



## The 2000 Meter Row: A Case Study in Performance Anxiety

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Sixty minutes before the championship race, Jim was sitting quietly on the bank of the Cuyahoga River. He was thinking about the race he was about to row. Two thousand meters of intense physical activity, pushing his body to the very limits of its capabilities.

Different thoughts raced through his head. As a highly-recruited freshman on the university crew team (he was considered the top recruit in the country), he had been thinking about this race since the beginning of the season. He was worried about his lack of experience and the possibility of letting the team down. He also knew this would be the last race for Larry, a senior and his best friend on the team, and he didn't want to disappoint him. "That would be hard to live with," he thought to himself. He had done his stretching and warm-up exercises. He touched his wrist, and felt his heart beating faster than usual. His extremities felt cold and clammy. He was well hydrated, but his throat felt coarse and very dry.

That was an hour ago. Now, he was sitting in the bow seat of the Men's Varsity Eight in lane four on the starting line. He could see two boats to his left and three boats to his right. The rowers all looked much bigger than him and his crew. It was unusual for him to think like that.

The starter on the shore was saying something over the loudspeaker, but Jim wasn't paying attention. He was trying to concentrate on being ready, but he felt distracted and tense. He was making a concerted effort to listen to his coxswain. These last few seconds before the race were the most stressful—you could feel the tension in the air. Jim's heart was pounding more strongly than ever before. He just wished the race was over and done with.

"All hands are down," he heard the starter say. As was his custom, he tensed his muscles in his starting position, but it all felt wrong.

"Et vous prez... PARTE!" which was French for "Are you ready... ROW!"

Three short strokes to get the 60-foot-long shell moving, and then 20 strokes at maximum power. His crew was rowing and water was flying everywhere. It all seemed like a daze to Jim, nothing could be heard clearly—coxswains yelling, rowers grunting, oars and rigors banging. This race was nothing like he had ever felt before. He was putting all of his strength into each stroke, but he felt weak and exhausted. He kept pleading to himself for it to be over. His muscles hurt—they felt like they were burning. Jim uncharacteristically missed a stroke halfway through the race. Larry gave him a quick look of confusion, and Jim felt a deep, sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach.

With 250 meters to go to the finish line, Jim's team was in fourth place. This was highly unusual for a team that easily won their last six races. His cox was talking to the team, keeping them focused, getting them ready for the sprint. He heard his coxswain call for what he was dreading—five strokes to bring it

up for the sprint. He focused on a spot between the shoulder blades of his number two man and forced his muscles to respond. Thirty-seven strokes per minute, then 38 strokes. He started to focus on the task at hand, counting numbers to himself and getting psyched about the challenge. He started to feel more like himself and experienced an unexpected surge of energy.

Jim's team pushed hard, but it was too late to make up for lost ground. They crossed the finish line, six minutes and 58 seconds after starting, in second place, and one-tenth of a second behind the triumphant crew in lane three. Jim stopped rowing and slumped over his oar, breathing nearly 80 times per minute but still not feeling like he could get enough air. It felt like his arms and legs were on fire. Sweat was pouring out of every pore of his body. He felt light-headed and despondent.

Ten minutes later after a dejected row back to the docks, Jim continued to feel drained of physical and psychological energy. He couldn't talk to Larry. He felt like he had let the team down, that the second place finish was his fault. He kept thinking about what had happened in the race, and felt baffled to explain the course of events. "I just don't understand what happened," he said to himself as he shook his head slowly back and forth.

A week later, Jim decided to approach his coach to talk about the race. He was concerned about the impact of the race on his rowing future, and had gone so far as to think about quitting the team. His coach was concerned, and referred Jim to the Athletic Department's sports psychologist.

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\*This case is based upon the physiology case in our collection called "The 2000-Meter Row: A Case in Homeostasis" written by Nathan Strong (see <http://www.sciencecases.org/crew/crew.asp>). The latter emphasizes the metabolic, respiratory and cardiac responses of a young athlete competing in a championship rowing event. Here we see the same event in a new light: Doug Post of Ohio State University uses the case to explore the psychological ramifications of the stressful competition.

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