



**Faster Masters Rowing:
General Guide to Age and Experience**

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- Introduction
- Considerations for your personal program
- Age-specific concerns
- Article: Return to Rowing
- Article: Retiring to Rowing
- Article: Recovery for Masters
- Article: Adjusting Workouts
- Article: Scoring Burnout
- Article: Putting Goals into Action
- Article: Relationships- In Search of Understanding
- Article: Psychological Components of Injury

Introduction

From post-university rowers in their 20's to those in their 90's masters rowing encompasses a spectrum of ages, abilities, and events geared to each group. Just as there is no cookbook approach to an elite athlete's program, there is no cookbook approach to a masters athlete either. Each has their own goals and individual needs that have to be considered for their own rowing to be a successful experience.

Balance and flexibility are key. A masters athlete juggles family life, work, commuting, volunteer, and social commitments with training, sleep, travel, and racing. Your plan needs to be a plan that works for you based on your weekly schedule, and your available time to train and your recovery ability. Your age, fitness level, and commitments away from the boathouse will impact your schedule and energy level. Your energy comes from one source so keeping the scales on an even keel as much as possible will help you get the most out of your training and contribute to a greater sense of well-being.

Considerations for your personal program



1. How would you identify yourself: A seasoned competitor, performance-oriented but aims for only one or two events each season, a novice rower just learning skills but eventually wants to race, purely recreational more geared to fitness and good technique, or a student of the sport focused primarily on improving technique- loves drills and exercises, or a combination of the above.
2. Write down your schedule and available time for training. Specify your preferred rest day(s) and any other set training sessions you have scheduled such as a team boat practice or work with a trainer, or cross training. Be sure you include the priority days, recovery days, and flex days. If your schedule needs to be re-arranged during a given week a flex day can be an additional day off or a day for making up a priority workout that you missed.
3. What are your short-term racing and training goals for the next 6-12 months?
4. What can you do physically and mentally to help yourself reach your goals?
5. How can you improve your technique?
6. How can you improve your race plan?
7. How can you improve your diet?
8. Do you feel you get enough recovery/sleep during the week?
9. What are you willing to do to achieve your goals? Lose weight/ train harder/ train more/ invest in a better boat/ recover more/ take time from work/ take time away from home/ all of the above/ other.
10. What resources are available to you to help you with your training and technique: a rowing coach, personal trainer, sports nutritionist, massage therapist, experienced rowers at your club?

Age-specific concerns:

These observations are from my experience and there certainly are variations but these are some trends.

20's and 30's

If you are a post-collegiate athlete and you continue to train as you start your new career, graduate work, or family, you can maintain a high level of fitness close to that of



your university years and even surpass that fitness if you want to. Provided that you are living a reasonable “athletic-lifestyle” your body has a great recovery capacity and you can certainly push your limits if you so desire. Many single scullers reach their peak in their late 20’s early 30’s. In masters rowing, high-energy athletes in this age group often train 6 to 9 sessions per week including land and water workouts. If you are new to the sport 3 to 4 sessions per week will provide a good base for technique, for additional fitness you can include more land-based training.

40’s

You will often have limited time and have to weave your rowing in between your career and family demands. So the key here is making sure that you get adequate training to support the level of your goals and to put a priority on quality workouts versus quantity. Getting enough sleep and recovery is an important training factor not to be over looked in this demanding age group. Top masters in this age group are likely to train 5 to 7 sessions per week; newcomers should aim for 3 to 4 rowing sessions complimented with cross training until a good base is established.

50’s

This is one of the most competitively-minded groups in masters rowing; especially among women. This is often a time when your career is well-developed, the children are a bit older allowing more personal time for pursuing rowing goals and motivation is very high. It can also be a time when many new masters seem to come into the sport because they now have some additional time to follow personal interests or have the opportunity to pursue athletic goals they had earlier in life but put on hold.

With the 50’s come metabolic and hormonal changes in both men and women. Sleep patterns may be disrupted, unwanted weight gain can happen easily, so diet and sleep need to be watched carefully. If you are lacking sleep at night it is important to take short power naps before or after training so that your workout has quality. Recovery has to be monitored more closely and if you are feeling run down boost the protein and take additional rest. Always err on the side of caution. The top competitors in this age group train 5 to 7 sessions per week. New comers must take care not to over do it, your body needs time to adapt to the training and doing too much too soon can cause over-use injuries or set backs. Your body must adapt on the cellular level and this takes time.

