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Editorial: Ben Ainslie's Rule 69 Gross Misconduct disqualification tough but fair

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On Saturday December 10, the world's best known Olympic sailor, Ben Ainslie of Great Britain, was scored DGM (disqualified for gross misconduct) from races 9 and 10 of Perth 2011, costing him another world championship in the Finn class. Ainslie would otherwise have been leading the class by eight points going into the medal race.

The action was taken by the international jury after Ainslie boarded a television boat at the end of the ninth race and remonstrated with the driver. His actions were captured by Danish photographer Mick Anderson and flashed around the world. (See accompanying story - link to photographs is <http://sailingpix.photoshelter.com/gallery/Ben-Ainslie-confronts-skipper-and-photographer-at-World-Champs/G0000uXhrsGqrj50>.)

There is no doubt that the photographs show the incident in a very bad light. It is not a good message to send to the thousands of Opti kids and other young sailors who compete in the sport, and it is not the image of sailing we want splashed across newspapers all around the world. However, in my humble opinion, Ben's positive contribution to the sport massively outweighs any damage he has done in this one isolated incident, and this should be the end of the matter.

Opinions on the affair will no doubt range from those who think it's a storm in a teacup, and that the rib driver got what he deserved, to those who would have Ainslie thrown out for life. To help you make up your mind, here are a few facts you might like to consider:

- The media rib had strayed right into the course area, and had in fact driven straight between Ainslie and the race leader, PJ Postma. The wake from the boat had almost swamped Ainslie's Finn and could easily have cost him vital places at a crucial time in the series.
- This was not the first time it had happened during the regatta, according to Ainslie. He emphasised that he totally appreciated the need to get the sport onto television, but quite rightly said that this should not be at the expense of the sailors who are trying to sail to the best of their ability in the most important event of the year.
- The incursion of the media boat was the equivalent of a football* cameraman running onto the pitch and impeding a player while trying to get the "money shot". Imagine the uproar if that happened in a World Cup final!
- There is a saying that "the camera doesn't lie" and it certainly looks as though Ainslie grabbed the driver and also pushed a cameraman. Everyone involved, including Ainslie, the driver and the cameraman, insist that no physical contact took place. The lens foreshortens the distance between Ainslie and the driver, and in the incident where it appears he grabs the cameraman, Ainslie says he was just in a hurry to get off the boat and back to his dinghy and used the cameraman's shoulder to help him reach the foredeck.
- The rib driver has acknowledged that he was in the wrong place and has apologised to Ainslie. Ainslie has acknowledged that he over-reacted and has apologised to the driver.



Not a happy man. Ben Ainslie leaves the rigging area to prepare his defence for the Rule 69 hearing.

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I have interviewed Ben Ainslie on a number of occasions and have always found him to be a total gentleman. He, as much as any other sailor I have ever spoken to, knows that the media are a necessary evil who have to have access to the leading names in the sport if it is to get the publicity it needs to grow - and to provide an income for the leading exponents such as Ainslie. Even when he would much rather wash his boat down and go for a shower, he will always stop and give me a few words that I can use.

I have also spoken with other sailors, who confirm that Ben Ainslie is not a man to be trifled with on the race course, and the gentleman I speak to is a far cry from the super-competitive animal that races a Finn.

In many ways, that is why the incident happened. Like other champions, Ben Ainslie sets very high standards for himself, and expects others, such as officials and race boat drivers, to operate at the same level. He also, quite rightly, expects to receive respect for his commitment and his ability. This respect was not forthcoming, and something snapped.

I know that Ben is bitterly disappointed that he won't be sailing the medal race. I know he thinks the penalty was too harsh. But once those photographs flashed around the world, the race committee had no option but to take action, and the jury had to impose a penalty.

I also know that Ainslie will never again be involved in an incident of this nature, and nor will anyone else who was here in Perth. The point has been made, the lesson has been learned.

There are still a lot of "what ifs" that will be debated over the coming weeks. "What if it had been an unknown instead of Ben Ainslie? Would they have rubbed him out for longer?" That will be the main question.

Again, in my humble opinion, the penalty fits the crime. Even if no contact took place, a serious breach of protocol occurred and a Rule 69 infringement took place. A serious penalty had to be applied.

It is a tragedy for Ben, and a disappointment for every sailing fan, that he cannot win the world championship when he had sailed so brilliantly in conditions that are not ideal for his bodyweight. But if you do the crime, you do the time.

I reckon he's paid his price. Now let's leave him in peace, and look forward to seeing him compete for that fantastic fourth gold medal at his home Olympics. I, for one, hope he achieves his dream.

- Roger McMillan, Editor.

* Unlike disgraced footballers who when forced to front a media conference read from a pre-prepared statement, never making eye contact with the assembled hacks, Ainslie took the microphone, looked us in the eyes and spoke off-the-cuff. As always, he was polished and professional. This was after 11pm at night and he had not had time for dinner. Oh, did I remind you he had also just been disqualified from a world championship he was almost certain to win? One mistake should not cost a man his lifetime reputation.

