

Rowing Tips for the Texas 200

By: Rob Fisher

Now that the 2016 Texas 200 is over, my son and I have recovered, I wanted to capture some thoughts and suggestions for future rowers. Our significant effort for training, planning, and rowing allowed us to be 1 of 18 boats to arrive at all camps in 2016, rowing a total of 224.6 miles over 6 days and 10+ hours each day of continuous rowing. I hope these thoughts will help future masochists.

1. Boat Selection

What boat to row, selection is one of many trade-offs. You will have to deal with very diverse weather, wind and water conditions. First you need to be able to carry considerable cargo loads for all your gear and provisions. Just consider the weight of the water we carried this year was 216 pounds. We experienced high winds in excess of 20 mph from different directions, high waves and some current. We built the Welsford Mollyhawk with two rowing stations. Weighed in at ~170 pounds for boat and rowing stations. LOA is just over 18 feet, 4 foot beam.

Freeboard is needed for the high waves and cargo capacity, but it creates a lot of windage. There were times when we clocked in at 3.5-4 mph without rowing going dead down wind. The trouble was that it wasn't in the direction we wanted to go. Despite our amount of freeboard we still took waves over the side, over the stern and one over the bow.

Get an estimation of the weight you think you will carry. The single biggest load was our water. We carried 26 gallons at the start. We carried it in 1 gallon jugs which was great. It allowed us to move it around the boat to balance it depending on the wind and wave conditions. We were consuming 4 gallons each day for 2 people so we kept the empties in case we needed extra ballast later in the week. The first days we had the highest waves and the extra ballast from the water made our boat really stable.

Sliding seat or fixed seat is a personal choice. We have always rowed sliding seat. We prefer it as it allows you to use your leg muscles when rowing. Through our training if we rowed with the sliding seat compared to no sliding increased our speed by ~50%. Seat comfort (or lack of it) is extremely important and we underestimated this one. We used carbon fiber molded seats with thin padding. They felt fine for the first 20 or so miles for a couple days, but nothing

feels good after sitting 11 hours every day for 6 days. By the end of the trip our back sides were suffering.

One thing we didn't have was a rudder. Traditionally in a row boat you don't really need one. Just take an extra pull on one side or the other to change course. We found with the wind and waves it took considerable effort to keep the boat on course. On day 2 we had a side wind of 20+ mph and there were times we rowed for miles with the starboard oar only to go where we wanted.

2. Training

I can't emphasize this enough. What does it take to go from rowing in a racing shell for a couple hours a week, to rowing 10+ hours a day, for 6 consecutive days in a boat fully loaded with gear? One can potentially row and push yourself for a day or two, but doing it 6 days in a row requires some base level of conditioning unless you want to suffer a lot.

Our training started in January, 5 months before the event. We were either rowing on the water or on a rowing machine 6 days a week. During the week we rowed one hour each day, then on the weekends we extended the distance using a modified marathon training plan. During the long training days, we were able to test the boat, food, hydration, different weather and build physical conditioning. In January we rowed 7 miles one Sunday and it took us 3 days to recover. At that point we wondered how we could row 40+ miles each day for a week. The key for us was having a written plan and sticking to it, never give up. Below is our weekend training plan that we followed. Basic rule, build up miles for a couple weeks, then drop back to rest and build some more. At the end do a gradual taper to rest before the event.

week	1	1	2	2	3	3	4	4	5	5	6	6	7	7
	sat	sun	sat	sun	sat	sun	sat	sun	sat	sun	sat	sun	sat	sun
Miles	6.2	7.1	10.3	6.8	4.0	5.0	3.1	12.0	12.4	9.2	9.0	17.0	15.3	12.2
week	8	8	9	9	10	10	11	11	12	12	13	13	14	14
	sat	sun	sat	sun	sat	sun	sat	sun	sat	sun	sat	sun	sat	sun
Miles	4.4	6.2	12.2	10.0	18.1	14.5	20.1	15.9	15.0	15.5	17.0	23.0	24.9	21.8
week	15	15	16	16	17	17	18	18	19	19	20	20	21	
	sat	sun	sat	sun	sat	sun	sat	sun	sat	sun	sat	sun	sat	
Miles	12.6	9.3	28.2	27.0	31.3	30.0	35.0	30.0	15.0	15.0	rest week	rest week	event	

We developed a rowing strategy so that we could stay hydrated and fueled. We would double row for 25 minutes, then one person would take a 5 minute break to eat and drink while the other person single rowed. Then switch and start over again. We did this non stop for 10+ hrs each day. We also took one long break just over half way through the day. This allowed for more stretching and rest.