60’s

One’s body seems to undergo greater metabolic changes during the 50’s so the 60’s can be fairly stable decade provided there are no major or unfortunate health issues to deal with. Retirement offers more training time, at least as one can tolerate safely, and also allows for more recovery. With each year from now on, recovery becomes more



paramount to success. You may not be hitting personal best times compared to when you were 40 but you can certainly maintain a high level of competitiveness and fitness through this decade and keep your erg score pretty steady. Technical improvements become more and more critical as the ability to increase hours of training is limited for recovery reasons. Its far better to take some coaching and gain boat speed technically than trying to pile on extra training hours. Maintaining flexibility, proper recovery, and injury prevention must be closely attended. Top masters in this age group train 5 to 6 sessions per week. Novices may want to aim for 3 sessions and gradually build up as tolerated.

70's

Seasoned rowers, in their 70's are some of the first to have been athletic most of their lives. This age group is no less competitive than any younger age group especially on the international masters level. What several athletes have reported to me is that when they turn 70 the body goes through another major change as it did in the 50's, the 60's were less so, primarily that the body's response to exercise becomes more unpredictable. Typical workouts can now require much more recovery, two to three days compared to one day in years past but it can change from week to week. The main factor here is to continue your training but be flexible to adjust for your recovery needs. If that means one day you need to simply go for a walk then do that if it means the next day you can again have a quality workout. You may want to look at varying the weekly schedule to be one day on one day off or two training days followed by a rest day, or include active rest days between harder rows. Again, it is very individual and one has to be prepared to adjust as the body dictates. There is every reason to continue to get coaching to row better, to maintain flexibility and muscle mass, and to maximize your time on the water. Its also a great way to get out in team boats and row for health, friendship, and well-being.

80's and 90's

This age class is growing especially at fall regattas like the Head of the Charles in Boston MA and I suspect it will only continue to grow in years to come. Already 70-year olds tell me that they can't wait to move into the next age group. I would emphasize all the same points for the 70-year olds with an even great emphasis on recovery and injury prevention. Always err on the side of caution. Safety concerns should be paramount in conjunction with health and well-being.

100s

I am sure this age group will expand.



Return to Rowing

It has been 10 years and you haven't touched an oar. Stepping back into the boat after a layoff may seem daunting at first but its actually easier than you think. You can thank the rowing gods for such a thing as muscle memory. Chances are, at some point in your life you will need time off from rowing. Major life changes such as moving, career changes, or parenting can cause you to fall out of step with your training routine. Although make good attempts to stay fit obstacles get in the way of a solid program. Then, 10 or 15 unwanted pounds later, you feel compelled to get back on the water and get fit again.

Rest easy; heading out you'll be in familiar territory. With each row you have taken in the past you have made neurological deposits into your bank account of muscle memory. The more you have rowed, the longer your brain's mapping of the motions will last. The nervous system pathways are well-grooved which is why you will never forget how to square your blade before it enters the water, how to drive your legs, or swing your body. In fact, you will be able to get back into shape faster because of the good biomechanics and efficiency that you developed years ago. These pathways don't only refer to your voluntary muscles as in your legs but also to involuntary muscles such as your heart. Physiological training adaptations of the past also have memory; your circulatory system will be able to respond to the new activity faster and easier than a novice.

There is also a big psychological plus to to revisiting a sport that you had a strong emotional ties to teammates, and enjoyed; you can go back into it with more confidence and expectations. So what better time than now to dust off your erg or join your local masters program.



Retiring to Rowing

Crossing the threshold into the masters F category of racing doesn't only mean that you are now 60 but maybe F stands for "free to row full-time." Whether you are semi-retired, or in fact retired, notions of getting good results in your new age group can swiftly tiptoe into your racing calendar. After all you do have a lot more time to train now. So, as you start sketching your future training program to maximize your infinite available time, consider some points to make the next stage of your rowing career a success.

