

The Event That's Bringing Rowing Down to Earth

Started by Ivy League athletes, the C.R.A.S.H.-B. World Indoor Rowing Championship is opening up the sport to a whole new crowd.

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Cuba's Angel Fournier Rodriguez (right) and Australia's Samson Loch battle for the Open Men's title at the 2015 C.R.A.S.H.-B.'s. Photo: Igor Belakovskiy/[Scullingfool Photography](#)

Welcome to the [C.R.A.S.H.-B. World Indoor Rowing Championship](#). Here is your rowing machine, or “erg,” parked in Boston University’s Agganis Arena. You’re going to row 2,000 meters on it, and, after about seven minutes of intense exertion, you’re going to be exactly where you started — but with some really extraordinary pain in your everything.

Does this sound like fun to you? It did to the 2,300 people who showed up for this year's event, held on March 1—many of whom have never rowed on water. In fact, C.R.A.S.H.-B., a competition started by elite Ivy League rowers in 1982, is now democratizing a sport whose high equipment costs and water accessibility previously made it inaccessible to all but the wealthiest Americans.

C.R.A.S.H.-B. stands for the Charles River All Star Has-Beens. The competition started when a group of former Ivy League, U.S. Olympic rowers couldn't compete in the 1980 Olympics in Moscow because of the U.S. boycott. That year, one of those rowers, Dick Dreissigacker, invented the world's first modern indoor rowing machine with his brother Peter: the Concept2.

A few years later in 1982, Dreissigacker and his friends decided to haul some of those rowing machines and a keg of beer into the Harvard boathouse to hold their first C.R.A.S.H.-B. event.

"It was a party," says Dreissigacker, now 67. Today, "it's become a monster."

In the early 1980s, C.R.A.S.H.-B. was attracted national team rowers and Harvard kids, but the event's popularity has grown alongside that of the Concept2 ergometer. As the Concept2 appeared in local colleges' boathouses later that decade, student rowers started coming to C.R.A.S.H.-B.'s, too. When health clubs started buying the erg sometime in the 1990s, the fitness enthusiasts started coming—and they kept coming when CrossFit gyms got in on the Concept2 action in the 2000s. These days, there is hardly a gym without an ergometer, and all types of athletes show up at C.R.A.S.H.-B.'s.

Keeping track of exactly how many competitors come from somewhere besides the water is tough, since some rowers get whimsical in listing affiliations. But it's largely agreed that this race—a race that once belonged to elite rowers as a personal test—now equally belongs to athletes who've never stepped foot in a boat.

That owes a lot to CrossFit, says Nick Peterson, a former Olympic rower and a coach at CrossFit South Brooklyn. As he puts it: "CrossFit is the best thing that's ever happened to indoor rowing."

In 2010, when Peterson first took a small group of CrossFitters to C.R.A.S.H.-B., rowers didn't know what to make of it, he says. "There were some rowers sitting near them who said, Hey, where do you row? And the CrossFitters said, Well, we don't. And the rowers just gave them the weirdest look."



Cuba's Angel Fournier Rodriguez celebrates his victory at the 2015 C.R.A.S.H.-B.'s. Photo:

Igor Belakovskiy/[Scullingfool Photography](#)

This year, though, the 15 South Brooklyn CrossFitters C.R.A.S.H.-B. were anything but alone. In the women's 30 to 39 heavyweight category, for example, 14 of the 42 competitors were from CrossFit gyms.

"It's an elite athlete versus average Joe competition," says Greg Hammond, who does marketing for Concept2. "It's people who have nothing else in their lives in common, except this. But because they have this, they're all friends."

There are handicapped competitors racing in the adaptive divisions. Racers who, at 90 years old, are posting times teen rowers envy. And elite indoor rowers whose bodies look as every bit as fit as those of elite water rowers.

"Just get in the rowing machine," says Clare Busst, a member of [Q-Power](#), an international group of competitive indoor rowers. Busst, who has never rowed on the water but found an erg at a health club, this year defended her title as champion in her lightweight age-group, flying all the way from the United Kingdom to Boston to row for 7 minutes and 16 seconds.

"If people don't understand this, I say get in a rower," says the 34-year-old Brit, "and then they'll know I mean."

The erg, by design, is a democratic machine. "The rowing machine is desperately fair," says James Bailey, Q-Power's founder. "One person pulls faster than the other one, and that's the end of it."



Riverside Boat Club's Lily Keane after her second place finish in the Open Women's event at the 2015 C.R.A.S.H.-B.'s. *Photo:*

Igor Belakovskiy/[Scullingfool Photography](#)

Bailey, a 40-year old Londoner who rowed as a lightweight for Oxford, started Q-Power in 2011 with the idea that a group of physiologically talented people could hone themselves to be as fast as elite rowing teams on the erg. Of his 12 athletes, eight of them have never rowed in a boat.

But not everyone who crushes the competition on an erg can do the same in a crew boat: ergs, it's said, "don't float." Still, some argue that there are champion indoor rowers who can be champions on the water, too.

Cady Hart, who co-owns [Green Mountain CrossFit](#), in Berlin, VT, says she went through college on a rowing scholarship and tells the teens in her indoor rowing classes to keep rowing; a stellar erg time can earn them college scholarships. Fast indoor rowers are catches to the college recruiters who attend regattas and review online scores, Hart says, hunting for athletes who will help their boats win.

"I just think there are so many opportunities in rowing," she says.



between heats at the 2015 C.R.A.S.H.-B.'s. *Photo:*

Igor Belakovskiy/[Scullingfool Photography](#)

Still, indoor rowing can only do so much to diversify the sport. Yes, it makes rowing more accessible, but it still costs a fair amount of money to access an erg, whether it's through a traditional gym or CrossFit box. And it's worth mentioning that almost all the faces at C.R.A.S.H.-B. this year were white.

But the C.R.A.S.H.-B. competition must be praised for bringing more people to the sport, and for helping to legitimize the erg as a measure of one's rowing prowess.

"No one is shut out," says Geoffrey S. Knauth, one of C.R.A.S.H.-B.'s 14 board members and a former coxswain on the U.S. rowing team. "I care about rowing," he says. "I care about people doing good things for the sport of rowing. When we get non-rowers, their attitude is always, hey, this is neat, and I want to see if I can do it, too. And I feel great about that."

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