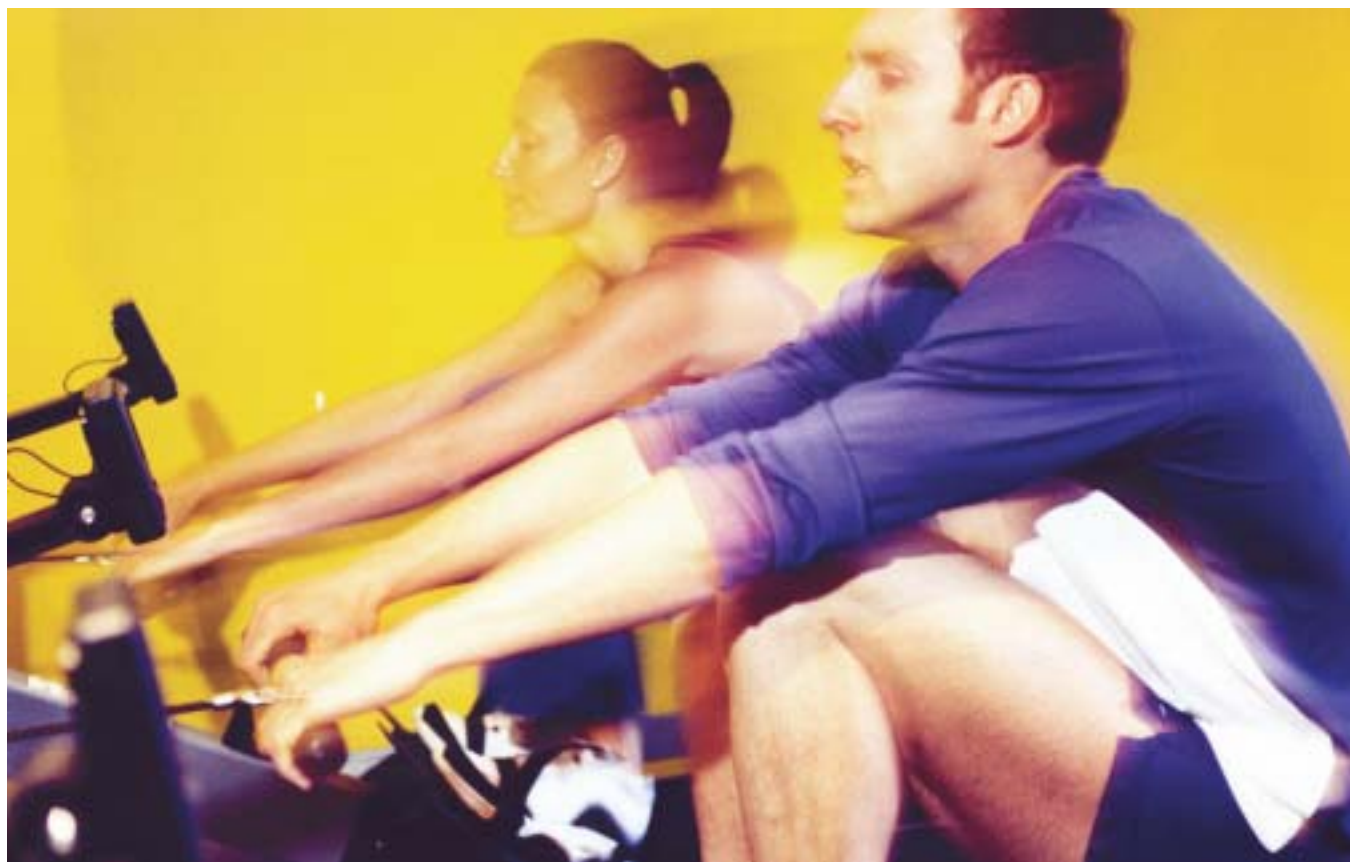


Rowers



Having looked at home-use bikes, treadmills and elliptical cross-trainers, it's time to consider rowers.

Now you might think that a humble rowing machine, bereft of electronic gizmos, won't really cut the mustard when it comes to serious aerobic training, but you'd be wrong!

By Andrew Hamilton BSc Hons MRSC

In my days as a fitness instructor we had a cruel pastime that involved reducing the beefiest and most arrogant hulks in the gym to a pathetic, quivering nauseous mass of jelly in just a few minutes. And how did we do it? Simple – we invited them to row 2,000 metres flat out on a rower! Blissfully ignorant of the superb aerobic conditioning and total muscular involvement of the rowing action, these guys had no respect for the rowing ergo and suffered the consequences. But home rowing has another trump card up its sleeve. For the same price as a budget treadmill or mid-range elliptical, you can buy an absolutely top of the range, bombproof rower – the sort that Olympic heroes train on! When it comes to rowing, the best machines that money can buy really are affordable...

THE BENEFITS OF ROWING

Like running, cycling, stepping and elliptical cross-trainers, rowing works the large muscles of the lower body in a smooth rhythmic fashion – ideal for aerobic training. However, unlike these activities, rowing also utilises muscles of the back and arms, which means that, for any given effort level, the heart has to work harder in order to pump blood simultaneously to upper and lower body muscles. The effect of this is to increase the loading on the circulatory system, further increasing the aerobic training effect. Another major difference is that serious rowing training also develops anaerobic power and strength, because, at higher workloads each stroke is performed against a considerable resistance. This in turn leads to increased muscle tone throughout the body, and no

doubt accounts for rowing's reputation as the 'total conditioning exercise'! However, when performed at a more moderate intensity, rowing is still suitable for most people. There's no jarring sensation through the joints and, additionally, the sliding movement up and down the rail encourages flexibility in the knee and hip area. However, although rowing in itself is not likely to cause lower back problems, the biomechanical requirements of the rowing action could aggravate an existing condition. If you fall into this category, try some rowing down at your local gym first in order to ensure that you and rowing are compatible.

