Making the Transition Back to the Water

"As indoor training comes to an end, what should rowers be aware of as they make the transition back outdoors and on the water?"

Marnie McBean, HomePond Rowing

Getting back on the water is exhilarating -- finally something interesting to look at, some breeze and, with any luck, a feeling of speed. The hands need a bit of time to adjust to the different oar handle, but thousands of kilometers on the erg and all those weights can have a rower craving for instant 20k rows. Unfortunately, all of the tiny muscles we use to balance on the water are going to tire way before our propulsion muscles. This can cause some big problems that will last the whole year.

When these muscles tire, we begin to compensate -- knees start to do the Samba on the recovery, blade height is a seesaw mess, and entry and exits are messy and forced. In a perfect world if we all did what was right, we should probably ease into on-the-water rowing, blending in erg time to keep work load up until our stabilizers get strong again. But with good water out there, who's going to get back on the sled?

Try to ease into the longer rows. Spend some time on drills: a lot of balancing drills, release to catch kind of stuff that will help fire and fast track all the small stabilizing muscles that are next to useless on the erg. Be diligent now about balance and blade height. Your whole season could depend on it!

There can be a great advantage to winter erging in front of a mirror if we use it right. With any luck, a rower who had been confined to a four-foot rail-pond has been giving some thought to technique. Hands down and around, straight arms at the catch, etc. Having been kept off the water for the winter, perhaps a rower has had dreams, awake or asleep, of the boat gliding across the water, perfectly balanced, no check. The blade exits without dragging from a tight puddle and returns to the catch with perfect height. The blade enters the water with optimum back splash and seems to cut even further to the bow and the boat runs and runs and runs...

Nobody thinks of bad technique all winter, so getting back on the water with the good image in one's head is the best time to get rid of nagging technical faults that will quickly become ingrained and more than a little frustrating to get rid of.
Basically, use the time off the water to your advantage. Be fresh and excited about rowing, but don't think you can go from 40k erg to 40k water without a massive technical breakdown. Remember, the boat goes faster when you are patient with the recovery!

Marnie McBean, a four-time Olympic medalist and eight-time world championships' medalist for Canada, currently serves as the president of HomePond Rowing. Through HomePond Rowing, McBean, who has won world or Olympic medals in the single, double, quad, pair, four and eight, offers on-site clinics and camps for clubs and crews. To learn more about HomePond Rowing, check out its Web site at www.homepondrowing.com.

Evans Liolin, Yale University Men's Freshman Coach

The transition from winter training to the water is critical, but it can be managed easily. The anticipation of the upcoming races will ensure that your early water workouts are charged. As a starting point, however, it is wise to mentally prepare yourself for new blisters and inevitably poor weather, which can last well into the spring. Physically, the goal during this time is to maintain the fitness gained from the winter, while establishing good bladework, balance and confidence in the boat.

With experienced and novice athletes alike, I utilize the first days on the water to explain how to manipulate the oar handle throughout the stroke. Beginning with the basics allows you to regain comfort in the boat without the pressure of racing. There is no need to feel hurried during this period. You've been off the water for a while and enthusiasm is high, but don't worry if the rowing isn't perfect. It doesn't have to be. However, if these technical principles are not established early, they can be the first to break down in heated competition.

During this transition period, you may want to alternate easy days on the water with harder work on land. This approach helps you maximize your good strokes in the boat, while improving fitness and racing skills on land. Water time during this period can be used for steady-state workouts. On harder days, you can row the erg or cross-train so that you continue to improve physically. As your skills stabilize, you can then increase the number of sessions in the boat. If you adjust to the boat at a natural pace, you will be well-prepared as your first race approaches.

Evans Liolin is currently the men's freshman coach at Yale University. Prior to coaching at Yale, he served as the head coach at Boston Rowing Center Juniors in Cambridge, Mass., and before that, as the men's
freshman coach and assistant varsity coach at Northeastern University. Liolin also served as junior men’s national team coach from 2002-04.

Chris Clark, University of Wisconsin Men's Head Coach  One thing the rower can expect is this: no matter how cold or miserable spring weather can be, it beats erging. On the serious side, the salient issue during this transition period is safety. On our lake, water temperatures stay below forty degrees into May. Therefore, exercise extreme caution except in the most benign weather.

These realities, along with cold air, really limit what we can do technique-wise. Therefore, the bulk of our spring season training is almost exclusively hard, steady-state without breaks and minimal turning. So, what many may consider to be a disadvantage (harsh and inclement weather), it may be able to be used to suit your purposes.

Chris Clark has served as the men’s head coach at the University of Wisconsin since 1997. In 2002, the University of California graduate led Wisconsin's varsity eight to a second-place finish at the IRA Championships. In addition to his collegiate coaching duties, Clark has served as an assistant national team coach at the world championships several times and as the men’s head coach for the Under 23 National Team several times.

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