

Risk Assessment – Cedric Avery Winter Series Mini-Marathon 2025/26

Event: Cedric Avery Winter Series Mini-Marathon

Dates: October 25th, November 29th, December 27th, January 31st, February 28th, March 28th.

Location: Harefield, UB9 6HZ

Organised by: The Sharks Canoe Club

Assessment Completed by: Grant Underwood

Assessment Date: Thursday, 18th September 2025

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1. Event Overview

The Cedric Avery Winter Series Mini-Marathon is a multi-distance paddling race held on the Grand Union Canal, Harefield. The event forms part of a six-race winter series designed to encourage participation, development, and competition across all ages and craft types.

Three distances are offered:

- **1.5 miles (2.4km) – The Starter:** Out-and-back below Black Jack's Lock, no portage.
- **3.5 miles (5.6km) – The Challenger:** Includes portage at Black Jack's Lock.
- **6.5 miles (10.4km) – The Legendary:** Extended course to London Lane Horseshoe Bridge with five portages.

The event is open to paddlers of all abilities in a wide range of craft, including racing kayaks, canoes, wild water racers, slalom boats, general purpose boats, SUPs, and recreational craft. Racing is pursuit-style, with seeded starts to ensure paddlers are close enough to be both “hunters” and “hunted”.

Estimated race times range from 15 minutes (1.5 miles) to over 1 hour (6.5 miles), depending on craft and conditions. Safety cover will be provided both on the water and bankside, and a compulsory competitor briefing will be held before racing begins.

2. River Grade and Hazards

- **Water Classification:**

- I. **Flatwater (Grade 0):** The Grand Union Canal sections are non-flowing, controlled waters suitable for all abilities.
- II. **Weir (Grade 1–2):** Harefield Weir introduces moving water, turbulence, and waves. Risk level depends on rainfall and lock operation.

- **Primary Feature:** Harefield Weir — fast-flowing water, waves, and turbulent currents at the base of the weir. Conditions will be assessed on race day, and course alterations or cancellation will be made if water levels are deemed unsafe.

- I. **1.5 mile race:** avoids the weir, paddlers start/finish below.
- II. **3.5 & 6.5 mile races:** paddlers must cross the weir. Competitors may paddle across the weir or portage if conditions or confidence dictate.

- **Additional Hazards:**

- I. **Canal boat traffic:** Limited visibility around bends; competitors briefed to pass powered craft on the left.
- II. **Towpath & portages:** Gravel/mud surfaces, possible slips/trips. Shoes with soles thicker than uppers strongly advised.
- III. **Road crossing at Coppermill Lane bridge:** Busy road with traffic lights. Competitors instructed not to cross with boats except when using Coy Carp access, and then only with caution.
- IV. **Obstacles:** Floating debris, low branches, or dumped items. Course inspected and cleared where possible pre-race.
- V. **Cold water exposure:** Winter conditions heighten hypothermia risk; warm blankets available at the finish.
- VI. **Fatigue:** Especially on the 6.5 mile course; can affect judgment near the weir and during portages.
- VII. **Waterborne illness:**
 - **Sewage discharge (Troy Cut / Colne Valley):** Organisers monitor water quality; participants advised to cover cuts, avoid deliberate capsize, and seek medical attention if ill.
 - **Weil's Disease (Leptospirosis):** Paddlers advised to cover wounds, avoid swallowing water, and seek medical attention immediately if symptoms occur.

3. Key Hazards & Controls

Hazard	Risk Level	Who is at Risk?	Controls / Mitigations
Harefield Weir (variable flow, grade 1–2)	Medium	Paddlers, other water-users	Beginners (1.5 mile) avoid weir. 3.5 & 6.5 mile races cross the weir; paddlers briefed on safest line (lower section). Option to portage. Safety boat and bankside cover in place. Event modified or cancelled if unsafe.
Canal traffic (powered/ unpowered craft)	Low/Medium	Paddlers, other water-users	Start at intervals to ensure clear course; briefing to all competitors to give way and pass powered craft on the left; marshals with radios at start/finish; suspend race temporarily if navigation conflict occurs.
Capsize / immersion	Medium	Paddlers, other water-users	Competitors briefed on self-rescue. Stop-and-check rule: paddlers must confirm welfare of nearby competitors before continuing. Junior paddlers escorted by safety boat & walker on 1.5 mile course. PFDs compulsory U18, strongly advised for adults.
Cold water exposure (hyperthermia)	Medium	Paddlers, other water-users	Warm blankets available at finish; safety advice in briefing; competitors advised on appropriate clothing; event paused or cancelled in severe conditions.
Collision between paddlers	Low/Medium	Paddlers	Course design provides ample space; marshals monitor and manage start intervals; competitor briefing includes collision avoidance guidance.
Slips/trips at portages & towpath	Low/Medium	Everyone	Shoes advised with soles thicker than uppers. Course inspected for mud, gravel, or debris. Marshals assist at start/finish areas.
Road traffic (Coppermill Lane bridge)	Medium	Everyone	Competitors instructed not to cross with boats unless using Coy Carp drop-off; briefing directs safe access under bridge via towpath; marshals positioned if needed.
Entrapment / in- water obstacles	Medium	Paddlers, water-users	Pre-event inspection of course; organisers to remove debris where possible; paddlers briefed on hazard locations; safety cover equipped for rescue.

