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CrossFit
JOURNAL ARTICLES

From Rowing Indoors to Rowing on the Water

Judy Geer



Up here in northern Vermont the weather is finally getting warmer. The ice left the lakes at the end of April, and the water temperature is now into the 60s and climbing. If you're a rower, this means you are no doubt starting to feel the irresistible urge to get back on the water. Indoor rowing is terrific exercise, but it will never be quite the same as skimming across the surface of the water in a narrow streamlined racing shell entirely under your own power, feeling the boat surge forward with every stroke you take.

But what is so great about rowing on the water? In reality, indoor rowing offers a number of key advantages even for the hardcore on-water competitor. For an athlete using rowing as a tool to achieve superb fitness, is there really any reason to get on the water? In this article we'll explore that question by addressing the similarities and differences between these two variations of the same

sport, and the different benefits they have to offer. Then you can decide whether to take the plunge and see if real rowing floats your boat, as it were.

Let's start with the similarities. The overall body coordination is the same. Whether on the water or off, you catch, drive, finish, and recover in essentially the same way. The stroke is continuous, smooth, and rhythmic. In both cases, you go "faster" by applying more power during the drive, whether it is a boat or flywheel you're accelerating. The faster you go, the more resistance you feel, in the form of the fluid resistance of air against the flywheel or of water against the hull of the boat. And both rowing vehicles allow you to do a vast array of workouts from intervals to 2K races to marathons (though on the water there may be limits to how far you can go without stopping to turn around).

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What are the differences? The big one is, of course, the water. When rowing in a boat, there is the possibility of getting wet—and not just from sweating. Water and a natural environment also introduce an element of variability and unpredictability to the rowing experience. Wind, wakes, and waves all add challenge to your workout. Rowing into a stiff headwind definitely makes a workout harder.

The challenge of balance is an important difference between on and off-water rowing. In a boat, you control your balance by raising or lowering your oars, which also serve as your “outriggers,” keeping you from tipping over. In a slender racing boat, it’s very easy for a beginner to flip and end up in the water. Luckily, there are more stable boats for training newbies, which offer the best way to get comfortable with the whole concept of balance on the water. Ultimately, a skilled sculler will be able to balance effortlessly while working at maximum output without ever letting the oars touch the water.

There are some significant differences between using the handle on an indoor rower and using a pair of sculling oars. In sculling, you hold one oar in each hand with your thumb at the end of the oar grip. (For sweep rowing with multiple people in a boat, each rower holds one larger oar with both hands, alternating sides down the boat.) As you progress through the stroke, the oars swing an arc as they pivot against the oarlock. This means that your hands start farther apart at the catch, then swing in and overlap each other in the middle of the drive, and finally swing apart again to the finish. This is slightly different from the straight pull of indoor rowing, and introduces a slightly wider range of shoulder motion.

One of the biggest additional challenges of on-water rowing is mastering the handling of the blade. During the drive, the blade is just under the surface and “square” to the water, close to vertical. During the recovery, the blade is just above the water and “feathered”—rotated to horizontal—in order to decrease wind resistance and make it easier to keep it clear of the water. All of this blade-handling is managed by the fingers with a little help from the wrists. It’s a subtle but critical set of moves that must be done in time with the body

coordination without adding tension to the arms or shoulders.

There are clearly a number of complexities introduced by rowing on the water that make it a different kind of training session compared to working on an erg. To be sure, you should not expect to get a good workout the first time you row in a boat. In fact, it will probably be several sessions before you can really pull as hard as you’d like to. Ideally, you should start in a stable boat, one that is very hard to flip even if you do things wrong, and then progress to a sleeker shell when you are ready. The most important advice I can offer to a fit athlete learning to row on the water is this: Don’t try to pull hard too soon, and take time to figure out the proper blade handling.

So why go to the trouble of rowing on the water? The exhilaration, the powerful grace, and the silent speed are well worth the investment. Once you have rowed on the water, you will have a deeper understanding, even when indoors, of the dynamics of the stroke and





the application of power, because you will be able to think in terms of moving a boat and how your body's motions affects the speed of the boat. And if you ever get bored indoors, you'll be able to close your eyes and visualize the real thing.

But even for those whose goal is to be fast on the water, there are certain aspects of indoor rowing that can't be beat. It's a great teaching tool. On the water, your coach can't stand next to you and give hands-on coaching about body position and technique. It's consistent and quantifiable. On the water, it's difficult to monitor improvements in speed since conditions vary so much, but the indoor rower gives you accurate data any time you want it. And finally, it's weatherproof, dry, and convenient. It's always there to give you a great workout even when the weather is lousy or the lake is frozen. You don't have to dress for the wet or the weather, you don't have to live near water, you don't have to launch and then stow a boat, an erg is considerably less expensive to own than a scull, there are no rowing club or boathouse fees, the learning curve is not very steep, and mistakes aren't punished by a dunking.

The bottom line: you can't beat indoor rowing for a convenient and highly effective workout. But you can add to its value—and maybe find a new sport and community you enjoy—by getting yourself out on the water. Give it a try!

How to get on the water

Learn the body coordination first on the indoor rower, and then take your skills to the water under experienced supervision. Don't expect to get a good workout the first time on the water. Take the time to master blade handling and get comfortable before chasing intensity. Find a sculling camp to attend, or a local boathouse that offers lessons. The following websites will help you locate clubs, programs, and camps:

- www.usrowing.org
- www.row2k.com
- www.craftsbury.com
- www.rowinglinks.com
- www.concept2.com



Judy Geer was a member of three U.S. Olympic Rowing Teams (1976, 1980, 1984). She placed sixth in both 1976 and 1984; 1980 was the boycott year.) Since then, she and her husband Dick Dreissigacker (also an Olympic rower, and co-founder of [Concept2 Rowing](http://www.concept2.com)) have raised three children, now ages 15, 18, and 20, who are national-level competitive athletes in their own right. Judy continues to train and race in sculling, running, Nordic skiing, and biathlon.