Invest in coaching. You will make substantial gains in speed by rowing better. Improving your technique is not limited by age. More exercise isn't always better exercise. A correct approach improves outcomes. The amount of work that you can do is individual but clues that you are training properly are easy to identify. Are you seeing performance improvements from phase to phase? Are you excited about your next workout? Then you are likely on track. If you are injured often, getting sick frequently, or unable to stick to a routine you should re-evaluate your program to avoid over training. It gets more difficult to bounce back quickly as we age.

Recovery and training stress need to stay in balance. Training involves breakdown and recovery must be adequate for you to rebuild or the risk of setbacks grow. Space your hard workouts properly during the week. Experiment with your weekly cycles. Rather than the typical six-day per week training, you may need a pattern of three days of working out then a rest day or Mondays and Fridays off with Wednesdays and Saturdays your hardest sessions of the week. You get into shape when you recover.

Allow time to adapt to stress before you increase it. Adding stress can mean adding more distance or the same amount of rowing distance at a greater intensity. Give yourself three to four weeks of working at one load before you make a change.

Understand the purpose of your workout and make adjustments when needed. If you are not able to hold the proper intensity, you may need to do it another day or change the session to have a different purpose. Lastly, always warm up properly at the start of a practice, cool down with easy rowing, and make time for daily flexibility to maintain your technical edge.



Recovery for Masters

Just as pushing your bow across the line for the first time in the 50+ age category signifies entering a mature phase of your rowing career it may also mark new adventures in maintaining equilibrium in your training schedule. Masters athletes need to include the same intensities of work in their race preparation as their younger counterparts. However, the difference for masters is how and when workouts are planned in the weekly schedule to adjust for potentially longer recovery as the body requires more time.

Improving your performance as you age is linked to maintaining a relatively high VO2 max. This means that high intensity intervals at race pace need to be a key elements of any master's program in combination with the substantial endurance work that rowing demands. Such intervals also place a lot of stress on your physiological systems so the volume and frequency needs to be approached carefully to optimize the benefits. Recovery periods are when your body makes the positive adaptation to the work you just did, without break down or injuries can occur more easily.

Only you can gauge how much recovery you need between the intense sessions of the week. Monitor your morning resting heart rate the day after, if it is elevated above your norm, include low intensity sessions until it returns to normal rest rate. If this typically take two days you can schedule a total rest day, easy distance work, or low intensity cross training.

Weekly training patterns can vary, be creative. You may find you feel more energized taking a total rest day after three training days. If a traditional weekly pattern is better for your schedule, resting Monday and Friday might give you the edge you need to maintain quality workouts during the between days.

The best form of recovery as you age is sleep. Getting 40 winks, taking cat naps, or simply laying down restores your energy the fastest especially when backed up by healthy eating. Look over your weekly cycle and build your recovery days around your priority sessions of the week whether it be a long row on the river or 250-meter pieces focus on quality and form to get the and follow it up with a good dose of rest.



Adjusting Workouts

In a "suck it up and do it" world when to tough it out and when to bag it can be a hard question. Knowing the right answer is a fine line between going that extra step to succeed and potentially setting yourself back. If you skip or adjust a workout, that doesn't mean you have failed. Taking a long-term view can give you the flexibility to make sure your training stays productive. So how do you really know if you are wimping out or simply being wise- here are some tips to guide you before, during, or after your practice.

Before your workout even starts, life stress creeps in and you know it is going to be a rough day. You are good to go if you are well-rested and have not had a string of hard days. Try the workout as planned, you may feel much better having done it. However, take caution if you are just too tired on the day it's scheduled and postpone it. It's better to complete the workout with quality than to fail at it. If you lack sleep or dealing with long hours at work better skip it and don't look back. Get rest and pick up on your schedule as soon as you can.

You may not see any red flags heading into your workout, but then you struggle to hit your target splits. If you are within a second or two per 500m its better to push through the workout. If you start the session and realize that you won't be able to finish it at the target splits, modify it and do fewer pieces at the assigned pace or do the same repetitions but shorten the time. That is a good way to modify, deal with a sub-par day, but still get in a some solid strokes. If you are way off target, call it quits and get some rest.

After a workout if you have completed one that you normally sail through but really had to grind it out, review your plan for adjustments. If you modified your session and finished strong you might be able to stay on track but take care not to overtrain. If you are feeling whipped day in day out to get the work in, you probably need more rest days between hard sessions or to trim your workout volume a bit so you maintain some freshness and optimism.



