

Olympic medal hopes dig in oars over grant cuts

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Kieran West and Tom James, two of Britain's brightest hopes for Olympic medals in Beijing, could plunge the sport into disarray after deciding to fight the Amateur Rowing Association's decision to slash their performance grants. The two Cambridge University students stand to lose more than £10,000 each if they stick with their intention to train at Ely with the light blues, instead of linking with the national squad at Henley.

West and James have fallen foul of the performance director David Tanner's new policy that requires all potential Olympic rowers to train at a central location. However, travelling from Cambridge to Henley would take up to half their student life.

Until this year, the two rowers would have been due a grant of around £18,000 for finishing in the top six at the world championships. They were threatened with losing that before but, in what was interpreted as a compromise by Tanner, they were offered 40% of that amount should they continue to train with Cambridge. However, the two men insist they are entitled to the full grant and the issue will be discussed by rowing's governing body, the ARA Council, this weekend.

"At stake here is the principle of whether the ARA is willing to pursue Olympic success at any price - regardless of the cost to these students' studies," said Richard Phelps, the representative for Cambridge. "I doubt performance will improve by making students travel from all over the country every day."

Phelps's arguments were boosted at the Fours Head last weekend, when West and James, rowing in a multi-national Cambridge four, beat a Leander crew that included three of the British four that took gold at this year's world championships.

West said: "It's really important that people don't see this as a fight against David Tanner, or a successful system. We are both committed to our Beijing Olympic preparations but are determined to continue our studies this winter and believe our grants should reflect our performance, so have offered to take a cut in our grants if our performances suffer."