



Matt Rostron confronts the elephant in the room at the inaugural National Junior Indoor Rowing Championships... Photos by **Jake Evans** (Concept2).

Is Competition Good or Bad for Young People?



That headline, at first glance, seems as though it should have a relatively simple answer. You are probably already laying out your own arguments and thoughts in your head as you read this. In fact, I was exactly the same. I was asked my opinion as to whether it was good for the competitors at an indoor rowing competition – whether it is constructive for them to have such a desire to beat their fellow classmates, club members, friends and family members at such a young age.

As I stood on the balcony overlooking some of the 800 young people competing at the inaugural National Junior Indoor Rowing Championships

(NJIRC) at Hammersmith in March, I had my argument ready. “*Just look at that lot – what do you think?*” was my reply, but it was only afterwards that I gave it more thought.

“Competition is to self-esteem as sugar is to teeth. Most people lose in most competitive encounters, and it’s obvious why that causes self-doubt. But even winning doesn’t build character; it just lets a child gloat temporarily. Your value is defined by what you’ve done. Worse – you’re a good person in proportion to the number of people you’ve beaten.”

These comments are from the American Alfie Kohn, who writes and speaks widely on

human behavior, education, and parenting. This will, I'm sure, cause some discussion, especially in a sporting journal like this one. But discuss it we should.

So, where do we start? In our roles as coaches, athletes and club members, we have all come across young people who will never be the archetypal athlete – the wrong shape, different looks and those that just do not fit in, the typical 'last to be picked for the team' syndrome. As programme director of London Youth Rowing, an initiative that aims to increase the number of young people from less advantaged backgrounds entering the sport of rowing, I have found this to be true. And as an organisation, we have learnt from our many experiences, not least at the NJIRC.

If we take Kohn at his word then it should have been that the Hammersmith Town Hall was filled not with the sound of cheering and screaming, but the hum of dismay and consolation. He is right when he says that "*most people lose in most competitive encounters,*" but that isn't the full story and it strikes me as somewhat one dimensional in its thinking.

My experience of young people is largely that they do 'get it'. They have learned the rules and know from an early age that someone will win and someone will lose. They have the inbuilt mechanism that makes them happy to compete with no real importance resting on the end result – whether win or lose. We are not born with a 'must win' mentality, it's something that we are taught and learn.

This was in evidence at the NJIRC. I didn't see people being consoled and commiserated, nor people with heads bowed. Just the opposite – I saw competitors aged from 11 to 18 years-old, from all sorts of backgrounds, urging on their team-mates in the individual races where the huge Concept2 display screen faced the audience and encouraged cheering from the very first race to the very last.

The final race was an eight-person Boat Race relay, raced over the Boat Race course of approximately 6,700m. The young people wanted to win, of course, but they were also just pleased to compete and to beat their own personal bests. There was not a single person who seemed jealous when it was announced that the British Record had been broken in one of the first races of the day.

This is surely the best thing about this type of competition. It enables the individuals to achieve their own goals and the adage that 'you're competing only against yourself' is completely true.

Nevertheless, at London Youth Rowing, we come across many young people that just don't want to compete in side-by-side racing. We stage many school, borough and regional indoor rowing competitions – the NJIRC being a recent example – and we actively promote competition to young people because there is no quicker way of breaking down the shield of being 'just, like, *waaay* too cool' to try it.

Getting one of the boys on a machine and then dropping it into conversation that their friend has just beaten and bettered their effort



works almost every time! That said, we also appreciate that this may not *always* be the case, and are soon going to launch an online distance award scheme that provides rewards and recognition not for 'beating' someone, but instead allows the young person to work at their own rate and pace and still be rewarded when they reach and attain certain goals and targets.

that expect to win all the time, can't cope with not achieving the right exam results, landing the plumb job, getting *the* girl or boy? Will it be a shock when they realise that there are better people in the world than them? No, of course not, but by looking at the 800+ who that morning got ready and travelled, in some cases hundreds of miles across the country,

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By making these rewards t-shirts and badges, it means that to their classmates they become athletes in their own right – not in the school football or rugby teams, but as people that have rowed anything from 10,000 to a million metres.

Where does that leave us? Without competition, do young people become adults

and had a go – they will remember that day for a very long time to come.

For London Youth Rowing, The Boat Race Company and Concept2, this is just the start. We're already planning an even bigger test of whether competition is good or bad next year. See you there! ■

About London Youth Rowing

Matt Rostron is programme director of London Youth Rowing – the largest rowing initiative with a focus on providing rowing activities for young people in London. London Youth Rowing has three core activities:

- Rowing programmes for schools and youth clubs.
- Indoor rowing as a sport for young people.
- Adaptive rowing programmes for young people with disabilities.

The programme works closely with and has the full support of the ARA. By combining the resources of local youth clubs, schools, and specialist rowing centres, it provides a first exposure for many with no prior experience in the sport. By providing high standards of coaching and encouragement, the initiative will offer recreational rowing as well as specific programmes for those capable of competing at national and international levels.