

the **CrossFit** JOURNAL ARTICLES

Race to Your Potential

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Back in February of 2007, Concept2 co-founder Peter Dreissigacker wrote an article in the *CrossFit Journal* (issue 54) about how to prepare for an indoor rower test. That article concentrated mainly on the type of workouts to include in a training schedule in the final few weeks leading up to a race. It also touched on the basics of how to construct a race plan.

Over the years I have witnessed many people who have failed to race to their potential because they didn't pace the race correctly. This is either because they didn't know how to, or because they got carried away by the excitement of race conditions. Having the right race plan—and sticking to it—makes a big difference both for your performance and for your enjoyment of the experience of indoor racing. In this article I will look in more detail at constructing a race plan and how to avoid making costly mistakes.

I will use the 1000-meter distance in the examples below (in part because at the [CrossFit Games](#) this July there will be an opportunity to win an indoor rower by taking part in a 1000-meter race), but the same basic principles could be applied to any race distance.



Your pace

The first question you need to answer is what time are you realistically capable of for the given distance? If you have never raced over 1000 meters before then you will need to use the results of your training sessions and performances over other distances to approximate a time. If you have ever raced over 2000 meters, then a reasonable starting guideline is that your pace (that is, your pace per 500 meters as shown on the monitor) over 1000 meters should be around five seconds faster than your pace for 2000 meters. For example, if you

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raced 2000 meters in a time of 7 minutes, then your pace per 500 meters was 1:45. A pace five seconds faster than this is 1:40. This would be your guide pace for 1000 meters, giving you a time of 3 minutes and 20 seconds. The best thing to do now is have a go at a 1000 meter test in training and see how the pace works for you. But to do that you need a race plan.

There are several different plans, or race strategies, that you could take. We'll look in detail here at the four known as "fly and die," "defend a lead," even splits, and negative splits.

"Fly and die"

The strategy: Go out from the start as hard as you can and then try to hang on.

If all you want to do is hurt yourself as much as possible, then this is the race plan for you. As the adrenalin surges, you will indeed fly through the first part of the race. But as the oxygen debt grows and strength is sapped from your muscles you will find it harder and harder to maintain the pace. Even before you get to 500 meters you will be suffering the consequences of your enthusiasm and the second half of the race will be a miserable experience.

Using the example of an expected time of 3:20, the flying first 500 meters will probably be covered in around 1:36 or 1:37. This will put you 3 or 4 seconds ahead of schedule at the halfway stage. But for every second gained in the first half you can expect to lose at least two seconds over the second half of the race. So a 1:36 for the first 500 will be followed by a 1:48 at best for the second 500, giving you a total time of 3:24 or longer.

This strategy is often unwittingly adopted by first-time racers who get carried away by the occasion. They tend to think very hard before taking this tack again in future races.

"Defend a lead"

The strategy: Go out hard before settling to a predetermined pace that ensures you get to the halfway mark about a second ahead of schedule, and then try to defend this advantage as you fade over the second half.

This is a more controlled version of the "fly and die," where you try to gain a small lead in the first part of the race while you are still feeling strong. This is the race plan of the optimist. What you are actually hoping is that your training has been so good that you will be capable of a faster pace than you have predicted for yourself. The outcome might go one of three ways:

1. You are having a great day. You row 1:39 followed by 1:39, giving you a time of 3:18.
2. You are having a normal day. You row 1:39 followed by 1:42, giving you a time of 3:21.
3. You are having a bad day. You row 1:39 followed by 1:45 (or worse), giving you a time of 3:24.

Even splits

The strategy: Row the same time for the first and second halves of the race.

In this approach, you take a few hard, fast strokes at the start to get you going and then settle into an early rhythm that will take you to halfway exactly on schedule. You will fade a little over the second half before a sprint to the finish brings your average pace back on target. The outcome could be as follows:

1. You are having a great day. You row 1:40 followed by 1:38.5, giving you a time of 3:18.5.
2. You are having a normal day. You row 1:40 followed by 1:40, giving you a time of 3:20.
3. You are having a bad day. You row 1:40 followed by 1:43, giving you a time of 3:23.

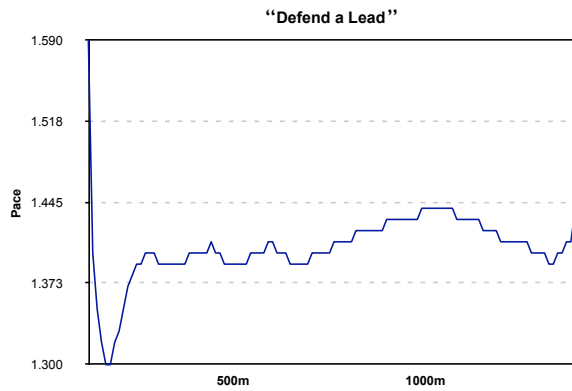
Negative splits

The strategy: Row the second half of the race faster than the first half.

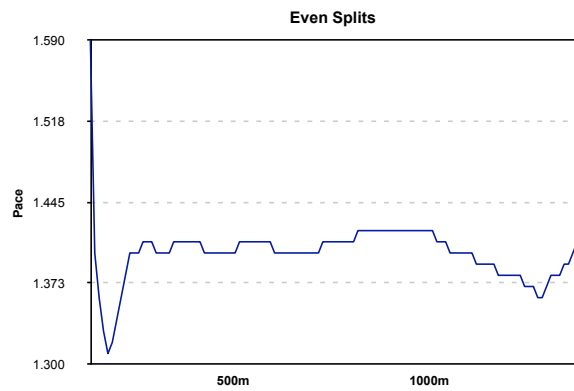
This is a popular tactic, particularly with anyone who has been on the wrong end of a "fly and die." It is probably the safest option because it offers the least risk of going too fast in the first half and then paying for it in the second half. Even if it turns out that you are having a bad day, an attempt at negative splits can quickly be changed to even splits. The outcome might be one of these:

1. You are having a great day. You row 1:41 followed by 1:38, giving you a time of 3:19.
2. You are having a normal day. You row 1:41 followed by 1:39.5, giving you a time of 3:20.5.
3. You are having a bad day. You row 1:41 followed by 1:41, giving you a time of 3:22.

