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# Indoor rowing experience leads to solid showing at 2016 Hammer Ergatta: Stretching Out



Plain Dealer "Stretching Out" columnist Zachary Lewis (in blue) participated in the 2016 Hammer Ergatta Sunday, Feb. 21 at Cleveland State University. (Jim Ridge/Share the River) (*Jim Ridge/Share the River*)

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CLEVELAND, Ohio – Rowing machine ownership just got a little sweeter. In addition to enormous health and fitness benefits, I learned last week that owning an ergometer also provides the ability to survive rowing competitions.

In the six years before last weekend, when I took part in my second indoor rowing race, I've grown markedly slower on my feet, on my bike, and in the pool. On a rower, however, I've stayed the same. *Exactly* the same. And for that I can only credit my **recent acquisition of a Concept 2** Model D ergometer.

How's this for defying the effects of aging? In 2010, my time at the Hammer Ergatta, a 2,000-meter race on rowing machines, was 7:16.3. My time last Sunday? 7:16.7. In six years, I've lost just four hundredths of a second. And I've only had my erg since Christmas.

I had hoped for better, of course. Going into the race, held at Cleveland State University in benefit of that school's rowing team, I'd aspired to break seven minutes, as many actually did. Still, the goal I achieved, of staying in the game, is not one I can discount.

The race is dubbed "Hammer" with good reason. Comparable to the mile event in track and field, the 2,000-meter row is just short enough to permit intense effort but just long enough to require pacing. Afterwards, I definitely felt as if I'd been struck by Thor.

The scene was daunting enough. I knew what to expect, after my debut in 2010, but still I found myself Sunday marveling at my competition: men and women built either like tanks or long and lean like me, but with broader shoulders and bulging quads. Indeed, many went on to give stunning performances, smashing my elusive goal by 30 seconds or more.

I wouldn't have fared half as well as I did without my coxswain, Jim Ridge. My longtime rowing and fitness buddy ([sharetheriver.com](http://sharetheriver.com)), he sat behind me during the "Hammer" and kept me from sinking my little boat.

My temptation over the first 500 meters, when the rowing was easy, was to give everything, but he kept me in check, reminding me how far I had still to go. Once I'd found a manageable pace, he then helped me keep it, all the while reminding me to drive with my legs, sit up straight, and breathe evenly.

In this manner, time flew. Two competitors fell out of my reach immediately while, almost without feeling any fatigue, I proceeded to cross the 800-, 1,000-, and 1,200-meter marks, content in third place. My only task, I realized, was to hang on.

Holding on, though, soon grew exponentially more difficult. The 750 meters that felt like nothing in the beginning felt on the second half like the Sahara desert, an interminable, exhausting expanse I was far from guaranteed to cross.

That I finished, and hung onto third place in my (albeit tiny) age group, is a testament to the power of regular rowing. No way at 39 would I still equal my 33-year-old self if I weren't now spending hours in my basement, pulling the oars of an imaginary ship.

The future's looking bright, too. Some of the best scores at Sunday's race were by men in the age group above me. That gives me hope. If I follow in their wake, I'll be under seven minutes in no time.

*(Video courtesy of Jim Ridge/Share the River)*

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