

Training Guide

This is a general guide to training for rowing. I'm sure those crews at the top may find this a little light!

What to consider

Rowing 2000m in a race requires lots of stamina. For that reason a lot of cardiovascular exercise is required. Rowing is one of the few sports that utilises most of the muscles and in a flexible manner. It also requires explosive power and therefore requires a variety of different types of training.

For most of us this is a hobby for which we must balance our time against our working hours and family time. Each of us has differing priorities which take precedence in what we do.

The addition to this is what type of fitness position that we as athletes are starting from. What do I mean by this? To quote the extremes, there is a vast difference in general fitness between someone who raced last season and has kept a basic level of fitness throughout the winter and someone who has trained for a few years.

What you are training for is another factor. There is a different level fitness required to win Senior events over a novice event.

Medical factors such as Asthma, Heart problems or injury recovery etc also need consideration and may require advice from a Doctor before you start.

Just taking the above statements into account you will see that any training plan that you find on the web will need tailoring to suit your needs. And these are just for the individual.

Crews or Singles

If you are planning on sculling you only have yourself to consider when setting out your training diary. There is an added complexity when there are two or more in the crew. Add in the needs of a coxswain and things can get interesting.

Surely the coxswain just steers I hear you say. Whilst that is a major part of their roles there is more to it than that. You may require to train a coxswain from scratch so as many outings as possible could be on the cards.

Exercise

Whilst there are many training regimes around with many theories we can only carry out activities where resources are accessible and available. There are truths in some old sayings.

One of those that I have heard is the best exercise for a sport is doing the sport. This means that if you intend to take part in rowing races on the water then the best method of achieving that is to get out on the water and row! I can hear you saying that most of our rowers are in the gyms or out running but I will come to that later.

Another I am sure the football fans of you have heard is “he hasn’t got match fitness”. You can apply that to rowing as well and by this we mean race fitness and competitiveness. The only way to achieve this is by racing against someone. The clock is ok but there is nothing like being next to another crew. The more the better!

Coastal rowing clubs are very dependant on the sea conditions. Some are luckier than others and have a stretch of river close at hand making water time more accessible. If that’s not the case then cross training activities such as Ergo or Running are used as an alternative.

Experience can play a part in this as you may not be allowed to use equipment or go onto the water without permission or supervision. If you are under 18 or a Novice then this probably applies to you.

In all cases “**Safety First**”!

Basics of Rowing

The basic function of rowing for each individual is to move your body weight and that of the boat across the water. If everyone was a perfect rowing technician and the boats were identical then the fastest crews would be those that have the best power to weight.

What do I mean by power to weight? Power is watts and most ergo rowing machines measure this. If two people of exactly the same weight have different power outputs then the one with the higher power output has a better power to weight ratio. Hence, boats and technique being equal would see the more powerful person win a race between the two.

Size and leverage

There is an old saying in rowing, that “a good big’n will always beat a good littl’n”. The muscles in your body (in most cases) are capable of more than moving just your body weight. There is a bit more besides which in a bigger person is potentially more than a smaller person. Hence, generally Men are more powerful than women and rowing is categorised further by heavyweight and lightweight divisions. Height and limb length is of greater assistance by the laws of physics. That’s why a lot of the good crews have very tall people in them. They move the boat further every stroke than a shorter person. So the top crews are aiming for tall, lean people with a high power output.

Technique

Luckily, things like technique and rowing conditions are not equal so it is not always the biggest rowers that win. This can be especially true in coastal conditions where balance is key and stroke efficiency with the waves is vitally important.

Exercise types and concepts.

In rowing, technique is the main priority initially but should be a big part of your ongoing plan. Without this any fitness and power that you have is wasted. Even more so in a novice crew.

The Cardiovascular system is the basis for all distance sporting events and rowing is no exception. As previously said, rowing uses most muscles in our body and these need a constant supply of energy (Air via the Heart and Lungs). What ever stage of rowing you are at, this is the base of any fitness and is of prime importance.

This is why it is important for novices to spend a lot of time out on the water working on technique. As your technique improves so will your base fitness as the time that you will spend out on the water will get you heart and lungs working.