3. Sun Protection

One constant for South Texas is the heat and sun. I can't emphasize enough how un-relenting it is. There are two strategies for sun protection. Use tons and tons of sunscreen and hope you don't miss something, or cover everything up. We chose to cover up since we would be sweating a lot. Lightweight clothing takes some of the heat load off your body. We didn't want to get sunscreen all over our hands and oars.

4. Hand and Physical Health

If you have rowed at all, you know that blisters are inevitable. The single most important thing for a rower is keeping your hands healthy. We used a variation of techniques during the trip. During all our training we found the single biggest factor in hand health was keeping our hands as dry as possible. Wet hands turn soft, soft hands get hot spots, hot spots become blisters. Our routine, was to start out in the morning with bare hands for the first 3-4 hours of rowing until the sun started getting strong. Then we would tape up our hands and put on gloves. The gloves worked well for sun protection and to some extent they soak up excess sweat. When we took a break every 25 minutes, the gloves would come off. This allowed for the hands to breath and dry a little. The tape was changed out a couple times a day. The tape helps protect from blisters and gives your fingers some extra support. Following that strategy, we had very few blisters. The ones we did get weren't debilitating and could be managed. We also took hand sanitizer for cleaning our hands and oar handles. If you have ruptured blisters, you don't want an infection.

5. Hydration and Nutrition

Rowing non stop all day long takes a lot of food and water. We consumed 2 gallons of water each day per person for food and drinking. We figured we were burning something like 400-500 calories each hour of rowing. We started the day with a hot serving of oatmeal. We joked that it should be an Olympic event to eat one serving, but we never went hungry.

One serving oatmeal:

1 cup oats

1 T chia seeds

½ cup dried fruit

¼ cup sunflower seeds

¼ cup pumpkin seeds

¼ tsp cinnamon
1 T brown sugar
2 cup water for thick, more is better

It was nice to have a hot meal for breakfast. For the remainder of the day we had snack food (no lunch). We tried a lot of different things for snacks. Keep in mind it's hot in Texas. Anything with chocolate becomes a mess. This includes chewy granola bars which melt in the heat. Some different ideas we tried, various granola bars, peanut butter filled pretzel bites, various different trail mix, various nut mix, jerky, dried fruit, peanut butter crackers and cheese crackers. We actually had to force ourselves to eat. Since you are exercising a lot you don't really get hungry and if you are feeling hungry or tired, it's too late. Eat small portions and eat often, even if you don't feel like it. Before the trip we portioned out snacks into small Ziploc snack bags and then divided out our snacks into gallon Ziploc bags for each day. Doing this helped when we were tired, all we had to do is pull out the food bag in the morning and we were ready to go. No thinking required. We ate on average 350-400 calories each hour. The hardest part was having enough variety. After 5 months of training, we were sick of pretty much every possible snack. For example, rowing 40+ miles over 10+ hours. Eating every 30 minutes comes out to 20+ snacks for the day. After a week, you need a staggering 120 snacks.

6. Navigation

Rowing offers an additional challenge for navigation since the rower faces the wrong direction the whole time. There are very few landmarks on the TX200 so a GPS unit is very helpful. Getting off course or zigzagging around adds a lot of miles on a 40 mile day. We used a handheld GPS and had our paper charts as backup. I made a GPS mount that attached to the rigger between the rowers feet so that you could look at it while rowing. We made a course with all the way points for each day which was a direct course because we didn't know any better. We didn't take into account that the wind shifts during the day by as much as 90 degrees and changes direction as you progress north and east along the route. If we had to do it again we would have preplanned alternate routes in case the wind changed. This was something we did not expect since we hadn't done this before.