



This Month

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USRowing This Month is published monthly by USRowing and features association news and updates.

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A Letter from the USRowing Executive Director

Dear Members,

March is the time of year that I loved most as an athlete. The Hudson River was just beginning to defrost, and we could look forward to exchanging weeks of body circuits and ergs for ice-soaked oar handles and tippy boats. The USRowing office is much the same. Winter is paperwork, meetings and planning sessions; spring brings the registered regatta season and selection events.

As we move into full swing, I wanted to bring the membership up to speed on several initiatives taking place this year.

Membership:

First, I want to thank the membership for its support during the past two months. Our organizational dues increase was an unwelcome change for everyone. To date, the membership department and I have fielded about 300 calls and e-mails asking questions, providing input, and generally being supportive in a difficult time for our sport.

While organizational dues and insurance issues have been a primary focus recently, we have continued to look for new benefits that we can offer our members. Along those lines, USRowing will be offering a new product specifically targeted to our member organizations with junior programs: criminal background checks for coaches and volunteers who work with minors. The sport of rowing has been fortunate in that our clubs have not faced allegations of sexual predators in our junior programs. USRowing would like to provide our clubs with the tools to ensure that we keep our junior athletes safer.

USRowing has partnered with the National Center for Safety Initiatives to perform criminal background checks.

This Ohio-based firm specializes in checks for youth groups, sport organizations and, most recently, the USOC. The program will enable clubs to have their staff register online for the check for a nominal fee. The NCSI does the leg work and generates a simple red light or green light report for each individual based on the predetermined criteria. Part of this process will include a motor vehicle component. We recognize that junior programs often travel, sometimes overnight, and this tool will help clubs reduce the liability of the wrong people being trusted with younger athletes. More details will follow on our Web site as we complete the launch of this program. Please check back during this month.

Some time ago, USRowing partnered with the Foundation for Rowing Education in an effort to creatively address safety issues and education. The first RowingRoadCrew workshop on Safe Trailer Driving will be held in the Boston area this April. Details can be found in this newsletter or at www.rowingeducation.org. The event will be hosted by MIT Crew on Sunday, April 1. This is a starting point in a partnership to make our sport safer, and new clinics and topics will be unveiled as the year progresses.

Another safety program for members that has been launched is the coach and referee PFD discount plan. Organizations and referees may purchase top-quality life jackets through this program at a significant discount, making them safer on the water. These are not your discount store, five-dollar orange jackets. They represent the best technology for users who can wear the jacket as a full-time safety tool. A flyer outlining

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Fundamental Mindset

By Ted Swinford

“This is the law: There is no possible victory in defense, the sword is more important than the shield, and skill is more important than either, the final weapon is the brain. All else is supplemental.” -- John Steinbeck

I rarely encounter competitive rowers [never really] who feel their technique and conditioning is as good as it should be. Even if well conditioned, most will acknowledge a real deep need for technical improvement. Whether you are a brand new novice or an elite national team member, experience suggests the place to start to build or rebuild your training program is by reinforcing the fundamentals.

This basic guide on rowing technique has evolved during 30 years (1977-2007) of rowing competition and professional instruction. It includes ideas and concepts I’ve come up with myself, and things I’ve shamelessly robbed from some of the best competitors and coaches I couldn’t out row or out coach. I am always asking questions of good coaches and, when they make sense, adopt them as my own. A coach of greater accomplishment than I once said to a group of some of the best coaches and athletes in the country, “good coaches are good copy cats.” I will, however, give credit where credit is due and when I can remember who said and did what.

What that coach was saying was this: get your ego out of the way and learn something. Even wisdom from other sports seemingly unlike rowing can and should be used.

“At the peak of tremendous and victorious effort, while the blood is pounding in your head, all suddenly becomes quiet within you. Everything seems clearer and whiter than ever before, as if great spotlights had been turned on. At that moment, you have the conviction that you contain all the power in the world, that you are capable of everything, that you have wings. There is no more precious moment in life than this, the white moment, and you will work very hard for years just to taste it again.” -- Yuri Vlasov, Soviet Weightlifter

Remember the “Tonight Show” with Johnny Carson? He was always punctuating a joke with his

golf swing. How many times have you seen golfers practice their swing without the props of their sport? How about tennis players? Swimmers? Now, ask a rower to do that, a practice stroke. Mr. Carson may have had other reasons to mimic a golf swing, but the bottom line is he didn’t need a club or ball to do it. Since John Riley pointed this out to me, I have asked many rowers to show me their rowing stroke without equipment. Almost to a one, their rowing stroke without the equipment is comical. These embarrassed, experienced athletes when asked why their air strokes are so awful invariably say, “I need my boat and oars to do it right.” This begs the question: does the equipment control you or do you control the equipment? For some it is surely the former, but the rest of us need to strive for the later.

The ability to fully mimic a proper rowing stroke is not just a funny trick for coaches to entertain and amuse their crews. It is a necessary training tool for any aspiring athlete. Brad Lewis and Pail Enquist used this technique when training for the 1984 Olympics. A gold medal in the men’s double is a pretty strong endorsement. So go ahead and look funny, amuse your friends; you can keep them entertained on your way to the medal stand.

In the shooting sports, there is a saying that goes like this: you can’t miss fast enough to win. In any sport where speed is important, proper technique and efficient motions will always win out. This is where relentless attention to detail and impeccable focus in training pay off. Moving quick and dirty may work in nuclear war, but when the times are compared, it is the elites effortless superiority that stands out and goes unnoticed.

