Sauer's Suggestions:

Ergometer Initiation

Maybe you got an ergometer for Christmas. Or maybe your YMCA or local health club just bought one. Whether it's in your basement or your garage or down the street, do some planning, follow a schedule, and learn a little more about your ergometer before you start.

USRowing Technical Director Kevin Sauer offers the following suggestions:

What's the biggest mistake people make when they begin ergometer workouts?

They get on the erg and work as hard as they can for about two minutes, and then they go take a shower and feel like they've done something. There are two big problems with that: first, it's dangerous. You can injure muscles that way, including the big one, your heart. Secondly, you haven't done anything for your cardiovascular system or your muscles except build up some high levels of lactic acid that'll take three days to wear off. After a couple of experiences with very sore muscles, the ergometer will get dusty.

Then what's the best way to start?

I recommend starting the ergometer the same way you're used to doing whatever other exercise you do. If you're a jogger or a biker or a swimmer, think about how you've done that and approach your erg the same way. You wouldn't go out and play tennis for five minutes and quit; why try to workout on an ergometer that way?

When you're going to introduce ergometer training, combine it with something you're already doing. Don't try 30 minutes on the ergometer the first time out. Erging uses different musculature. So do combinations instead. Bike 20 minutes and then, without stopping, hop on your erg for 10; or run 15 minutes and get right on the erg for 10. That way, you can introduce new muscles into your training without too much soreness. And, little by little, you can trade to the ergometer completely.

What about setting the "gears"?

You don't need to set an ergometer on the heaviest setting to see results. For longer workouts, keep on a light setting. If you're doing shorter work, set it a little heavier.

Once you're working exclusively on the erg, how should you plan your workouts?

First of all, remember to stretch for 5-10 minutes. Stretch the major muscle groups—quadriceps, hamstrings, lower back, abdominals, chest and shoulders and neck. I like to think of it as stretch-

"Erging" as a spectator sport—action from the 1987 CRASH-B Sprints.
Remember that you want 20-30 minutes of steady state work four times a week to get the maximum benefit. But that doesn’t mean you’re stuck just rowing for 30 solid minutes. Start working in the 20-30 minutes range and then add variations. For example, do 5 minutes hard, 2 min. easy; 5 min. hard; 2 min. easy, etc. That is a good cardiovascular workout. Just remember that the 2 minutes easy doesn’t mean stop. Whatever you do, don’t stop—don’t get up for a drink of water. What you’re after is active rest in preparation for the next piece. If you stop, you’ll lose your heart rate and then you’ve lost the workout. Keep a bicycle water bottle next to your erg if you want. That way, you’ll have water right there when you’re finished.

What about longer workouts—45-60 minutes?

I don’t know about other people, but I have a tough time sitting on an erg for an hour. I like variety. So I’ll get on a stationary bike for 10 minutes and then get right on the erg for 10, and alternate it—10 minutes bike; 10 minutes erg, etc. Or I’ll run for half an hour and then erg for half an hour. You can also combine body circuit with the erg (see article, page 37). Do a body circuit and then your erg and alternate that. Periodically, I like to do a test piece to check my progress. Do the equivalent of 2500 meters or something you can monitor.

Any suggestions on breathing?

I always tell people to just breathe when they have to instead of concentrating too much on when they’re breathing. But once you’ve settled into your workout schedule a little, you can try concentrating on lengthening your exhale. For example, try counting to three or four while you exhale and see if you can extend it. Without getting too scientific, this process can make your breathing more efficient and get oxygen into your bloodstream quicker.

30-Minute Workouts

A. 5 repetitions of 5 minutes hard; 2 minutes easy. Remember that easy doesn’t mean stop, it means active rest for the next piece.

B. Break up 30 minutes into 10-minute sections—10 minutes hard; 3 min. easy; 10 min. hard; 3 min. easy; 10 min. hard; 3 min. easy.

C. Farkenspiel—10 strokes hard; 10 easy; 20 hard; 20 easy; 30 hard; 30 easy; 40 hard; 30 easy; 50 hard; 30 easy. You can build a lot of variety into this one by doing pyramids—building the number of strokes up and down. Just remember that you never increase the number of easy strokes to more than 30.

D. One minute hard; one minute easy \times 15.