



TRAINING PROGRAMME

Learn-to-Row Starter Plan

Your first six weeks of rowing, made simple

FOR

Complete beginners in Canada, on the erg and the water

LENGTH

6 weeks

EACH WEEK

2-3 sessions

KIT

An indoor rower, plus water sessions with a Rowing Canada Aviron club

Learn-to-Row Starter Plan

Your first six weeks of rowing, made simple - arrive at your Learn to Row course already fit and confident, with a good, repeatable stroke.

DO THIS

- ✓ **Follow the sessions in order** - each has a warm-up, a main set and a cool-down.
- ✓ **Learn the sequence:** legs, then body, then arms on the drive; reverse it coming back.
- ✓ **Keep the recovery slower than the drive,** and the rate low and relaxed.
- ✓ **Do the water outings with your club** whenever they are offered.

AVOID

- Chasing speed or a low split in week one.
- Rushing up the slide.
- Pulling with the arms before the legs.
- Skipping the warm-up.

THE PLAN AT A GLANCE

PHASE	WEEKS	WHAT YOU DO
First strokes	Wk 1-2	Meet the machine and learn the legs-body-arms sequence
Build the stroke	Wk 3-4	Add length and rhythm; clean, calm blade handling
Put it together	Wk 5-6	Longer pieces and your first benchmark row

The full six-week plan, a talk-test effort guide and the coaching detail follow. Row within your comfort, warm up, and stop for any pain.

The plan, week by week

WK	FOCUS	SESSION 1	SESSION 2	SESSION 3
1	Meet the machine	First strokes ~40 min 4 x 5 min easy at rate 18-20, with 2 min rest between. Count "one-two" on the drive and "one-two-three" on the recovery	Recovery control ~35 min 20 min easy at rate 18. For the first 10 min, pause for 1 second at the finish each stroke; then row continuously	
2	Build the habit	Steady rowing ~40 min 2 x 10 min easy at rate 18-20, with 3 min rest between. Keep the length and rate the same throughout	First on the water ~60-90 min Club session - learn to sit the boat still, feel the balance and follow the stroke of the person in front. Your coach runs the session	Benchmark row ~30 min Row 8 min at a steady, even effort and write down the distance you cover. This is your benchmark - you repeat it in week 6
3	Add a little length	Steady erg ~45 min 30 min continuous at rate 20-22, holding one steady split the whole way	Water skills ~60-90 min Club session - squaring and feathering the blade, balance drills and short bits of continuous rowing	Steady intervals ~40 min 5 x 4 min at rate 22, with 1 min easy between. Aim for the same split on every rep
4	Feel the rhythm	Rate ladder ~40 min 4 x 5 min at rates 18, 20, 22 then 20, with 1 min easy between. Keep the stroke length full as the rate rises	On-water session ~60-90 min Club session - longer stretches of continuous rowing, applying the rate control from the erg	Steady with bursts ~40 min 20 min steady at rate 20, with a 10-stroke firmer burst every 3 min
5	Build fitness	Longer steady ~50 min 35 min continuous at rate 20-22, one steady split	On-water session ~60-90 min Club session - a longer paddle, focused on staying relaxed and rowing well when a little tired	Pyramid ~45 min 2, 4, 6, 4, 2 min steady at rate 22, with 1-2 min easy between each piece
6	Put it together	Continuous row ~50 min 40 min continuous, easy to steady - your longest row yet	On-water session ~60-90 min Club session - a proper session from start to finish. You are a rower now	Benchmark again ~30 min Row 8 min at a steady, even effort and note the distance. Compare it to your week-2 benchmark

Warm up and cool down on every session - the listed times include both; on the interval days build for about ten minutes first. The coloured edge of each session shows its effort zone (the effort guide is a couple of pages on). Coaching cues and the full detail are in the sections that follow.

About this plan

Welcome to rowing. This plan takes you from your very first stroke to rowing comfortably and confidently over six weeks. It mixes indoor rowing (the "erg"), where you learn the movement safely, with on-water sessions run by your club.

It is built to sit alongside a **Rowing Canada Aviron (RCA) Learn to Row** course. Much of Canada is on the water for only part of the year, so the erg is the natural place to begin – do the erg sessions over the off-season to arrive fit and ahead, then use the on-water sessions to put it into practice. Every session is fully laid out: a warm-up, the main set, and a cool-down. There is no pressure on speed – a good, repeatable stroke now makes everything later come easily.

HOW TO USE THIS PLAN

Follow the sessions in order. Each one shows a warm-up, a main set and a cool-down, plus a rough time and a single technical focus. The times include the warm-up and cool-down.

Do the on-water sessions with your club whenever they are offered – they replace an erg session that week. If a week only has erg access, do the erg sessions and you will still progress nicely.

Judge effort by the "talk test", not numbers (see the effort guide overleaf). Keep the stroke rate low while you learn – length and rhythm move the boat, not spinning the handle. New coaching terms are explained at the back.