Next is Muscle efficiency and flexibility, You should warm up before every session and warm down afterwards and at the end of each you should carry out stretching exercises to improve your flexibility.

Weight training can be used to supplement your rowing activities to improve your power. Rowing is about moving weight as quickly as possible so it is recommended that you use weights in a circuit based system working arms and legs. You have probably seen a few movies where they should pull as the oars are in the water. You may still hear this from some rowers but the prime muscle group that moves a boat are the legs. They are the biggest and you push with them. The torso and arms are used to lock and anchor the oars in the water while the legs drive the boat forward. Therefore you need a balanced weight circuit.

Setting a training plan.

This really depends on where you are in the calendar cycle. The basics are split into approximately four sections of about three months between the Coastal rowing seasons.

Section one: September to December

Section two: December to March

Section three: March to May

Section four: May to September

Why split them? Isn't training all the same? Well, it depends on what your doing but the session pieces should get smaller as you approach the season. Long pieces in the winter and if you are doing weights heavier and less repetitions.

The chances are that you spend most of the winter sections one and two in the training room, out on the road or in the pool. Dark nights limit you to the weekend for any rowing activity and if the sea is your only option then the conditions will probably be against you for masses of water work. The most dedicated of crews may venture further afield for outings on the river when they can. It really depends on accessibility. Long outings mainly on technique will generally be the training plan at the weekend. The core fitness work taking place on those long dark evenings. (Get away from the TV or computer)

A good 60 - 70% of the work will be on the cardiovascular system. This means Ergo, running or swimming for long periods. 40 minutes sessions or more is optimal but as I said before. This all depends on the work, home and training balance that suits you. Remember to add the warm up/down and stretching at the beginning and end of the main activity. 10 minutes at either end is a 60 minutes session.

The rest of the work schedule will be weights or some form of cross training to break up the routine. Remember that if you have less time for your training then you should concentrate on the cardiovascular exercises.

As you approach the end of section two the 60 minutes sessions may include reduced but more intensive cardiovascular pieces. This may be three 15min pieces with 5mins rest between.

By section three you should have a good basis to work on. This is when you really need to have a good idea what your racing will entail and work out a plan with that in mind. There is no point working towards completing 2000m in the fastest time and not being prepared to row the final 10mins later. Similarly, if you are considering racing in fours and pairs you should bank on a minimum of 4 x 2000m per regatta. Don't forget that re-row. Hmmm, yes that could mean 10,000m in a 6 hour period at 2k race pace. If this is the case for you then your session may be 6 x 2000k pieces with relevant rest breaks. As they say "Failure to plan is planning to fail".

You will also want to be doing shorter distances at higher power rates. Maybe 500m or 1000m with rest periods of 1min or less. Still keep up with some sessions of cardiovascular work.

If you are doing enough sessions to keep up with the weight circuits you should be reducing the weight and increasing the repetitions.

If you are racing at a high level then towards the end of this section you will want to look at lactic tolerance training. Don't know what this is? Lactic acid builds up in the muscles with intensive work and is the by-product of expanding the energy that is contained within the muscle. Those heavy racing starts is where this comes into effect and not transitioning to you race pace quick enough leads to oxygen starvation of the muscles. Your cardiovascular work through the season is required from here when the muscle energy is used. If you didn't do enough you will pay from here on in.

You can build up a tolerance to lactic acid. This means that you won't feel it quite as bad off the start and give you a better transition period. I should add that there is little point doing this training if you have failed to do the basic workouts or are just starting. The sessions will contain short distances such as 100m with 30sec rest.

Once the clocks have changed for summer time you need to get out on the water as often as you can. You can't replace the water work no matter how good you are. (If the opposition is doing less than you then you may get away with this. DON'T BANK ON IT!)

If I was coaching a crew I would expect a minimum of three water sessions a week. If the full crew can't do more sessions then either split into smaller boats or do some land training. Remember to keep up with the cardiovascular work whatever the weather!

You may do fewer outings but spend more time out there. Whatever you do, Enjoy IT!