

From Australian Ultra-FIT Magazine

Aletha Mays tested this revolutionary ergometer for three months—she's not giving it back!

Have you ever wanted to own a single piece of exercise equipment that would not only give you a great cardiovascular, but also a demanding strength training workout? Would you then want this machine to need very little in the way of maintenance, and also fit into your spare bedroom or living room, without being too obtrusive? Plus, would you like it to be able to monitor your performance and give you immediate and useful feedback? Oh, and have you ever wanted to row like the Oarsome Foursome?

You might not have answered yes to the final question, but if you nodded your head in agreement to the others, read on, because I reckon I've found the perfect fitness machine for the home. The Rowperfect—a rowing machine designed by a rower for rowers.

Having enjoyed using rowing machines in the gym environment for many years, I was pretty excited when asked to do a home equipment review on the Rowperfect.

Developed by Dutch rowing coach Casper Rekers in the early 1990s, this is a unique piece of fitness equipment which has, up until fairly recently, been used almost exclusively by the world's rowing fraternity as a training weapon for those aiming for Olympic Gold—like Great Britain's Eight, or members of Australia's own Oarsome Foursome, who use this machine for their land-based training. Rekers' ideal was to build the perfect rowing simulator of on-water rowers to train on land during the winter months. And, from what I've seen, it looks like he succeeded.

Unique Construction

With its bare stainless steel fascia and no fuss, wooden handlebar, seat and foot pads, the Rowperfect has a basic, industrial non-nonsense, utilitarian appearance. And, although it doesn't look too dissimilar to other ergos (rowing machines) on the market, it's wholly unique in that it has a dual action movement, i.e. the flywheel housing, as well as the seat, move independently along its length. The result of this unique, ground breaking design is a surprisingly sophisticated rowing machine which manufacturers claim puts comparatively less strain on your knee and hip joints and lower back, when put up against single action (fixed resistance housing) rowing machines. This has since been verified in tests conducted by Dr Richard Smith of the School of Biomechanics at the University of Sydney.

What is it like to use?

The fact that the Rowperfect was originally designed to simulate as closely as possible the action of a light racing shell on water, means that it's inherently a little unstable, and relies on the user having some knowledge of stroke mechanics to get the best out of it. However, once you begin to concentrate on your stroke technique and get used to the flywheel housing instead of your body moving backwards and forwards along the main rail, the sensation actually becomes far more appealing than sitting and rowing backwards and forwards as you would on other machines.

This dual movement is also the secret to the Rowperfect's comparative gentleness on your joints. How so? Well, because the fan housing weighs just 17.5kg (the approximate weight of a single scull), at the instant you take up the catch of the stroke, it's the fan housing that moves away from you, and not the other way around. So, in that split second it takes to initiate movement (the moment where you have most compression on your knees), you're only asking your body to move against 17.5kg, not the full weight of your body, which might be up to five times the mass of the fan housing. Also, at the finish of the stroke, where your hip flexors and lower back are put under pressure because of the reversal of momentum, again, it is merely 17.5kg of weight which is asked to be moved. This ultimately puts less strain on your knees, hips and lower back than single action ergos.

Feedback & Resistance

To complement its performance, and to help you get into your stroke, Rowperfect have developed a PC interface which, when attached to your home computer, gives you all the normal feedback (speed, stroke rate, time, distance, etc) plus it monitors your actual stroke technique by displaying an easy-to-understand power curve. And if you're a serious rower (indoor or outdoor) Rowperfect have pre-programmed into the software the power curves of some of the best rowers in the world, so you can compare your technique to, say Steve Redgrave. The only negative side to receiving this comprehensive feedback is that the PC must be positioned nearby so that you can link into the software.

Resistance is provided by a covered air fan, and its adjustment is basic. By adding or removing concentric plastic discs to or from the open side of the fan/flywheel cage, available air is controlled from entering the cage, so a variable resistance is achieved. This operation is only possible before or after a workout, not during, which isn't a major problem, really. Other than an occasional wipe down with some light oil every couple of months, the Rowperfect requires little maintenance.

Not so perfect

There are a couple of negative aspects to the Rowperfect, all of which are currently being addressed by the manufacturers. Firstly, the seat is somewhat small and hard, which can cause discomfort after thirty minutes or more of continuous rowing. Rowperfect has assured us that their ergos will soon be built with wider seats and more padding to reduce this discomfort. In the meantime, importers recommend you buy some rubber and glue it on to the seat, or simply fold a towel to use as a cushion. Secondly, the imminent development of an on-board computer, displaying similar motivational information to those found on all of its rivals, will eliminate the need of having a dedicated PC nearby.

The Verdict

After three months using this machine, the verdict is that I loved it so much that I'm not giving it back! The Rowperfect has inspired both myself and my partner to get fitter, and we use it almost every day. When my partner first started using the Rowperfect he was on it for maybe ten minutes a day. Now his workouts have extended to rowing sessions fifty minutes—and he loves it! In my mind, there's no doubt that it has improved our strength, endurance, coordination, muscle tone and has reduced our body fat levels. The Rowperfect is a machine for the serious rower looking to improve technique, as well as the individual who is looking for a machine that can provide a total body workout.

A growing trend

Because ergos work every major muscle group in the body, they are very effective fat burners. They're also fun to use, create little stress on the joints, and so have excellent rehabilitative exercise qualities. All these factors have made the humble ergo, originally designed as an aid to 'real' rowing, a very popular form of exercise—so popular, in fact, that there are now numerous indoor rowing championships held around the world. In America and Europe, indoor rowing competitions are common. However, in Australia these indoor regattas are still a relatively new phenomenon. You may remember earlier this year Ultra-FIT sponsored the inaugural Zurich Australian Indoor Rowing Championships 2001, with Ultra-FIT readers making up over half the competitors! And more recently Rowperfect themselves sponsored an indoor regatta event in Sydney, which attracted over 200 competitors. Be on the lookout for more indoor regattas in the future. They're a growing trend.