"Go out hard and hold on ... never let up."

"Pace is most important ... the reality of the race is what you did in training."

"I use brute strength and sheer determination."

"Don't row the erg any differently than you row in a boat."

"I've never been in a boat ... some people say I row totally with my upper body although I know my back is my weakest part."

"Get a haircut before race day."

The above is a sampling of responses to the query: "What is the secret of your erging success?" Recently we posed this question to several C.R.A.S.H.-B. champions and coaches in an effort to glean any secrets or universal truths from them which might help the rest of us put in our best performance come race day.

The issue of developing faster methods on the machine has been reopened by the growing appearance of erg competitors who do not row in boats and whose technique, unrefined by time on the water, still manages to yield success. The natural question emerges: are these people doing something different that we should look into?

Their spotty erg training methods further mystify their standout performances. Sister Marion Irvine, a world-class runner turned rower who set a world record for women 60-69 at last year's C.R.A.S.H.-B. Sprints, has only been erging for a few years now and claims to have no special training tactics. Up until eight months ago, she found it difficult to stay on the erg for more than 3,000 meters; "and even that seemed crazy." Currently training for longer races, she has upped her mileage a bit, but it still pales in comparison to the erg work done at most competitive rowing programs. Her self-proclaimed secret, as listed above, is "brute strength and determination."

Another non-rowing standout who gets away with minimal erg training is Canadian triathlete JoAnne Ritchie, whose time of 3:33.8 at last year's C.R.A.S.H.-B. was a world record for women 30-39 and even bested the fastest open women's time by over 10 seconds. To watch her erg last year was to watch someone competing in a different race than those sitting around her, and yet she too claims to train little more than 10 minutes on the erg, three or four times per week. "There is so much quality in short, hard sessions," she claims, admitting that she often runs or bikes for 30 minutes prior her erging. In the same breath, she also emphasizes that her winter training in December and January is scant and totals only about four to six hours per week!

So much for muscle specificity. Should we all cross-train, then? Hold your horses. Undoubtedly, the prior years of aerobic mileage put in by both Sister Marion and Ritchie aid them on the erg, but that doesn't necessarily mean that we should chuck it all and start rowing less. It's more likely that these women can get away with minimal time on the erg because they have done so much in the way of other transferable activities. It is also apparent that they must possess gifted cardiovascular systems more so than the "brute strength," listed by Sister Marion.

It is interesting, nevertheless, that more than just a few standout ergers can get away with spending a surprisingly small percentage of their time on the erg and still do well. The main reason listed for not doing more erging? Not surprisingly, among rowers and non-rowers alike, the answer is the same: boredom. Despite the entertaining image some try to associate with the erg, inventing games and organizing team relays, relatively few athletes harbor strong romantic feelings toward the machine, and most regard it simply as a necessary evil.

"Drudgery, sheer drudgery," says Bob Spousa, world record holder in the men's 40-49 category. Spousa resorts to erg training only when the river rowing becomes too chilly, usually sometime in November. His longest piece on the erg is generally 10,000 meters, with some shorter interval work done preceding a competitive effort, which generally happens only "a few times a winter."

Unlike Ritchie and Sister Marion, Spousa does little else than row, and he is a strong proponent of the philosophy that "the best way to get better at rowing is to row."

Spousa encourages athletes "not to let up" in their yearly training or take extended breaks from working out daily. His stocic race plan, listed above, is to "go out hard and hold on," although he admits that during his record-breaking row, a friend coxed him and actually had him "slow down" in the early going of the piece.

This theme of pacing and rowing modestly through the first part of a 2,500 meter effort, is reaffirmed by two-time collegiate winner of C.R.A.S.H.-B's, Bill Cooper. Both of his wins were come-from-behind efforts, where he actually had to hold back from overextending himself in the early going. "This is difficult to do," he admits, "especially when you see everyone else ahead of you." His strategy, however, which was to lower his split times gradually through the course of the piece, paid off when others could not maintain the pace of their ambitious first 500 meters. Cooper, who graduated from Harvard last year, is also the practitioner of the haircut approach, but warns that it should only be employed for "important competitions."
Carrie Graves, Northeastern's women's varsity coach and three-time C.R.A.S.H.-B. winner, tries to instill the concept of pacing in her athletes by having them discover their "realistic split times" and stick to them.

"There is nothing so painful as watching or being the person who flies and dies," she laments. Graves goes on to emphasize that rowers must "learn from their workouts what their target is." Based on repeated race-distance intervals, her athletes in essence "rehearse" for a race, developing a physical and mental script which will alter little come race day.

"To set your goals, you must first find your splits," she insists, "and this takes some of the guesswork out of the erging game." By providing her athletes with a plan, she believes that they can then relax a little and have a better chance at taping into what she terms "their ultimate push."

Steve Gladstone, men's varsity coach at Brown University (undefeated 1993 National Collegiate Champions) concurs with this advice but is quick to point out that he plays very little role in improving an oarsman's erg performance. "Good rowers," he says, "have an intuitive sense of pushing themselves to the edge." Two of Gladstone's athletes, Gus Koven and Igor Boraska, placed first and second at C.R.A.S.H.-B.s in the collegiate men's event last year; a third team member, Jamie Koven, placed second in the open category.

