



ROWING 101

OKC RIVERSPORT • OKLAHOMA RIVER • DOWNTOWN OKC

Rowing is a sport that uses all of the body's major muscle groups: arms, legs, back, abs and buttocks. The power comes from the legs, while it takes core and upper body strength to transfer that power into the stroke. Rowing also requires balance, flexibility and coordination – plus mental focus to keep a crew in sync. It's a great aerobic workout often compared to cross-country skiing, and because it's low impact, can be an alternative to running for those with knee injuries.

Olympic-Style Rowing Rowers sit facing the rear of the boat and wield an oar that pivots in an oarlock. Boats are called shells. Rowers either scull (row with two oars) or sweep row (one oar). The rowing team is called a “crew.”

Men and women of all ages row both competitively and for pleasure. Rowers who are sculling (rowing with two oars) compete in single, double and quad events. In sweep rowing (one oar) there are racing events for pairs, quads or eights. The “eight” is the most impressive of the boats and is approximately 60 feet long. It accommodates eight rowers perched on sliding seats.

The Crew Athletes are identified by their position in the boat. The athlete sitting in the bow, the part of the boat that crosses the finish line first, is the bow seat or No. 1 seat. The person in front of the bow is No. 2, then No. 3 and so on. The rower closest to the stern that crosses the finish line last is known as the stroke.

Coxswain Some boats are equipped to accommodate a coxswain (pronounced cox'n) who doesn't row but uses a rudder to steer. The “cox” also coaches the rowers throughout the race. The coxswain is tucked into a seat at the stern of the boat and uses a “cox box” to amplify his/her voice throughout the boat.

Race Types Olympic style races are held on a 2,000 meter course; longer races are called “head” races and cover approximately 5,000 meters. The shortest races are either 500 or 1,000 meters and are called sprints.

Rowing Divisions Rowers are categorized by age, sex and weight. Age categories for racing including junior (under 18); collegiate; adult (18-24); and masters (over age 24). Masters races are usually subdivided into age categories. There are two weight categories: lightweight and open weight.

Strokes Per Minute Rowers speak in terms of strokes per minute (SPM). The stroke rate at the start is high, approximately 38 to 45, even into the 50s for an eight – and then “settles” to a race cadence typically in the 30s. Crews may call for a “Power 10” during the race – a demand for the crew's most intense 10 strokes.

The Athletes Rowing is a total body workout. Although upper body strength is important, the strength of the rowing stroke comes from the legs. Rowing is one of the few athletic activities that involves all of the body's major muscle groups. It is a great aerobic workout, in the same vein as cross-country skiing, and is low-impact on the joints.

The Equipment Rowing boats are called shells, and are made of lightweight carbon fiber. The smallest boat on the water is the single which is only 27 to 30 feet long, a foot wide and approximately 30 pounds. Eights are the largest boats at 60 feet and a little over 200 pounds. Oars are each about 9.5 ft long. Sweep oars are longer than sculling oars, typically with carbon fiber handles and rubber grips.

TIPS FOR WATCHING

Rowers typically race one of two types of races, a head race or a sprint.

Sprint Races Sprint races are held in the spring and are 2,000 meters, or approximately 1.25 miles. The racecourse is divided into six lanes and each 500-meter section is marked with buoys. On the Oklahoma River, sprint races start east of I35 and proceed west to the Chesapeake Finish Line Tower.

The race begins with all boats aligned at the start in the lanes they've been assigned. Each crew is allowed one false start; two false starts result in disqualification. If within the first 100 meters there is legitimate equipment breakage (e.g., an oar snaps in two), the race will be stopped and restarted with repaired equipment.

Head Races Head races are held in the fall and are typically 5,000 meters or approximately 3 miles. The race begins with boats released at 10 to 15 second intervals. Rowers race against the clock with the winning time being announced after all boats in the division have crossed the finish line. On the Oklahoma River, head races start at the Western dam and proceed east with the finish line east of I35.

Sweep vs. Sculling Whether it's a head race or a sprint, rowing events are divided into two disciplines – sweep rowing and sculling – and two categories within those: lightweight and open. Races are further divided by age bracket, usually defined as juniors and masters, with handicapping for the various age groups within the masters.

Watch for... You may see dozens of races during a regatta, each showcasing the athletic skill of rowers within a specific category. The crew that's making it look easy is most likely the one doing the best job. While you're watching, look for –

- Continuous, fluid motion of the rowers. The rowing motion shouldn't have a discernible end or beginning.

- Synchronization. Rowers strive for perfect synchronization in the boat.

- Clean catches of the oar blade . If you see a lot of splash, the oar blades aren't entering the water correctly. The catch should happen at the end of the recovery, when the hands are as far ahead of the rower as possible. Rowers who uncoil before they drop the oar blades are sacrificing speed and not getting a complete drive.

- Even oar blade feathering. When the blades are brought out of the water, they should all move horizontally close to the water and at the same height. It's not easy, especially if the water is rough.

- The most consistent speed. Shells don't move like a car – they're slowest at the catch, quickest at the release. The good crews time the catch at just the right moment to maintain the speed of the shell.

Identifying a crew Crews are identified by their oar blade design. OCU blades are blue with a white star. OU blades are crimson and cream, and the OKC RIVERSPORT design is blue and orange.

Into the water! Coxswains from first-place boats worldwide are thrown into the water by their crews. Coxswains don't now and probably never did yell "stroke! stroke!" Similar to a jockey, their job is to implement the coach's strategy during the race, in addition to steering and letting the rowers know where they stand in the race and what they need to do to win.

We hope you've enjoyed learning about this fascinating sport – now join us on the Oklahoma River!

You can learn more about rowing lessons and coached rowing programs

at riversportokc.org or by calling (405) 552-4040.