Scoring Burnout

When you are in the groove and the boat is in stealth mode, you dial into your mission and rise to the challenge. Whether in practice or on the race course if you are "on" thoughts of failure get no airtime. However, there will be days when you feel like toast. Athletes need enough rest and at times your scale may be tipped to the side of fatigue. However, if your performance is starting to drag and the doldrums don't seem to be going away, you may be pushing the "more is better" principle too far and be risking burnout.

Asking yourself these 20 questions can determine if you need to build some down time in your plan. Answer True or False: I am tired all the time. I don't enjoy practice like I did before. When I practice I wish I were somewhere else. I dread racing. It has been a long time since I had fun rowing. I continually ask myself why I am rowing. It is hard to stay focused on my goals. I seem to get injured more often than before. My injuries never seem to heal. My attitude seems to have become worse over the past few months. I resent having to sacrifice so much time for rowing. I don't handle the discomfort from hard training as well as I did last season. Sometimes I don't care that I don't care. I am more negative than usual about myself and my training. I put myself down a lot lately. I resent my coach. I have trouble getting along with my teammates. I feel pressured by others to keep rowing. I don't seem to bounce back from set backs and losses like I used to.

Each true answer equals one point; each false equals zero points. If you scored between one and three you are not at risk for burnout; between four and seven you are entering the trouble zone so take some time off; between eight and 14 you really need a vacation from training and competition; 15 or higher you are seriously burned out and should sit down with your coach and evaluate your rowing future. Taking a breather can turn the *Thank Goodness it is Friday* mentality, counting the minutes of practice, into the *Thank Goodness it is Monday* mentality and get you revved up for the next season.



Putting Goals into Action

The logbook fanatic thrives on precise goals, charting every workout and split, and for others sitting down tracking data it is a bit like eating spinach, they do it because they know they should but would rather not be spending the time on it. In both cases, however, goals are a must to take your fitness and performance to the next level. Raising the bar to a higher level is akin to making a contract between you and your athletic self. Determine your expectations and then your training program puts into action the steps you need to take to get there.

Identify your goal setting behaviour. The first is an unwillingness to set goals either due to fear of commitment or fear of failure. Second is setting unrealistically high goals risking frustration or discouragement. The third type of behaviour is setting rational goals that have a 50 percent chance or better of attaining.

Recognize what you want out of rowing; write it down. To have better technique in a single scull, to be more fit and improve your 1k time, or to take part in an event such as a long distance rowing tour.

Develop your physical skills such as conditioning, technique, and strength; your mental skills such as discipline, strategy, concentration, good work habits, knowledge of training principles, etc. Go to a rowing camp, start working with a personal trainer, or join a coached program. Research the requirements and the performance levels of those who are now where you want to be. If you want to win a medal at your nationals masters championships what are the time standards to medal in your age group?

Get coaching. The support and feedback of a coach will help you with the process of evaluation and re-evaluation of fitness and skills; this is the keystone of a coach-athlete relationship.

Write your goals down in your logbook stating three main subjective goals and three main objective goals for the upcoming season. Subjective goals are more open by nature such as developing a better sense of swing at higher stroke rates. Objective goals are measurable such as improve anaerobic threshold by improving 20:00 erg score from 2:05 per 500 meters to 2:03 per 500 meters in two months.

Begin your goal with a verb, for example, improve, attend, or qualify. Setting short-term weekly or monthly goals will help break your goals into achievable steps. Review each goal and determine what you need to accomplish it.



Set yourself up for success at each stage to build confidence to reach your long-term goal. You cannot row a 1k erg time in 1:59 per 500 meters unless you have accomplished 2:00 per 500 meters first. Small steps win.

Relationships- In Search of Understanding

Rowing can bond you and rowing can create division. For a masters racer who competes on a serious level and is also a career-maker, balancing their schedule to give enough attention to a non-rowing spouse can sometimes be a tough task. All-day weekend regattas during racing season, early morning practices, long rows, mixed boat partners, travel, and an intense round-the-clock focus on your training can make a spouse feel ignored, jealous, or angry. An endurance sport like rowing is time demanding; it can make it hard to combine your individual interests with your needs as a couple. Trying to reach a common ground and resolve conflicts will go a long way to reduce frustration to non-rowers and keep your lives connected.