The athlete needs a technical model. Fortunately we have these in the form of world and Olympic champions. Get some videos of these athletes and watch them. Get someone to video you and compare. End your video sessions with some video of these champions; let this be the ideal form you take everywhere.

This is something with which I have experience. My college coaches always had video of good row-

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ing available to watch, and we did watch. Sometimes without video of ourselves, we would watch and remember. I don't think I realized what I was doing! By the time I was an aspiring elite, I could, on demand, picture myself rowing from all angles. This was perhaps the ultimate Photoshop, not only my face, but my thoughts, feeling and body rowing the way I willed it.

“Victorious warriors win first and then go to war, while defeated warriors go to war first and then seek to win.” -- Sun-Tzu

When I was able to picture myself a member of the U.S. National Rowing Team, when I believed it, it was so.

What sports gurus say is really true: it takes thousands of correct repetitions of an activity before that action becomes permanently apart of your subconscious skills. Proper attention must be paid to form during each repetition for the programming of that action to be perfect. Many hold the mistaken belief that great rowers, like musical prodigies, are simply born with superior coordination, toughness, muscle fiber type or other innate talents from whence they draw their superior skills. The reality is they work harder with what they have, and importantly, have developed better training tools to train smarter. James Lyons [1940 U.S. Olympic Rowing Team] summed it up this way: “big guys just wear more clothes.”

Fast, competitive, winning rowing requires mastery of many skills beyond simple conditioning such as body preparation, direct catch and proper drive coordination. It might seem that the task of correctly executing each skill many thousands of times while maintaining correct form and acute mental focus would seem almost impossible. It really is not; but, the ability to train effectively is actually the only attribute separating champions from those de-rigging early. It is not the amount of training time put in that counts, it is the quality of their preparation.

The key to such effective training, defined as getting the most correct reps of an action from the time available, is to focus on quality. Do a thing perfectly even one time and you've learned something; let yourself flail about in haste and distraction and each lousy repetition just does more damage. Your mind cannot differentiate between good body preparation and lousy, a proper direct catch and an ugly miss of

the water; it grooves in what you actually do, see and feel as the model for future performances. If you do not want to drop your posture, miss water and check your boat, you must maintain your posture, direct your blades to the water and push your legs when covered. This is equally true for recreational rowers and elites.

“In the heat of battle, you don't remember very much, you don't think very fast. You act by instinct, which is really training. So you've got to be trained for battle so you react exactly the way you did in training.” -- Admiral Arleigh Burke, USN

In racing, as in battle, you get what you practice. Such conceits as letting yourself ignore fundamental rowing skills, slouching, missing water and rowing negative ratio just because the water is bad or “the piece is over and I'm tired” will gain nothing. A lapse in focus in training even after the piece is over and you are tired, may bring disappointing results later on.

I view rowing training on a continuum, with careful, precise steady-state rowing on one end and high rate, aggressive short burst pieces on the other. All points on this continuum can be mastered by varying the pace and type of practice with appropriate mental imagery. Properly program each individual aspect of the stroke cycle into your subconscious and it will all come together in a seamless fluid skill set on the water.

Finally and most importantly, relying on your subconscious training to hold you together in rhythm vs. a-rhythm, when exhausted, on demand, frees up your conscious mind to react quickly to changing circumstances and make correct tactical decisions under the stresses of racing. The secret is this: limit what you have to think about to begin with and thinking on your feet [or butt] will be easier.

Ted Swinford was a multiple-time U.S. National Team member and a world champion in the men's four in 1986.

Ten Steps to a Strong Start for Spring

By Mayrene T. Earle, M.Ed.

March is upon us already. That means it's time to look back at the results of the training you've done since November and to look forward as you prepare for spring racing season. Here are 10 tips to help you get your spring season off to a great start.

1. Evaluate your winter training. Did you accomplish all your goals? If not, why not? What areas still need work? What went well? Did you suffer any setbacks due to injury or other factors? What did you learn this winter?

2. Start slowly. Give yourself a couple of weeks to get used to being back on the water. Shake off the cobwebs by rowing exclusively at low ratings for a while. During early spring, consider skipping on-the-water training for a day or two every week, so you can continue to focus more-stable erg training on the winter goals you're still working to reach.

3. Set new goals. Review what you did last spring and make a list of the changes you want to make now to further your success. When you know where you are going, your training will be far more effective

4. Keep a logbook. Record your workouts, mileage, any changes you make and anything else you want to note. This will give you invaluable feedback about your

progress and serve as a guide in designing more effective workouts.

5. Picture it! Visualize yourself achieving your goals so you train your mind to anticipate success. All great athletes rehearse mentally. They understand that the mind is one of their most powerful tools.

6. Go long. Though your training program will change as racing season advances, do keep long-distance training days in your weekly workouts to keep your aerobic base. If you find it difficult to design your own workouts, get the help of a coach. And if you don't have access to a club coach, I recommend either Marlene Royle (www.roylerow.com) or Tom Bohrer (www.tbfit.com); both do a great job of designing training programs.

7. Re-evaluate, reassess and re-tune. Measure your progress regularly so you can modify your goals as needed. Have you set your goals too high? Or should you be challenging yourself more? It's important to be flexible, so you respond to what's happening right now, rather than rigidly following a game plan that's either too ambitious or not challenging enough.

8. Check the weather. In early spring especially, pay attention to the weather and conditions on the water. If it's 32 degrees and blowing, there's a good chance you'll benefit more from an indoor work-

out.

9. Take care of the basics. Eat well, drink lots of water and get plenty of sleep. Your body needs fuel and rest to perform well.

10. Be positive. Celebrate your successes and HAVE FUN!!!

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