



MAKING HEADWAY



Invictus medallist **Kieran Wood** trains hard, just like any other rower – despite suffering a traumatic brain injury. **Martin Gough** finds out more

Kieran Wood has yet to go out in a rowing boat, but he has already won a medal at Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park.

The British Armed Forces finished as top team in the indoor rowing competition as part of September's Invictus Games. Wood, who comes from Preston, won an individual bronze medal.

Kieran suffered brain injury – resulting in difficulties with speech, his right leg and arm – in a car crash on his first day back in the UK on leave from active duty with the Duke of Lancaster's Regiment in Iraq.

In September, holding the ergometer handle with his left hand only, he competed in the IR3 endurance event, covering 939m in four minutes.

He took up indoor rowing at Tedworth House – a recovery centre in Wiltshire run by the charity Help for Heroes – and showed such aptitude that he was given a training regime and encouraged to trial for the Invictus Games.

"I've met loads of friends at Tedworth. It's been a massive focus," he says, and he is clearly dedicated to the sport as he has an ergo in the middle of his lounge at home, training for about 30 minutes on four days each week.

Invictus allowed Kieran to compete in a way that any other rower can, but the real success of rowing

TOP COACHING TIPS



1. Understand each individual's ability – what they can do rather than what they can't.
2. Consider the importance of flexibility and training rowing movement patterns.
3. Pay close attention to fatigue and think about what external factors may affect it.
4. Ensure you have the right coaching infrastructure in place, with a high coach to athlete ratio.



Kieran Wood at the Invictus Games

for individuals with a central nervous system condition – of which his traumatic brain injury is just one – is down to its wider benefits.

Mobility and coordination can often be a problem for someone with a condition affecting the central nervous system – the brain and spinal cord. This could easily lead to a sedentary lifestyle, with associated potential physical problems including cardiovascular diseases and obesity, plus psychological ones including lower self-esteem.

"Rowing coaches are used to numbers on a stopwatch or an erg but there are other, soft outcomes here," says Simon Goodey, a British Rowing coach education consultant on para-rowing who also sits on the Para Rowing Commission of World Rowing's governing body FISA.

"Individuals might have a coordination deficit, memory loss or depression. Some would say that since they have started rowing they don't feel depressed any more. Also they often find that their gait can be compromised and walking causes stress on joints, but rowing is a lot simpler."

Goodey's book – *Adaptive Rowing: A Guide* – is published by British Rowing and covers access, classification, equipment, competition and coaching considerations for all adaptive rowers. Elements of what follows come from there, with permission.

Central nervous system (CNS) conditions can be acquired – through injury or a viral infection such as polio – or they could be congenital, as with cerebral palsy or spina bifida. Multiple sclerosis is another example.

Brain injury affects each individual differently – physical problems such as muscle weakness and poor coordination can combine with cognitive issues like poor coordination and emotional difficulties.

As part of the para-rowing programme at the London Regatta Centre, Goodey runs a programme for individuals with brain injuries in partnership with the charity Headway, and recently coached a crew competing in the Great River Race from the nearby London Docklands to Ham in Surrey. The crew covered the 21.6-mile course in three hours 42 minutes.

"Rowing in a waterman's cutter, the coordination pattern is simpler because of the fixed seat," he

Goodey suggests basic awareness training for any coach looking to get involved in a Rowability programme, especially one featuring athletes with CNS conditions. And of course, if you have athletes who need more support, you need a higher coach-per-athlete ratio.

"It's important to have an understanding of an individual's ability – what they can do rather than what they can't," he says.

"You need an understanding of individuals' biological clocks and when is a good time for them to train. For us [at London Regatta Centre] 11am is when the guys are at their best. In the afternoon they could be exhausted.

"Ensure you have a coaching infrastructure in place – you don't want to open up the club and then find that you don't have the capacity to make it work properly."

“Some say that since they have started rowing they don't feel depressed any more”

says. Of course, indoor rowing has some of those benefits too. Goodey adds that boats from the Explore Rowing programme could work both within a club's Rowability programme and for other recreational club members.

Among congenital CNS conditions, cerebral palsy (CP) is a term covering a group of permanent disorders affecting movement and posture, caused by disturbances to the developing foetal or infant brain.

Individuals with CP are likely to respond to strength and endurance training in the same ways as able-bodied athletes, although it may be more difficult to make gains in areas with an underlying neurological impairment.

Be aware of 'hypertonicity' – excessive muscle tone or tension – which can restrict flexibility and may require a more focussed stretching programme. Most rowers would benefit from a programme focussing on coordinated muscle movement patterns before lifting weight, CP athletes more so. A crew featuring CP athletes may also see a quicker deterioration of skills as the stroke rate rises so they might find a lower-than-average race rate more effective.

Multiple sclerosis (MS) is the most common disabling neurological disease in young adults in the western world. It is an inflammatory and chronic degeneration of the central nervous system, causing fatigue, weakness and motor dysfunction including 'spasticity' – when muscles contract, become stiff, or spasm involuntarily.

Research has shown the importance of endurance exercise in maintaining a greater level of independence for individuals with MS but athletes and coaches need to monitor closely the effects of fatigue, particularly in hot conditions.

Meanwhile Kieran jokes that the greatest barrier he has faced in rowing has been the wear on his backside. He quickly discovered lycra shorts and often uses gel pads on his seat.

A friend has offered to take him out in a boat soon, he is excited by suggestions the next Invictus may take place in Australia, and he is also having a go at archery.

His advice for rowers with a central nervous system condition could apply to anyone inspired by his tenacity and ability on the ergo: "Be dedicated and determined. Hard work pays off." □

TAKE IT FURTHER



Simon Goodey's book *Adaptive Rowing: A Guide* is available from British Rowing, priced £29.99 including P&P (UK only – international buyers should contact British Rowing for more information). You can

order your copy by emailing info@britishrowing.org or calling 020 8237 6700.

Useful links

Explore Rowing is a rowing community for everyone – www.explorerowing.org

Charity Headway promotes understanding of and provides information on all aspects of brain injury – www.headway.org.uk

Invictus Games – www.invictusgames.org