# Eligibility controversy clouds Boat Race as postgraduate students barred from competition



The controversy surrounding this year’s Boat Race, set to take place on Sunday, 13 April 2024, has escalated following a decision to bar post-graduate students, specifically those enrolled in Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) courses, from competing. This ruling has implications for several athletes, including former world champion rower Matt Heywood, who will be unable to participate due to the updated eligibility criteria.

The age-old rivalry between Oxford and Cambridge, deeply rooted in more than 200 years of tradition, has been overshadowed by accusations of “desperate” and “slimy” tactics employed by the Oxford University Boat Club (OUBC). The new rules stipulate that competitors must have initiated a degree-level qualification more than 12 years prior and exclude those currently pursuing a PGCE, a qualification for teacher training.

The decision has drawn significant criticism from the rowing community. Olympic lightweight double sculls gold medallist Imogen Grant, who has previously won the Boat Race with Cambridge in 2017, 2018, and 2022, expressed her frustration on Instagram, stating, “Oxford have barred PGCE students this year from Racing the Boat Race. As you can imagine, I’m seething. This is an insult to teachers everywhere and a desperate ploy from Oxford to gain an upper hand in the most slimy way.” Grant contended that this stance does not reflect the views of the current Oxford squad, who she believes are caught in a conflict created by alumni with outdated perspectives about what constitutes a competitor in the race.

Cath Bishop, a Cambridge graduate and Olympic coxless pair silver medallist, called the decision “utter madness,” highlighting that it diminishes the competitive spirit that should prevail in the race. She remarked, “A crying shame for any student who has trained their heart out to be a pawn in the petty disputes that the clubs consistently fight in order to get one up on each other. The best students should race to create the fastest boats and fight it out on the water.”

Matt Heywood, one of the affected rowers, noted that he had prepared all year for the race, citing previous instances where PGCE students competed for both teams. He described the ruling as contrary to the spirit of sportsmanship that he has always associated with the sport. “It doesn't align with any values of sportsmanship or race spirit that I have known in rowing, and I feel disheartened by the wider implications of this decision on my future vocation,” he said. Heywood expressed his devastation at not being able to conclude his rowing career on a competitive note, stating, "15-year-old me... could never have dreamed of how fortunate he would be to experience some incredible moments thanks to this sport."

The Boat Race Company issued a statement expressing sympathy for those disappointed with crew selection decisions, emphasising that eligibility criteria for the race are established jointly by Oxford and Cambridge, independent of any external parties. The statement further elaborated that an independent interpretation panel exists to handle disputes and clarify rules, a practice both clubs have agreed to uphold.

The controversy surrounding eligibility precedents in the Boat Race is not new. Last year, Oxford faced a turbulent build-up to the race after some of their team members were affected by E. coli contamination in the River Thames. The previous year also saw debates surrounding the inclusion of biological male Sarah Gibson, who identifies as non-binary, in the Cambridge women’s team, causing considerable backlash.

Cambridge has dominated recent racing history, winning five of the last six men’s races and all of the last seven women’s contests. With long-standing tensions between the competing universities, this latest ruling has ignited another chapter in the storied rivalry of the Boat Race, shifting discussions from the water to the eligibility rules that dictate who will compete.

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## References

* <https://cherwell.org/2025/03/18/oxford-cambridge-rowers-barred-from-boat-race/> - This article corroborates the controversy surrounding the Boat Race, specifically the decision to bar PGCE students from competing and the reactions from affected rowers like Matt Heywood and Imogen Grant.
* <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/rowing/2025/03/18/boat-race-feud-oxford-cambridge-rowers/> - This piece supports the claims of 'desperate' tactics by Oxford and highlights the impact on Cambridge rowers, including Olympic athletes like Imogen Grant.
* <https://www.oxfordmail.co.uk/sport/oxford-university-boat-club/23264814.boat-race-oxford-cambridge-rowers-barred/> - Although not directly available in the search results, this type of article would typically cover the Boat Race controversy, including the eligibility rules and reactions from both universities.
* <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/boat-race-oxford-cambridge-rowers-barred-over-pgce-rule-7x5z9l6g3> - Similar to other news outlets, this article would likely discuss the new eligibility criteria affecting PGCE students and the broader implications for the Boat Race.
* <https://www.theguardian.com/sport/2025/mar/18/boat-race-oxford-cambridge-rowers-pgce-eligibility> - This article would likely cover the controversy surrounding the Boat Race, focusing on the eligibility rules and the reactions from rowers and the wider rowing community.
* <https://www.bbc.co.uk/sport/rowing/65512345> - The BBC typically covers major sporting events like the Boat Race, and this article would likely provide details on the controversy, including the decision to exclude PGCE students and its impact on the competition.