On the question of technique, Gladstone admits that "there are probably ways to get a better erg score by rowing differently than in a boat," but he discourages such practices as being counterproductive to good rowing. Undoubtedly, the questions about proper rowing technique vs. erging technique will continue to persist, especially among rowers and their cross-training counterparts.

Ritchie is certainly a case in point. Despite her own quote above, "Someone once said I row totally with my upper body," it's clear from watching Ritchie that she benefits mainly from a strong pair of legs and the uncanny ability to hold the stroke rate at a 30+ for most of the 2,500-meter piece. While other oarswomen around her are keeping a slower slide/faster drive ratio intact until the closing sprint, Ritchie wastes little time focusing on a controlled recovery. On the water, that style might have the negative effect of checking her glide. She attributes her high-stroking technique to cycling, where it is beneficial to ride a lighter gear and "keep the crank spinning."

While many may shake their heads at such advice, rowers have not always been above compromising proper from to shave a few seconds from their erg times. Former Harvard oarsman and Olympic sculler, Andy Sudworth was a progenitor of the extended layback, pull-the-handle-up-to-the-chin style adopted by many others in the mid-eighties. Although he insists he made no "conscious" effort to row the erg differently than in his single, he does admit that the advent of the L.E.D. monitor on the machines did lead him and others to a certain "experiment with the most efficient stroke."

In the 1987 C.R.A.S.H.-B. open men's final, Harvard lightweight coach, Charlie Butt, Jr., treated the spectators to an even more ingenious maneuver. With about a minute left in the 2,500 meter piece, he suddenly stopped rowing, reached forward and shut the resistance vent on his erg. He then proceeded to sprint to near victory, taking the stroke rate — and the excitement level of the crowd — up to fever pitch.

These sorts of exploits, however, are few and far between, for if and when a mechanical advantage is discovered, it is inevitably copied or banned (the "Butt Maneuver" was subsequently outlawed) — which brings us back to training, training and training. And while our experts, may seem to differ on various ways to go about this, there are at least five major themes that might be labeled as universal truths in the pursuit of one's ultimate erg score. These might not provide much of a revelation, but perhaps the process of demystifying the scores of others is a helpful first step in discovering the potential of our own.

The 1994 C.R.A.S.H.-B.Sprints are Sunday, February 24th. The entry deadline is February 1. To obtain an entry form, send a self-addressed, stamped envelope to: C.R.A.S.H.-B., P.O. Box 1972, Cambridge, MA 02238.

Five Steps Toward Better Performance on the Erg

1. Identify and Maintain a Goal

"My goal becomes my motivation," says Sister Marion, whose high pursuits are world records. Most of us have less grandiose expectations, but the spirit of the advice is useful for all. For rowers who are trying out for a team, an erg performance may represent only one part of the overall effort, but make the team and become a better rower. Even so, setting individual goals on the erg seems to be a vital part of any mature athlete's progress toward consistent performances.

2. Establish an Aerobic Base

This applies not only to the few months of "pre-season" training but to the years of aerobic work that can be drawn from in later years. Consider, the warm weather mileage put in by Ritchie (running, swimming and cycling) it's no wonder she can get away with short sessions on the erg. Seasoned athletes can more easily draw from the reserve that they've built up over the years.

If you're just starting out on the erg, with little other aerobic experience to your credit, you should slowly build up your mileage on the machine before you even consider racing. As the first Concept II suggest in their manual, "Start your exercise program very early. Row no more than five minutes the first day, even if it feels great. Maintain a pace that allows you to keep a conversation." When you reach a point where you can row for at least 30 minutes or so, four or five times per week, you are on your way toward beginning an aerobic base from which shorter, more intense pieces can be launched.

3. Know Your Splits

"When I'm rowing, my eyes are on the L.E.D. and my mind is doing all sorts of mental gymnastics," says Spousal. All the standout ergers I interviewed had a similar concern and knowledge of where their split times should be when racing. The trial and error process of determining one's aerobic threshold and the split times attached to it is an important prerequisite to goal setting. Several "rehearsals" of the race distance interval, if possible under the supervision of a coach, will greatly aid in determining this mark.

4. Pace When You Race

If this seems like an obvious one, attend the C.R.A.S.H.-B.s this winter and see how many people don't, or can't do it right. So many are either too terrorized to go out strong, or are so euphoric with adrenaline that they "go over the edge." "There aren't any miracles on the erg," says Graves, "and these people always pay for it later." Despite her religious beliefs, Sister Marion notes, "Once you've gone over the edge, that's it."

5. Maintain Your Motivation

While coaches and athletes agree that the ergometer is a wonderful training tool, they also underline the fact that it is not the be-all and end-all of your overall rowing career. Plenty of small crew programs without a full arsenal of ergs have managed to succeed doing other aerobic activity during the off-season months, and even programs with them strive to mix in running, swimming, weightlifting and other activities to break up the monotony of the machine and condition the muscle groups. In designing your own training program, don't be afraid to mix in other activities which may keep you motivated over the long haul.