

## Pulling a Sub-7 minute 2k Row —without Rowing?

In the best lab-rat tradition, an erg-shy CrossFitter/lifter puts a scare into sport-specific stars.

EvaClaire "EC" Synkowski



Apparently, I was built to row. I wish someone had told me that in high school, when I was running around bent over field hockey sticks that were inevitably too short for my 6-foot frame. But it was not until a 2007 CrossFit seminar, five years after graduate school, when a fellow trainer was aghast to discover my rowing "experience" was limited to a single 5k pull at CrossFit Boston (CFB). He encouraged me to go to the infamous Concept 2 "Crash-B" race in Boston that following February, an indoor 2,000m race on Concept 2 ergometers ("ergs") that attracts international collegiate and Olympic athletes. I said I'd do it, but to be honest, the event slipped my mind after that seminar.

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I was reminded a few months later when Ewen Roth, a CrossFitter out of the Black Box in NYC, asked me if any CFB members were competing a few weeks prior to competition. At that time, I had yet to pull a 2k. Like all CrossFitters sizing up an untested WOD, I thought it didn't sound "that bad" and I decided to throw my hat into the ring. Since it was so close to the actual event, there was no preparation, save for a 2k pull to determine my approximate time to register for the event.

At my first Crash-B event in 2008, I pulled a 7:11 (a 15-second PR from my time two weeks prior) and finished 24<sup>th</sup> out of 222 women. That's when I learned that I had a competitive row time, and decided that I wanted to pull a sub-7 minute 2k at the 2009 event. But as the days passed since the 2008 race, this quickly became a backseat to improving my Olympic lifts and times in the benchmark WODs.

When registration opened for this year's event, I quickly remembered how little row-specific training I'd done over the last year. Nevertheless, I still wanted to give a sub-7 2k a shot and registered. Plus, some other CrossFit Bostonians decided to compete and we were to have a post-race social. So, the event would be "fun." If you have not rowed a 2k, I can assure you, however, the pull itself is not fun.

### **2008 Strategy: Zero Prep, Good Form, and Save it for the Finish**

If my preparation for the 2008 event was minimal, my preparation for the 2009 event was non-existent. Not only had I not pulled a 2k since the 2008 Crash-B, but I had not pulled a single distance for max effort on the rower the entire year! Sure, I had rowed in various WODs (e.g. Jackie), but never a max 500m, 1000m, 5k, etc. I'm guessing the memory of discomfort from the 2008 event was enough that I have a subconscious aversion to the erg. And to be honest, I have so many other "goats" to work on that I consider rowing a strength, relative to, say, bodyweight metcons or gymnastics.

My workouts over the last year were a mix of my own and others' programming: heavy on the Olympic and slow lifts 3-to-4 times a week, with CrossFit WODs 1-to-3 times a week. My "strategy" for this year was that I was stronger than last year; I just couldn't gas. "Gassing," however, was a real possibility as I had recently wrapped up a Bulgarian (high percentage relative to 1 RM, but low volume) Olympic lifting cycle from Catalyst Athletics, with CrossFit WODs dropping to 1-to-2 times a week. Needless to say, I was confident that the combination of sound mechanics in hip extension (i.e., almost every movement in CrossFit and the Olympic lifts) and my increased strength would be enough.



## Race Strategy for the Untrained

*We asked C2 to comment on EC's performance. Here's some insight from Oar Specialist Chris Wilson, a long-time rowing coach.*

Rowing competitors in training for spring or summer 2000m races on the water take many different approaches to their Crash-B preparations. Some focused on using the Crash-B event as a marker in a structured training program, an opportunity to reach for a PR for 2000m on the machine, while many others competed at the event for the experience of performing under pressure at a big time indoor race.

If you are an on-water competitor, why would you want to race over 2000m at the world indoor rowing championships and not be fully prepared for a personal best? Because there can only be so many tapers and peaks in a training program, and for these rowing athletes, the Crash-B result is not the ultimate goal. The majority of rowing athletes who competed in Boston are ultimately reaching for a league, regional or national championship that will be held on the water in May, June, or August. These are performance opportunities that will allow their teams' collective work for the year to reach a pinnacle, and these races measure boat speed.

In general, rowing training is categorized into six levels of intensity, and a program will be periodized to prepare an athlete for improved performances on the machine and ultimately on the water. Target goals are set and training plans are built by working backwards on a calendar from championship event dates.

What did Eva Claire have in common with many of the athletes who raced in Boston? She allowed her competitive instincts to get swept up in the event, and she did not stick to a sound race plan that reflected what she was capable of doing on the machine on that day.

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Similar to last year, my race time was in the late afternoon. Seeing that it was too late for any last-minute preparation, I spent most of the day at brunch and shopping until a couple of hours before race time. I showed up at the arena about 45 minutes prior to the event, registered, and linked up with fellow CrossFitters, including Lisa Lugo, CrossFit Affiliate Director. She told me how competitive my heat was: There were members from the Chinese Olympic Team in my race line! It was at this point I began questioning my strategy.

