

VIRTUAL ROWING

By Topher Bordeau

Introducing the Swingulator—for programs that have the space (but not the resources) for a tank.



The list of rowing teams that train in cold-weather climates may be long, but the number of those same teams that have the space and resources to install functional rowing tanks isn't. A Vermont-based company called Rowing Innovations has attempted to provide a solution to that problem with a new product called the Swingulator Dry-Tank Rowing Simulator. The Dry-Tank is neither simple nor cheap, but it's a lot simpler and a lot cheaper than installing a conventional rowing tank, and it may provide the same functionality for a fraction of the cost.

The product was born when University of Vermont coach Rick Kelliher arrived at UVM and very quickly appreciated the program's desperate need for something to approximate the benefits of water time through Burlington's long winters. Kelliher commandeered an abandoned racquetball court at the university and began piecing together an early prototype from an out-of-service shell, some broken oars, and his program's oldest ergometers. He soon had a functioning, albeit crude, version of his innovation up and running, and six years later, the Dry-Tank was formally launched. The company's literature calls it, "The Best Coaching Platform in the World," touting the Swingulator's six main features: resistance on the handle that matches the on-the-water experience; bladework that matches the on-the-water experience; individual measurement of a rower's performance; the teamwork aspect of rowing; an accessible hands-on coaching platform; and the ability to train in all conditions.

The Swingulator is best described with pictures and very quickly and easily understood in person. The machine, which costs roughly \$20,000 for an eight, is available by pairs, giving programs various options to fit their space and resource capacity. Buying the machine gets customers everything except the ergometers that attach to it, including installation. An eight fits within the space of half of a squash court, according to Kelliher, and set-up takes roughly a day under the guidance of Rowing Innovations staff.

Upon first glance, a pair—the smallest option—looks like a massive jumble of steel, carbon, and erg, and Kelliher is quick to point out that the machine's weight and general beefiness is an asset, given the forces the machine tolerates when in use. Getting set up on the Swingulator is no more complicated than getting situated in a rowing tank, and although looking to the left or right to see the ergometer screen takes some getting used to, there's nothing about the machine that rowers won't recognize or understand immediately. The Swingulator offers different resistance settings via an easy repositioning of the cable that connects the oar handle to the ergometer. The settings offer a wide range of resistance suitable for everything from light steady-state rowing to power work that could easily mimic rowing by pairs or fours in an eight.

The handle is the same handle that rowers who use Concept2 oars are familiar with, and the screen is the same screen that anyone who rows the erg will recognize, but there's something about using the two concurrently that seems odd. Still, the connection is more authentic than that of many rowing tanks. The bladework experience of rowing the machine, while not completely identical to what rowers experience on the water, is useful for instruction. Rowers who have rowed the old Gamut ergometer will feel at home sitting on the Swingulator.

A final interesting feature of the machine comes in the form of metal rods that can be used to bolt together the seats of each rower, demanding that the rowers move in unison, at least on the seat. This feature is the only one that mandates that rowers stay together, but a few minutes of rowing make its utility readily apparent. Rowers feel every bit of rush or stall, and a simultaneous change of direction produces an improved split on the erg screen with the same effort. □

