

Introduction to Rowing

Like running, rowing was a means of survival long before it was a sport. The Greeks rowed, the Phoenicians rowed, and the Vikings rowed, as a means of transportation and as the primary method of maneuvering during war on the seas. Viking ships from one thousand years ago have been unearthed (they were used in burials) and reconstructed. The typical Viking ship had 30 oarsmen. A single square sail was used, but only when a tailwind prevailed. So, the legacy of piracy and plundering of the Vikings was made possible, in part, by the speed of attack they could achieve in their rowing ships.

Rowing as a sport was initiated on the River Thames. Professional watermen competed in the Doggett Coat and Badge Race. "Gentlemen" began competing in 1829 with the Oxford-Cambridge race. The Henley Regatta was started in 1839. Competitive rowing crossed the Atlantic and the Yale-Harvard race was introduced in 1852. Rowing was the first organized collegiate sport in the United States, complete with its own governing body. International championships were first arranged in 1893, and remain under the direction of the Federation International des Societes d' Aviron (FISA).

International rowing (and collegiate rowing) competitions are standardized at 2000 meters. United States and international Masters rowing championships are contested over a distance of 1000 meters. At the elite level, 2000 meter races require between 5'20" and 7.5 minutes depending on boat type. Masters age-group championship races are contested over 1000 meters and last between 2'50" and 5 minutes depending on boat type and age of the contestants (age 27 to 80+). Other forms of competitive rowing include "head racing" in time trial fashion over a course of about 5 kilometers, as well as ocean rowing. Ocean rowing competitions range from "around the island" races that are popular in Scandinavia to the "Race across the Atlantic," a 5000 kilometer race for two person teams initiated in 1997. Rowing among islands and scurries has even formed the basis for row-orienteering competitions.

Rowing is divided into distinct disciplines: "sweep" rowing, where each oarsman handles one oar, and "sculling", where he uses two smaller oars. Sweep-oared races are contested in 2, 4, and 8 person boats. Sculling races are contested in single, double and four man shells. Steering in sweep oared boats is accomplished with the use of a movable rudder handled by either a coxswain (coxed events), or the rower in bow or stroke seat using a foot-controlled rudder. One and two man sculling shells are steered by changing pressure on the right or left oar. The four person sculling shell is typically controlled with a foot rudder operated by the person rowing in bow (with a contribution from oar pressure changes by the crew only when the bowman screws up!). International rowing is contested in two weight categories for men and women, lightweight and open. Lightweight oarsmen are restricted to a body weight of 72.5 kg (men) and 59kg (women). The average weight of the open class (heavyweight) in international competition is about 92 kg (200 lbs) and 79 kg (173 lbs) respectively.