About 20 minutes from the race start, it was time to warm up. Each athlete is permitted to bring a "coxswain" or coach to the race floor with them. Thankfully, I had found Jon Gilson and dragged him onto the floor. Jon, owner of [Again Faster](#) and head trainer at CrossFit seminars, is a more-than-competent coach for proper pulling mechanics. I wanted him to help keep my form as true to sumo deadlift high pull mechanics as fatigue would allow. I did some dynamic mobility, about 400m on an erg, and a few sets of air squats (I was definitely the only one doing those!). I told Jon that I wanted sub-7, so I thought I'd shoot for 1:44/500m splits. He thought that was a little aggressive and suggested 1:45-1:46 splits, and if possible, go for broke at the end. I remembered the lack of rowing I had done that past year, decided Jon's advice was sound and agreed. We headed over to the race line.

Whether someone is running a marathon or a 5km race, or preparing for her first or final 2000m piece of the season, it is critical to run or row your own race. There will always be energy to draw from at these events, but if your own adrenalin and the machines spinning around you take you to a place and pace you have never been before, get ready to fly and die.

Despite every CrossFitter's ability to push through pain, accumulating lactate in the first 1000m of a 2000m piece on the erg will take any one down who goes out too hard. There is no shame in going out too hard, but it is a lesson the best competitors should only learn once.

What is a sound strategy for a 2000m piece on the erg? Target pace +1.5-to-2 seconds for the first 500m, target pace +1 second for the second 500m, pace for the third 500m, and GO for the last 500m.



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### 2009 Strategy: Go for Broke

I don't remember the 2008 2k to be nearly as uncomfortable as the 2009 event. Almost from the onset, this year was a struggle.

I came out of the gate hard with the plan to settle into a row pace 10 strokes in, but I could not find an even pace—jumping between 1:42-1:48 split times. I knew Jon was concerned about me gassing and encouraged me to slow down the splits, but I struggled to find a steady pace. From there, it just got worse. I was leading my heat, but my legs began to feel so heavy—and even though I thought I was pushing harder, the split times drifted to 1:45 and above. I distinctly remember how surprised I was when I saw the countdown with 1200 meters on my monitor. I couldn't believe how uncomfortable I was with more than halfway to go. We've all been there in a CrossFit WOD: I thought about just letting go of the handle and stopping. Thankfully, I remembered the 10-plus CFB members in the stands yelling and decided I had to, at least, finish.

The second 1000m were brutal. I could tell my form was fading as Jon was giving me tips—"chest up," "fast hands"—with almost every stroke. With about 800m to go, I lost my lead in the heat and dropped off over the last 500m. Jon was encouraging me to push harder, and I thought I was—but was so defeated seeing 1:55 split times on the monitor. I wanted to catch the woman who overtook my lead, but her lead kept increasing. I was surprised how little I had left with 100m and had to hold on just to finish. I remember Jon counting the last couple of pulls and I didn't even see my time when I finished. I knew, however, my split times on the home stretch were not good enough for a sub-7. I immediately pointed to my feet, strapped into the erg, repeating "help" until Jon undid the straps and then rolled onto the floor. My legs and lungs were burning, but I don't need to describe that feeling. We've all been there.

Jon had me at 7:03, but I was skeptical based on my final fade. When I found out my actual time after the results were finally posted, I was pretty bummed out—shocked, in fact: 7:15. This was four seconds slower than my time in 2008 and placed me 36<sup>th</sup> out of 246 women.

### 2010: I'll be Back

Not bettering my 2008 time was rather disappointing, but I have since decided that it is relatively unrealistic to think that one could improve drastically on



a competitive time in an event without any specific training. And, looking on the bright side, I figure my time was pretty good. After all, my heat was littered with Olympic and collegiate rowers—most of whom had likely put in significantly more rowing than I had. Without making too many excuses, I also realized that race day was my fourth workout day in a row and also fell at the end of a brutal two travel weeks, flying to a different city on eight of the 14 days prior. Poor planning, perhaps, but I was competing in the event for fun. I am also somewhat comforted that I was not “fresh” for the event. That is, between results in 2008 and 2009, I have a 7:15 2k in the bag without any specific training. This reaffirms three things: 1. The efficacy of CrossFit training as a general physical preparedness program; 2. The potency of the WODs’ hip-driven functional movements as a transfer to all sport mechanics; and 3. The metabolic conditioning from CrossFit provides an above average ready-state to also be able to compete in a rather untested event.

Therefore, I’ve got my eyes on a sub-7 for 2010. And I’m willing to train for it this time.

My plan: I’m not giving up the Oly lifts or CrossFit, which I love and provide a good base. I will incorporate some rowing-specific training starting a few months out from

the 2010 event, when it will become my focal point. I am not planning on becoming “a rower” to achieve my goal; while rowing is fun, it’s too monotonous to train all the time—AND it’s painful! That’s why I didn’t specifically train for it in 2009. I am doing the event for fun. However, because I’m so close to a sub-7, I am willing to put in some time—within reason—to achieve this goal. That’s a pretty good benchmark for women, and I think I actually have a shot!



#### About the Author

*Eva Claire “EC” Synkowski is an assistant instructor at CrossFit Boston and a head trainer at CrossFit Level I certifications. Her athletic ability, dedication, and exact attention to mechanics is legendary among the locals and has given her the ability to lift loads beyond the level of most female athletes. She has extensive knowledge of proper dietary practices and holds CrossFit Level II, Olympic Weightlifting, Gymnastics, and Barbell certifications. She received her B.S. in Biological Resource Engineering from the University of Maryland at College Park in 2002, graduating summa cum laude, and received her M.S. in Natural Resource Sciences there in 2004. Contact EC at [ecsynkowski@gmail.com](mailto:ecsynkowski@gmail.com).*