John Gottman, PhD, author of *Masters of Marriage vs. Disasters of Marriage*, found that successful couples have three things in common. First, they know a lot about each other's opinions, needs, and their perspective. Second, they maintain respect and admiration for each other. Third, they maintain a high ratio of "emotional deposits" (thoughtful acts) to "emotional withdrawals" (self-centered acts). According to Gottman, the highest predictor of a failed relationship is a low ratio of thoughtful acts. As an example, an early morning long row on a Sunday morning might be considered an emotional withdrawal to your non-rowing spouse. But its negativity can be canceled out to some degree by leaving a nice note on the table for when she wakes up, bringing home her favorite coffee, or telling him you will be home at a certain time and you will go to brunch at his favorite restaurant. Gottman says that surprisingly, it doesn't matter how big or small the emotional deposits are as long as there is a large ratio compared to emotional withdrawals. So what is the right ratio? Gottman suggests the magic number is at least five emotional deposits for every emotional withdrawal.

So how does one restore flow to a rowing-stressed relationship? One strategy is to give your partner opportunities for supportive roles such as the travel planner, race photographer, or taking part in developing your training schedule. The inclusion of your partner helps make your sport become a shared experience and your partner is able to develop an appreciation of all that is involved in you performing well. For instance, if a regatta is far away or in an interesting place, you can turn the trip into a vacation and spend some time together after the event.

Communication with each other will help you get along better. The first step is to get your partner on the same page. Express your feelings of accomplishment, goals, and the love of fitness that rowing gives you. Make your list: I weight 20 pounds less, I eat



healthier, I am happier so I perform better at my job, I enjoy being good at something. The second step is to find out what bothers your spouse about your involvement in rowing. Do you fall asleep right after dinner? Does she take care of the kids more than you do on the weekends? Maybe your wife would like to go out dancing one night of the weekend but you always have to go to bed early-no fun she says. The third step is to acknowledge the issues that knock your relationship off kilter and work together to reduce the negatives and build up positive aspects. Here are some solutions you can try.

Create an important role for the non-rower such as getting involved in the rowing club or some aspect of your competitive life. Make a point to train or exercise together; consider running, cycling, hiking, or kayaking. If your spouse is interested, try rowing a double making the rows more recreational to explore the river rather than be a training session. Show appreciation for the support your spouse gives you- "I couldn't have won that race without your power thoughts. What can I do for you when I get home?" If you have been away for a weekend of racing, plan the next weekend to go away together. During the off-season put more focus on the interests of your spouse- perhaps it is shifting to another sport, more social events, or simply more time together at home pursuing other interests. Have an erg at home so you can train easily without always being away for long periods of time. When your training hours start to ramp up again be attentive to any strains starting to appear in your relationship and aim to balance them out right away with more emotional deposits into your account. If your chores at home don't get done during heavy training times get the kid next door to mow your lawn or rake the leaves so your household stays in order. Attempt to train during times that cause the least strain on the family, mornings make work better for many than dinner time practices; it depends on your daily pattern. Reserve time to spend with your partner; make one evening each your night to go to dinner and stick to it regardless of your training schedule.

Stay socially active-individually so you both develop your talents and have experiences to share and discuss. If your relationship is fundamentally healthy you will be able to work together to support each other's interests and goals. Paying attention to feelings, honesty, openness, and genuine interest in each other's well-being will help rowing be a positive factor in your relationship. If training has to be scaled back focus on quality versus quantity. Stay flexible because in the end it is all about equilibrium. Maintaining a positive emotional balance with those closest to you will help you manage the intensity of competition with the ever-important down time to regenerate and recharge between events and seasons.



Psychological Components of Injury

A back wound from an unforeseen boat crash or a painful overuse rib stress fracture that lingers on for months are unfortunate events that can happen in rowing. The main causes of injury are physical factors such as muscle imbalances, collisions, overtraining, and physical fatigue but psychological factors can also contribute to them. Understanding the psychological reactions to injuries and mental strategies to facilitate recovery can help to support athletes so they optimize healing and a timely return to practice.

