The ultimate indoor workout
Rowing is the smart way to shape up this winter. It's grueling, but you just might get hooked.

If you already have mastered the rowing basics, you may want to try the ultimate rowing experience: ergometer racing. There's a cachet to competing on indoor rowing ergometers like nothing else in sports. Only those who've raced can understand the "erg" prestige. It comes from one slightly unsettling truth about erg racing: If you want to pull competitive times, you're going to experience PAIN. Not hockey- or football-style pain, either. This pain is self-inflicted.

An ergometer offers "progressive resistance," meaning that the harder you work, the more resistance you get from the machine. A rowing ergometer mimics the motion of rowing a scull. And the harder you pull, the more it hurts.

Yet there are plenty of people out there who seem to relish the agony. The corps of hard-core rowers who compete has grown phenomenally over the past 20 years, now numbering in the hundreds of thousands.

Next month more than 1,000 of them will compete in the C.R.A.S.H.-B.s ("Charles River All-Star-Has-Beens") sprints—the World Series of Indoor rowing—in Cambridge, Mass. Fewer than 100 competed in 1982, its debut year.

One hard-core case sure to be there is 35-year-old Marge Steuck, who has finished in the top five at the C.R.A.S.H.-Bs for the past three years in the women's Masters Division (ages 30 to 39).

Why has indoor rowing become so popular? Minute for minute, there is no better cardiovascular workout. But many people who tried ergometers to get in and stay in shape have been lured into competition. Here's how it works: A digital video readout on the machine is set at 2,500 meters. Rowers, get set, and go. As you begin your strokes, the meters start clicking down, and the time starts clocking up. The idea: Race the clock.

To pull decent times, you've got to train, Steuck says. Form and conditioning are everything, and both take time to base. Steuck's tips:

- Form: Start with your knees bent, chest forward and arms straight. Kick out, bend backward slightly at the waist, and then pull in with your arms. To recover, clear your knees with the machine's handle by straightening your arms and leaning slightly forward, then pull your butt back to your heels. Rhythm and fluidity are key. "If you're throwing your body around, jerking your head and shoulders, you're wasting energy," Steuck says.

- Conditioning: No shortcuts here. But anything that builds your cardiovascular system will help, whether it's cycling, running or swimming. For the maximum benefit, Steuck says, "get on the ergometer.

To build endurance and power quickly, she recommends "interval training," where you go hard for 20 strokes, then easy for 10. Do sets lasting five minutes or so. In time, your workout should last 20 minutes.

Race strategy: Go out strong and maintain a pace that will still leave you with enough energy to "kick" the last 500 meters, Steuck says. But "you can't hold back too much. Not in a 10-minute race." And when the pain comes on strong? "I take it one stroke at a time."

Beyond that, just be buoyed by the fact that, the faster you row, the sooner you'll finish.

By Jonathan Walters

Mega-pain, mega-gain

There are two problems with competing on indoor rowing ergometers. The first is that, if you want to post competitive times, you have to push yourself to the point of some serious arm-, leg- and long-lasting pain. The second is that, once you've competed, you're hooked. I know, because I've competed before.

So it was with a mixture of excitement and trepidation that I headed to Newton, Conn., recently to participate in the second annual William W. Backus Hospital Indoor Sprints.

This race is the only one in the country that is organized by a hospital. Two years ago, the hospital's rehabilitation program started to use rowing ergometers and found them to be very effective in rebuilding cardiovascular health. A physician, Anthony Aless, and a physical therapist, Nicole Formler, both erg competitors, took the idea the next logical step: hold an annual regatta, open to everyone.

As my heat kicked off, I tried to keep Marge Steuck's advice in mind: Start at a strong pace and keep the strokes wide and smooth. For 1,000 meters, I was dazzling. But by the end, I was running. But I was the only person at the finish line and I was thinking: "I've got to run this again."

I finished the 2,500 in 8:49.7. Good enough for third in my age group. Good enough to make my legs wobble, my lungs burn and my arms rubber.

And good enough to make me want to come back for next regatta, because I can't shake this feeling that, with just a little more training, I could crash those times. And an 8:35.9 would have been good for first.

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