

Lifesaving inquiry to review helmets, vests

SURF lifesavers may be forced to wear safety helmets and vests when competing if changes mooted by Surf Life Saving Australia are adopted.

There are no safety equipment requirements for athletes taking part in competitions, but that could change after the tragedy involving Gold Coast teenager Robert Gatenby at the Australian surf lifesaving championships at Kurrawa.

Yesterday SLSA chief executive Scott Derwin maintained the organisation's stance that safety was a high priority throughout the three-day carnival.

Decisions

Mr Derwin said an official inquiry into the circumstances surrounding the presumed drowning of Robert had been launched but he stood by the decision to continue the carnival.

"The inquiry will review everything, including the decisions to stage the event, it will certainly review the safety operations that were put into place and it will review whether or not helmets should be made compulsory in boats (and) whether or not life jackets should be introduced," said Mr Derwin.

by BERNADETTE CONDREN

Yesterday Robert's brother Michael and his parents, Jeff and Vicki, issued a statement in which they said Robert loved what he was doing.

"My family does not hold anyone responsible for anything that might have happened," the statement said.

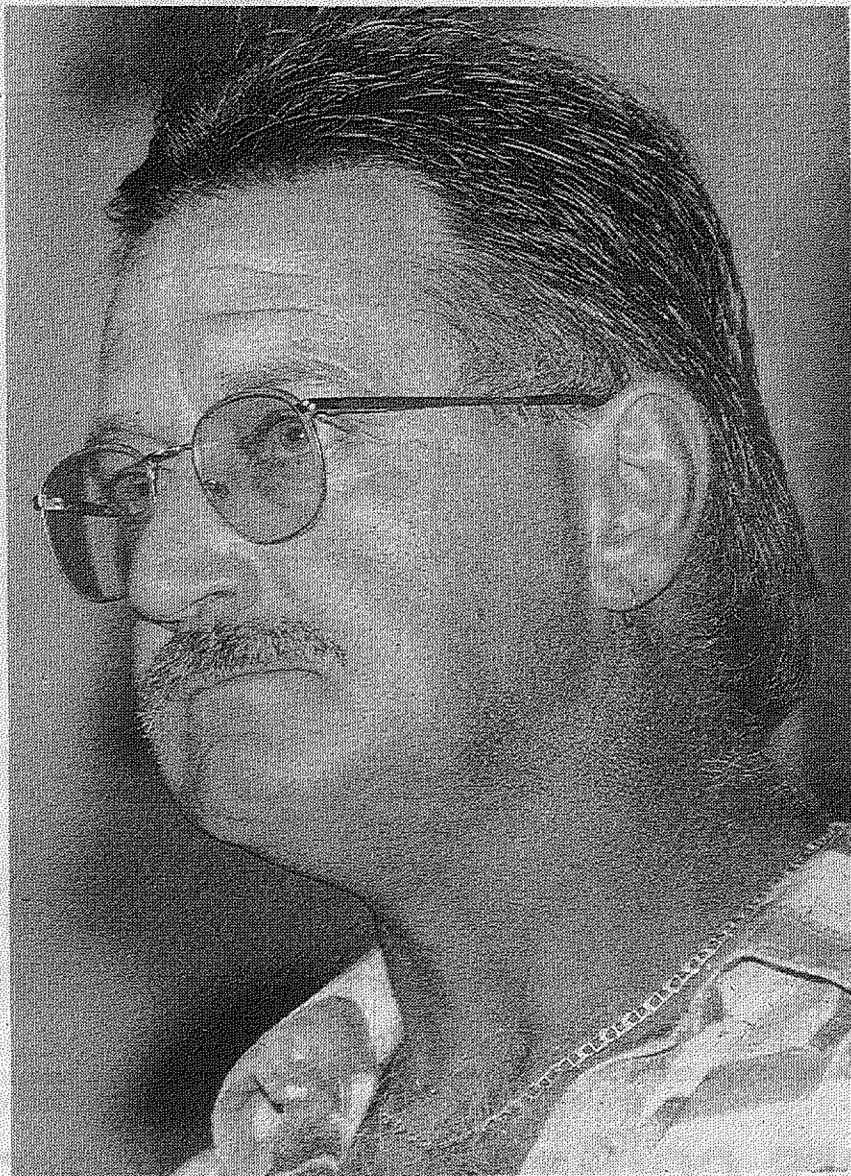
"We also want to thank all those people who have shared their feelings with us, all those who have offered their prayers or best wishes on behalf of Robert and the family."