GETTING STARTED IN CANADA

Rowing in Canada is run by **Rowing Canada Aviron (RCA)**, with provincial associations such as Row Ontario and Rowing BC. Before you get on the water, sort these three things through a local club:

- **Find a club or course.** Use RCA's [Find a Club](#) directory (120+ clubs) to locate a nearby club and its **Learn to Row** course. **National Come Try Rowing Day** (mid-June) is RCA's national come-and-try event.
- **Swim and cold water.** RCA recommends being able to **swim 50m in light clothing**, and many clubs require a swim or float test. Canadian water is cold – clubs run strict cold-water rules, and a life jacket (PFD) is carried or worn depending on conditions.
- **Prefer the machine first?** RCA's indoor **Learn to Row** resource is the year-round route and pairs perfectly with this plan.

The on-water season is short in most of Canada, so plenty of rowers start indoors and move to the water in spring. Follow your club's and RCA's safety guidance every time you go afloat.

Effort guide

No heart-rate monitor needed. Judge how hard you are working by how well you can talk – the "talk test" – together with your stroke rate (strokes per minute, shown on the monitor).

ZONE	WHAT IT IS	PACE	RATE	FEELS LIKE
● Focus	Technique	Slow, precise	16-20 s/m	Light – all about the stroke
● Easy	Recovery pace	Chatting pace	18-20 s/m	Hold a full conversation
● Steady	Working pace	Short sentences	20-24 s/m	Working, breathing up

Before you start: This is general training guidance, not medical advice. Check with a doctor before beginning any new exercise plan, especially if you have an injury or health condition. Warm up, listen to your body, and stop if you feel pain.

Coaching notes

The rowing stroke

Every stroke has four parts. The **catch** is the start: knees bent, shins vertical, arms straight, body leaning slightly forward from the hips. The **drive** is the push – legs down first, then swing the body open, then draw the hands into the body. The **finish** is the end of the drive: legs flat, a slight lean back, handle at the bottom of your ribs. The **recovery** is the slide back to the catch. Power comes from the legs, not the arms – the legs do most of the work on every single stroke.

The stroke, step by step

- 1 Sit at the **catch**: knees bent, shins vertical, arms straight, leaning slightly forward from the hips.
- 2 **Drive** with the legs – push them flat. Only then swing the body open. Only then draw the hands in to your ribs.
- 3 **Finish** tall: legs flat, a small lean back, handle to the bottom of the ribcage, elbows drawn past the body.
- 4 **Recover** in reverse: hands away from the body first, then tip forward from the hips, then bend the knees and slide to the catch.
- 5 Mind the **rhythm**: a quick, powerful drive and a slow, controlled recovery. Count "one-two" on the drive and "one-two-three" on the recovery to stop yourself rushing.

Setting up the machine

Sit tall and set the monitor to **eye level**. Strap your feet so the strap crosses the **ball of your foot**. On a Concept2, set the **damper** (the lever on the fan) to **3-5, not 10** – a lower setting rewards good technique and protects your back. The two numbers worth watching on the monitor are the **split** (your time per 500m) and the **rate** (strokes per minute). Chase clean technique, not big numbers.

Common beginner faults

COMMON FAULT	WHAT TO DO INSTEAD
Rushing the recovery	Slow the slide down. The recovery should take longer than the drive - use the "one-two / one-two-three" count.
Bending the arms too early	Keep the arms straight until the legs are almost flat. The hands draw in last, not first.
Opening the back too soon	Push the legs first and hold your body angle until the legs are about halfway down.
Shooting the slide	The seat and the handle should move together. Do not slam the seat back while the handle stays still.
Gripping too hard	Hook your fingers over the handle with light thumbs and loose wrists. A tight grip tires your forearms fast.
Looking down	Eyes up, sit tall. Looking down rounds your back and shortens the stroke.

Breathing and staying relaxed

Breathe **out on the drive** (the effort) and **in on the recovery**. On harder pieces, two breaths a stroke is fine. Keep your face, shoulders and grip relaxed - tension anywhere steals energy and shortens your stroke. If you notice you are tightening up, take a breath and let the shoulders drop.

On the water

The erg teaches the movement; the water adds balance and timing. Expect it to feel wobbly at first - that is completely normal, and it settles quickly. Sit still between strokes, keep your hands moving smoothly, and follow the person in front of you. Always listen to your coach. Rowing Canada recommends being able to swim 50m in light clothing (many clubs require it), and Canadian water is cold - follow your club's cold-water rules every time you go out.

Tracking your progress

In week 2 you row 8 minutes and note the distance. In week 6 you do exactly the same test - same warm-up, same effort. The extra metres are your six weeks of work made visible. Keep a note of your splits along the way too; watching your 500m time come down is the best motivation there is.

Rowing words explained

Catch	The start of the stroke, with the blade about to go into the water.
Drive	The powerful part of the stroke: legs, then body, then arms.
Finish	The end of the drive - handle drawn into the body, legs flat.
Recovery	The controlled slide from the finish back to the catch.
Rate (s/m)	Stroke rate - the number of strokes you take per minute.
Split	Your time to row 500m, shown on the monitor. Lower is faster.
Ratio	The balance of a quick drive to a slower recovery.
Square / feather	Turning the blade upright to take the water (square) or flat to come out (feather).
Blade	The oar.
Practice	A training session on the water.
Erg	The indoor rowing machine.
Crew	The people rowing a boat together.