Sports psychologists Jean Williams and Mark Andersen in their article, *A Model of stress and athletic injury: Prediction and prevention*, discuss the relationship between athletic injuries and psychological factors viewed mainly as stress-related. A potentially stressful athletic situation such as a competition, important practice, or a poor performance can contribute to injury depending on the athlete and how threatening the situation is perceived to be. Circumstances felt to be threatening raise anxiety, which cause changes in focus, attention, and muscle tension accordingly increasing the chances of injury. Personality, history of stressors, and coping abilities also influence the stress process and probability of injury. Plus, have power over how much stress the injury causes and the potential for rehabilitation. Competitors who develop psychological skills such as goal setting, imagery, and relaxation may deal better with stress, reducing both their chances of being injured and the stress of injury, should it occur. Overall the evidence suggests that athletes with higher levels of life stress experience more injuries. It is important for coaches to inquire about major life changes and stress in their rowers' lives so they can monitor or adjust training programs and provide support.

Two main theories explain the stress-injury relationship. Attentional disruption is the view that stress disrupts an athlete's attention by reducing peripheral attention. A sculler under great stress may not see an approaching single in his path. If his stress level had been lower he would have a wider field of peripheral vision and would notice the oncoming boat avoiding a collision and potential injury. It is also suggested that an increased state of anxiety causes distraction and irrelevant thoughts. For example, your first boat's stroke who goes for a run, after being told she will be rowing in the second boat for the next race, might not pay attention to the road and step off a curb, twisting her ankle. Another theory relates to increased muscle tension. High stress is accompanied by a rise in muscle tension that interferes with coordination and increases the risk of injury. To illustrate, at the start of a race a nervous novice sculler in the bow-seat of a quad might experience more muscle tension than desirable, loose control of an oarhandle, catch a crab, and suffer an injury if struck by the oarhandle. Coaches



need to be perceptive and watch their team closely. If a team member shows signs of increased muscle tension or unusual attention deficits when performing, it may be wise to lighten training and help initiate stress-management strategies.

Injury can happen because an athlete wants to live up to a slogan such as “No pain, No gain” or “Go hard or go home” and pushes the body beyond acceptable limits. In an effort to be rewarded by the coach, an athlete rows when hurt or takes unnecessary risks. Some athletes believe they must train through pain and “more is always better” but this can result in chronic strains or cases of tendonitis. Hard training involves discomfort, but one needs to distinguish between normal discomfort that is part of overloading or increasing training volume versus the pain that represents the onset of an injury. Some people learn to feel worthless if they are hurt and worry about not being part of the team so they row injured. Athletes should be encouraged to train hard without risking injury and discuss any concerns with their coach.

The emotional responses to injury can include stages of denial, anger, bargaining, depression, acceptance then reorganization. There are three general categories of responses. The first is referred to as injury-relevant information processing. Shortly, the injured one focuses on such information as pain, the extent of the injury, questions about how it happened, and the negative consequences. The second is emotional upheaval and reactive behaviour. Once the individual realizes he is injured, he may be agitated, feel depleted, experience isolation, disbelief, denial, or self-pity. The third is a positive outlook and optimistic coping. One accepts the injury, deals with it, shows a good attitude, and wants to see progress in recovery. Other psychological reactions adding to the complexity of recovery includes identity loss that can seriously affect self-concept, fear and anxiety with worry whether they will recover or be replaced because they are not at practice, lack of confidence because of the inability to participate or due to inferior performances while recovering because of missed practice time.

Setbacks are common during recovery. Sharing feelings with others is an important source of social support as is talking to seasoned athletes who experienced a similar injury and then successfully returned to full activity. In rehabilitation, attitude, life outlook, stress control, social support, positive self-talk, healing imagery, goal setting, and beliefs are important. Fast-healing athletes tend to use more goal setting, positive self-talk and healing imagery than slow-healing athletes suggesting the importance of psychological techniques in treatment. Goal setting can include setting a date to return to competition, planning the number of treatments each week, and the structure of each session. Self-talk strategies help an athlete stay positive and stick to the treatment program with confidence that he will return to the team. If you cannot row, visualization can be used to focus on the details of your stroke and your future race plan, or to improve healing to the injured area. Spend time in the coaches’ launch observing or



assist at practices. Most importantly stay involved with your team and in an active environment that inspires you to get back into action as soon as possible.