WHAT SORT OF ROWERS CAN I BUY?

Although some rowing machines use electronically generated resistance, the most popular methods involve using air, water or hydraulic pistons. The reason is all to do with the 'feel' of the movement. When you row a real boat through water, you encounter hydrostatic resistance – that is, the harder and faster you try and pull the oar through the water, the more resistance you encounter, slowing down that movement. Instead of

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accelerating the oar as you move through the stroke, the oar speed tends to remain pretty constant. It's very difficult to duplicate this kind of feel using electronic resistance, which is why most rowing machines use alternative methods. One way is to use hydraulic pistons, but while this is a cheap method, the feel is still not brilliant and to make matters worse, the pistons are prone to failure, making these types of rowers inherently unreliable! A better way however is to use air, or even water itself to generate the resistance. Air rowers use fins, geared to spin very rapidly during the oar stroke, which generates large amounts of resistance. Importantly, this resistance has similar characteristics to that of a real oar through water, leading to a realistic feel. Water-based rowers use paddles that agitate water in a sealed tank as the oar is pulled and it's hardly surprising that these rowers provide an exceptionally realistic rowing feel. It's also worth pointing out that their relatively simple designs means that both air and water resistance rowers are extremely reliable and virtually maintenance-free. And thanks to sophisticated on-board sensors and computers, they can also offer very accurate feedback about workload intensities. There are some rowers that employ electronic resistance, but while these types of rowers are also reliable and can offer excellent feedback, their feel is generally less realistic than water or air rowers, explaining why electronic rowers have never really caught on with true rowing enthusiasts.

BUYING A ROWING MACHINE – WHAT TO LOOK FOR

Compared to some bits of CV kit, which have complex on-board computer consoles allowing you to programme your workouts, most rowers are relatively straightforward. You simply get on and row, with any display merely feeding you information about your workout so far. However, if you want a rower that you'll actually enjoy using, that will deliver all the potential fitness benefits that rowing has to offer, and that lasts, there's still plenty you need to think about...

■ **Rowing Action** – This aspect is really important, yet so hard to summarise in words. A good rower should provide a really smooth and even level of resistance throughout the entire range of movement, regardless of how the resistance is generated. The range of movement (stroke length) should also be long enough to accommodate your height and arm length, enabling you to commence the

stroke (known as the catch) at full stretch without the oar hitting the end stop. There should be no 'give' at the beginning of the stroke, which tends to make for a sloppy feel and reduces the efficiency of the stroke drive; ideally the oar should be connected to the drive system with a chain or strap. Cables give a sloppier feel and ropes should be avoided like the plague!

- **Footboards** – A well-designed footboard enables you to adjust the position of your feet (whatever foot size you are) by ensuring that the foot bindings are positioned correctly. Some also allow the foot to pivot during the rowing action, which makes for a much more comfortable arrangement!
- **Seat** – You're not going to enjoy rowing spending hours sitting on a seat with the ergonomics of a park bench, so check that the seat is supportive without being rock hard, or too soggy, and that it has a non-slip surface – row for a few minutes and see how it feels when in use. Check too that the seat glides easily up and down the seat rail without any knottiness, vibration or wobble. Slide the seat to the back of the seat rail, lift up the rear of the rower 2 or 3 inches off the ground and, if the bearings are good, the seat should start sliding smoothly down the rail.
- **Oar** – The oar should be comfortable to hold and offer good grip. Don't judge just by picking it up and holding it; use it to do some rowing and remember that sweaty hands make gripping much more difficult, especially once you begin to tire.
- **Console** – The console should be easy to operate; the operating logic should be simple, the buttons within easy reach while seated on the rower and with a positive feel. Some consoles have adjustable positioning, allowing you to move them for maximum visibility while rowing – a definite bonus!
- **Noise** – Electronic rowers are the quietest and are almost silent in operation. Water resistance rowers are also pretty quiet, the only real sound being a gentle 'swish' as the paddles agitate the water – very much like the real thing! Air rowers tend to be the noisiest of the bunch, but advancements in cage design (the housing in which the rotating fins sit) means that noise levels are a lot lower than on earlier models and certainly not excessively intrusive.

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- **Footprint** – In terms of square feet, rowers don't have huge footprints; however, their long and thin profile mean that they can be awkward to site. If you're short of space, look for a rower that can be stored upright or folded.
- **Build Quality and Warranty** – The best news about rowers is that even the crème de la crème of models out there can be bought for less than the price of a budget treadmill! However, check the quality of the main frame, the transmission (chain, strap etc.) and the overall finish. Look for a generous warranty too – a well-bolted together rower with a good drive train has relatively little to go wrong on it!

HOT SELLERS

Although it's hard to buy a really bad rower these days, different models will have different qualities, and you'll need to find out which best fits your needs and preferences. If you're not sure where to start, here are three top rowing machines, which are not only hot sellers, but which will also give you an idea of what the best rowers out there have to offer...