Inexperienced paddlers	Low/Medium	Paddlers	Mandatory safety briefing. Organisers reserve right to restrict participation if unsafe.
Equipment failure (boats, paddles, airbags)	Low/Medium	Paddlers	Competitors responsible for pre-checks; officials may conduct random checks for buoyancy-aids/airbags. Limited spares available.
Egress/entry points (lock usage)	Medium	Paddlers	Competitors must not use locks for entry/exit due to hazards. This rule will be emphasised in safety briefing. Competitors responsible for self-assessment and use recognised, safe entry/exit points on the canal.
Waterborne illness (Weil's, sewage discharge)	Low/Medium	Water-users	Competitors briefed on risks. Cover cuts, avoid swallowing water, wash hands, seek urgent medical help if unwell. Water quality monitored in days leading up to event; event postponed/cancelled if unsafe.
Spectators on towpath	Low	Everyone	Designated viewing areas and guidance at busy points.
Congestion at start/finish	Low	Everyone	Controlled starts; clear spacing instructions; designated finish area; marshals manage flow.
Weather changes	Low/Medium	Everyone	Organisers monitor forecasts; competitors advised to dress appropriately; activities delayed, modified, or cancelled if unsafe.
Access & egress	Low	Paddler	Multiple safe launch and exit points with good access; clear pathways maintained for emergency and participant movement.
Parking & transport (Troy Lake / Coy Carp)	Low/Medium	Everyone	Designated parking at Troy Lake; Coy Carp drop-off only (no parking); marshals direct traffic; clear signage.
Slalom gates (fixed wooden poles on weir)	Low	Paddlers, other water-users	Poles moved aside; course monitored during event.

4. Safety Measures

- Safety boat and bankside cover positioned at Harefield Weir (primary risk area).
- Junior paddlers (1.5 mile) accompanied for the entire course by a safety boat and walker.
- No safety cover on extended sections of the 3.5 and 6.5 mile courses. Competitors are reminded of the compulsory **stop-and-check rule**: paddlers must confirm the welfare of any capsized or distressed competitor before continuing.
- Pre-race competitor briefing covers course layout, hazards, portages, self-rescue, and emergency protocols.
- Competency guidelines communicated pre-event; organisers reserve the right to restrict participation where safety concerns arise.
- Buoyancy Aid (PFD) compulsory for Under 18s, strongly advised for all adults. Boats should be fitted with airbags/buoyancy; spot checks may be conducted.
- Competitors responsible for using safe egress/entry points only — locks must not be used.
- Warm blankets available at the finish; competitors advised to dress appropriately for winter conditions.

5. Emergency Plan

- **In-Water Incident (near weir/junior course)**: Safety boat and bankside cover respond immediately; competitors in vicinity assist if safe to do so.
- **In-Water Incident (3.5/6.5 mile courses)**: Competitors must enact the **stop-and-check rule**. If a paddler signals distress or cannot continue, nearby paddlers must assist and raise the alarm at the next checkpoint/finish.
- **Medical Emergency**: First aid administered on site by qualified first aiders; emergency services contacted without delay using event communication channels.
- **Evacuation**: Clear access maintained at start/finish (Coppermill Lock and Rickmansworth SC) for emergency vehicles. Competitors and volunteers briefed on nearest access points along the course for emergency evacuation if required.
- **Extreme Weather Contingency**: In case of ice, strong winds, or unsafe water levels, the race may be delayed, shortened, or cancelled.
- **Post-Race Sweep**: Organisers ensure all paddlers are accounted for before results are finalised.