Mr Derwin dismissed claims that women competitors were forced by commercial interests from a television channel to compete in dangerous surf conditions.

"These championships are conducted by Surf Life Saving Australia. There is a group of three people who make the decision as to what events go ahead and when they go ahead," he said.

"We're not influenced at all by Channel 9 or other commercial interests or sponsors."

Mr Derwin said ironwomen who asked that their event on Saturday afternoon be delayed were overruled by officials.



ROWERS' RESPECT: National Boat Rowers League secretary Greg Davies leads 300 members in a minute's silence for missing 15-year-old competitor Robert Gatenby

Surf fraternity stands silent for lost brother

by MICHAEL CARROLL

MEMBERS of the surf boat fraternity bowed their heads in honour of their lost brother, Robert Gatenby, yesterday but stood firm in support of the decision to hold the tragic race.

The 1996 Boat Rowers' Convention at Conrad Jupiters observed a minute's silence as a mark of respect for the 15-year-old Gold Coaster, presumed dead after an accident in rough seas on Sunday.

League of Rowers national secretary Greg Davies told the 300 people at yesterday's convention the incident was tragic but stressed no-one was to blame for the accident.

"The decision (to compete) was the right decision," said Mr Davies.

"We are boat rowers and I just hope in the wash-up of what happened yesterday there is no one out to find a scapegoat to blame for the death."

"The decision to row was right. Robert Gatenby 1981-1996. The boy had one year's rowing — he was one of us."

Among the crowd at the convention were the five members from the Caves Beach squad, the eventual winners of the race in which the tragedy occurred. All wore black armbands as a sign of respect and sweep Andrew Winn said the accident had a major impact on the sport.

Sports commentator and master of

ceremonies Darrell Eastlake said the entire boat-rowing fraternity felt for Robert Gatenby's family.

"We went to sea on Sunday and unfortunately we lost a brother and we all feel pretty bad about that. We feel so sad for the family. We have all had sons and daughters go out who we have been worried about," said Mr Eastlake.

"(But) I just hope to hell we can continue to send them out for another hundred years."

Mr Eastlake also described as a 'joke' claims the surf titles continued despite the conditions because of pressure from Channel 9.

"It's just complete rubbish," he said. Australian rowing champion Jamie McKinless, who won his second national title on Sunday, said the seas on Sunday were among the strongest he had ever competed in.

McKinless's Alexandra Headlands team wore helmets when competing on Sunday and Mr Eastlake said it was a sign of what was to come for the sport.

Headmaster Barry Arnison, of Somerset College, which Robert Gatenby attended, said the school was greatly saddened by his presumed death.

"Robert Gatenby was a well-liked and dedicated young man, who we fear lost his life taking part in surf life saving activities," said Mr Arnison.

Shocked lifesavers told to take it easy

McMASTERS surf lifesavers underwent grief counselling yesterday before being advised to travel slowly home from the Gold Coast over two days.

The five hours of counselling is in the wake of Sunday's accident at the National Surf Life Saving Championships, when Gold Coast lifesaver Robert Gatenby, 15, collided with a McMasters Club boat.

Gatenby is still missing, presumed drowned.

Surf Life Saving chief executive Scott Derwin said the young crew needed some time to

come to terms with the tragedy.

"They've been through counselling and police interviews yesterday," he said.

A four-wheel drive search of Gold Coast beaches during the night by water police officers failed to find Gatenby.

The water police officers patrolled the waterline during the night shortly after high tide with no success.

Police said the search for Robert Gatenby, of Mudgeeraba in the Gold Coast hinterland, would continue today.