, Assistant Umpire, Sir Matthew Pinsent, prepared a statement for the trial which said:

‘The risk to the swimmer was great. He could have been killed.’
‘The rowers raised their oars to miss him
and he could have ‘cracked his skull or been knocked unconscious and drowned.
The students had been training for six months.’

(Duell, 2013)

David Searle, chief executive of the Boat Race Company, said there was little anyone could have done to prevent an individual “from staging such a stunt.” Race umpire John Garrett told the BBC that, while the possibility of swimmers had been “discussed” the previous year, the threat had not been expected in 2012 (Davies & Bull, 2012).

Oldfield’s Reaction

In response to various criticisms, Oldfield commented on Twitter (Davies & Bull, 2012)

‘Of course I expected the vindictive class to be vindictive and nasty
… about having disrupted their fun and ‘months of training.
I’m 100% behind my actions, if it’s jail time, so be it.’

The Judiciary and the Verdict

Having been charged under section 5 of the Public Order Act, Oldfield was convicted at Isleworth Court in October 2012 of causing a public nuisance. He was fined £750, sentenced to six months jail, and later had his spousal visa application rejected by the Home Office (Davies & Bull, 2012).

At his trial conducted in September 2012, Judge Anne Molyneux said, following the verdict:

‘Since he arrived in this country he has held a number of jobs ...
... all of which may be said to be for the benefit of the community’
‘He is a man of good character,
and five witnesses have given evidence on his behalf
and have spoken of his positive qualities.’

(Cassidy, 2013).

However, Molyneux also said:

‘The rowers had trained for many months. You had no regard for the sacrifices they had made or for their rigorous training when you swam into their paths.’
‘Your offence was planned. It was deliberate.
It was disproportionate. It was dangerous … and exhibited prejudice.

(Duell, 2013)

In addition, and subsequently, the Home Office denied his application for a spousal visa, stating:

‘Those who come to the UK must abide by our laws.
We refused this individual leave to remain
… because we do not believe his presence in this country is conducive to the public good.’

(Garnett, 2013; Muir, 2013; Pettitt, 2013)
Oldfield’s Supporters

Oldfield’s supporters believed that he had been victimised by the system - perhaps because his charge had been elevated from a public order offence to public nuisance, the latter having potential for a custodial sentence with a longer term of imprisonment (Muir, 2013). In general, though, ‘support’ was couched more as criticism of the stances taken by authorities more than support for Oldfield’s views. For example, journalist campaigner, John Pilger, had commented:

‘He is not a criminal or a terrorist.
He was a protester acting on principle, whether or not you agreed with his action.
What the Home Office is really saying is that …
all forms of protest are now potentially criminalised.’

Similarly, Mitch Mitchell, a member of the campaign group, Defend the Right to Protest, said:

‘The authorities are cracking down harder and harder against anyone who raises a voice.’

The Home Office view that:

‘Those who come to the UK must abide by our laws’
… is perhaps typical of the positions attracting criticism (Muir, 2013).

EPILOGUE

Following early release from Wormwood Scrubs prison, Oldfield was required to wear an electronic tag for two months (Duell, 2013). Then, having been denied a spousal visa to live in Britain, and under the threat of deportation, Oldfield decided to appeal against the Home Office’s decision, invoking Article 8 of the European convention on human rights, which guarantees the right to a family life, which he would be denied if deported to Australia (Garnett, 2013). Oldfield suggested:

‘It feels … that this is a very vindictive decision, very political and very much an overreaction.’ (Muir, 2013)
Support of his appeal came from many quarters including the universities and the rowing community, as well as others sharing his political views and protest ideals. For example, a letter/petition circulated and signed by 265 dons, students and Oxford and Cambridge alumni stated:

‘The Boat Race is a game; its disruption should not result in any individual's deportation.
Certainly its disruption should not be cause to separate an individual from his family,
which includes a recently-born child.
‘The race was completed successfully and no one was harmed by Mr Oldfield's actions.
We do not wish this draconian penalty
to be applied in the name of an event representing our institutions.’

His QC, Stephanie Harrison, described the threat of deportation as “grossly disproportionate”. The appeal hearing, itself, was well attended by Oldfield supporters. Then, following appeal to the First-tier Tribunal (Immigration and Asylum Chamber), Oldfield was finally allowed to stay in the UK, when the appeal judge overturned the Home Secretary, Theresa May’s previous decision (Bland, 2013). The judge, Kevin Moore, stated that:

‘There is no doubt as to your character and commitment
and the value you are to UK society generally.’

Although Oldfield’s response to the judge was emotional, he was specific in his intent, in the consistency of his beliefs, and the rationale for his protest.

‘I give you my word we won’t be here [in a tribunal] again.”
‘Our home is here. Australia is on the other side of the world.
... Australia is a particularly racist country.”

Whilst he broke down in tears stating that he had protested during the 2012 Boat Race of a
‘feeling of “heartbreak” at the deepening inequality in British society’ (Booth, 2013).
**STUDENT ASSIGNMENT QUESTIONS**

**Why has the case attracted such media attention?**

(a) Describe why the protest on the Thames created so much public interest and attracted such attention in the sports world?

(b) Comment on the social context, the athletes, the sport, the fans, the media.

(c) **Outline the events** associated with the protest in chronological order; describe Oldfield’s escalation of involvement, and identify moments when he could have made different decisions.

(d) Draw parallels with examples of protests that have targeted the operations of business organisations and political events.

**Part 1** Outline the major “players” involved in, or affected by the protest on The Thames

(a) Describe their main attributes, responsibilities, stakes and interests.

(b) Describe how the stakeholders impact on, and were impacted by public perception of the sports event and the public protest.

(c) **Describe the moral emotions** that appear to have surfaced in those commenting on events, and how those emotions may impact on moral judgments and decisions taken by the different actors.

**Part 2** What measures should the Boat Race organisers take to combat the threat of public protest (i) to the operation of the Boat Race as a sporting event, (ii) to athlete and spectator safety at the event, and (iii) to the future of the Boat Race as an event?

(a) **First, prepare an Event Risk Evaluation**
   Outline their roles within the sport system, within commerce, within the political world etc.

(b) **Prepare a broader Risk Management Analysis**, as a basis for a Risk Management Plan.

(c) **Risk and Crisis Management Plan**
   What would be the major features of a Risk Management Plan for:
   (i) the 2013 Boat Race (ii) future Boat Race events

**Part 4** **Was the punishment of Trenton Oldfield appropriate?**

Consider the nature of the punishment imposed upon Trenton Oldfield
- did the punishment fulfil natural, procedural, distributive or compensatory justice?

**Part 5** The relevance to Business and Political Environments

(a) What lessons would be relevant to the planning and conduct of:
   (i) other relevant mega-sporting events eg 2012 London Olympic Games?
   (ii) other major business and political events
      eg the AGM of a Fortune 500 company, or a G20 Heads of State meeting

(b) Outline other future trends and implications that may arise from this case.

Note: Students could use Badaracco’s framework (1997, 2002) and Freeman’s Stakeholder Approach (1984) to Strategic Management and Mitchell’s Stakeholder Typology (1997) to identify Stakeholders, their Attributes: orientation, stakes, interests, opinions, power; Responsibilities, and Stakeholder Dynamics etc.

Students could also use the Ideology and Political Risk Analysis framework of Thoma & Chalip (1996) derived from Allison (71) and Coplin & O’Leary (1983).

A Teaching Guide is available from the authors on request.
REFERENCES