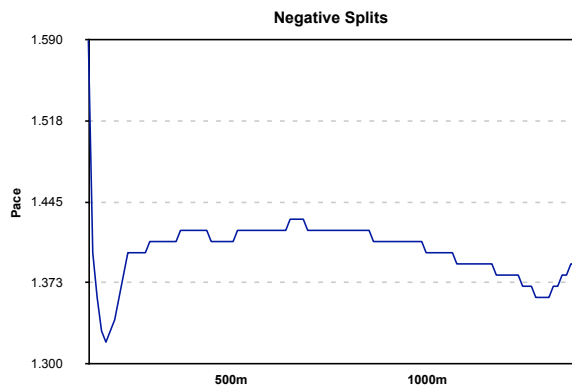
So, of the four different strategies, the one to avoid is "fly and die". In theory, the fastest way to complete the distance is by even splitting it, but to do that you need to



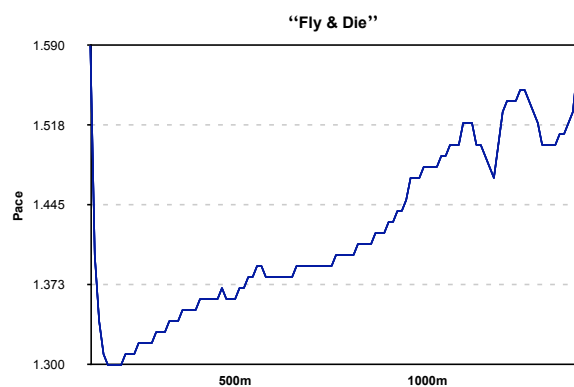
“Defend a lead.” Push the pace a little for the first half and then try to hang on.



“Even splits.” If you are sure of your capability, you can aim for two equal halves.



“Negative splits.” Hold back over the first half so that you can really attack the second half.



“Fly and die.” Too much too soon will surely result in disaster.

know exactly what you are capable of. If you are not sure how fast you can go then you are better off getting to halfway slightly too slowly than slightly too quickly.

Your race

I have talked about splitting the race into two 500-meter pieces for pacing in the examples above. When I'm racing, I actually split it into three distinct sections—100, 600, and 300. The first 100 meters is an opportunity to get a few hard strokes in and then settle into race pace. The 500 meter pace for each of the first ten strokes might go like this for a 3:20 target:

- Stroke 1 – 2:00
- Stroke 2 – 1:40
- Stroke 3 – 1:36
- Stroke 4 – 1:33

- Stroke 5 – 1:31
- Stroke 6 – 1:32
- Stroke 7 – 1:34
- Stroke 8 – 1:36
- Stroke 9 – 1:38
- Stroke 10 – 1:40

The flywheel is stationary at the start, so the first split will necessarily be slow. The first five strokes should not be at maximum power, but you should peak at a significantly faster pace than you hope to maintain for the race. Exactly how fast these first five strokes are will depend on the individual. These initial strokes will probably be a little shorter in length than normal and the rate (the number of strokes per minute) will certainly be high. After the fifth stroke you need to reduce the rate,



lengthen the stroke, and ease back on the power. By the tenth stroke you should be at the race pace you will hold during the following 600 meters.

That's worth repeating. *By the tenth stroke you should be at race pace!* The temptation to do just a few extra strokes at a faster pace is always there, but if you do, you will pay for them later. At the end of the first 100 meters, your average pace should be slightly faster than your target, maybe 1:37-1:38, for a 3:20 target.

The next section of the race, from 100 meters to 700 meters, is where you are trying to find a sustainable rhythm and be as consistent as possible. If you are looking to even-split the race, your pace will be between 1:40 and 1:41 during this stretch. If you are aiming for negative splits, your pace will be between 1:41 and 1:42. At the halfway stage of the race you should evaluate how you feel. Are you strong enough still to push on? Are you suffering so much that you need to ease back? After 700 meters your average pace will probably have slipped behind target, maybe to 1:40.5 or so.

The final 300 meters is the time to “empty the tank” and try to move the average pace back to target. It is natural in this final section for your rate to increase, and you may also start to shorten your length, although you should try to delay this until the last 100 meters or so. If you feel that you are already running on empty, you might have to hold the sprint finish back until 200 meters from the

line, as you don't want to fold in the final 100 meters. But once you have made your decision to go for home, there is no turning back.

If all goes well, you will have rowed a great piece. But, just as importantly, you will have maintained control throughout the race and will be able to use the experience to help you next time.

And, if you only remember one thing about how to pace an indoor rower test, it is that by the tenth stroke—say it with me!—you should be at race pace.



Alex Dunne works with international markets for [Concept2](#). He is a former English lightweight oarsman who rowed competitively on the water throughout the 1990s. Alex plays a variety of sports and he continues to compete on the indoor rower. In 2006 he won the 2000-meter race in the Master Men's age 30-39 lightweight category at the [C.R.A.S.H.-B. Sprints World Indoor Rowing Championships](#) with a time of 6:44.5.

