



The Shimano Rowing Story

Row360 talks to Bram Van Dinther of Shimano about the company's launch into rowing.

'A stool needs three legs to stand' or so the proverb goes. Already established in two sports - cycling and fishing - Shimano has long searched for a third sport to complete its stable.

The idea to enter rowing came from deep within the company's Japanese headquarters explains Bram Van Dinther at their European headquarters on the High Tech Campus in Eindhoven, Netherlands. Previous attempts at a third sport; golf (until 2005) and snowboarding (until 2008) had for various reasons proven fruitless. Rowing appealed to

the Shimano bosses on a number of fronts, Van Dinther tells me. "The company ethos is to promote health and happiness through the enjoyment of nature and the world around us. Rowing fits that perfectly."

So, with sign-off from the top, Shimano engineer Masahiro Ohkoshi headed to Europe in 2006 to gather market intelligence. At this point there was no specific product or area of the sport in mind. "They only knew that rowing suited the brand and that they wanted to explore where they might be able to make a difference," explains Van Dinther.

Ohkoshi returned from the world rowing championships, held in Eton Dorney that summer, with an answer. What he had seen was a blatant gap in innovation around the feet, the shoes, and the way they connected to the boat. Ohkoshi reported his findings to the board, a budget was allocated, and development on a shoe and footplate system began.

Three years later and SRD (Shimano Rowing Dynamics) hit the market with their first product - a clip in shoe on a 'swing arm' pivoting foot stretcher. Shimano employed →



its engineering prowess to design a neat solution to the problems it saw.

Shimano had developed what on paper - and indeed in practice - was a better way of connecting the feet to the boat. The swing arm design allows the foot to pivot creating an easier roll into the catch and a solid position at the release. The shoe, developed in tandem, incorporated their existing cycling shoe expertise to create a stiff sole that allowed the rower to push with the whole foot. The shoe could also be easily clipped in and out of the boat much like a cycling shoe on a clip-less pedal.

What the engineers hadn't factored in however was the sport of rowing's idiosyncratic and often conservative nature. The response from the market was polarised. Some loved (and still do) the swing

arm; German Olympic sculler Marcel Hacker was one of its earliest and most loyal adopters. While the swing arm concept helped some achieve world and even Olympic gold medals, others found the feel of a pivoting foot stretcher entirely disconcerting.

It was an important lesson for Shimano and it taught them two things. Firstly, that rowing is very different from the cycling and fishing industries; they couldn't simply engineer their way to success. Secondly, the individual shoe concept is the future of the sport.



“What the engineers hadn’t factored in was rowing’s idiosyncratic and often conservative nature.”

The problem, as any rower will know, is that with shoes permanently bolted into the boat, rowing in footwear that actually fits can be a rare and lucky occurrence. This was where Shimano believed it could make the difference.

Shimano expanded their rowing team, both in Europe and the US, with individuals who came from the sport and knew it inside out. Working closely with the engineers in Japan they began developing the latest evolution of the SRD shoes and footplates which launched earlier this year. A less engineering, more “service design” approach this time round has made sure Shimano’s new products better meet the needs of rowers and rowing clubs.

“The new product doesn’t change the feeling of the boat, doesn’t necessarily change performance - that is no longer the goal - but it makes the individual shoe concept available to everybody, everywhere,” says Van Dinther. And although performance was no longer the key focus in the product’s development, it stands to reason that rowing with well fitted shoes will contribute to an overall improvement in performance.

Shimano say the sole flexes at exactly the right position on the foot with as little resistance as possible, which is important in terms of minimising energy loss during the stroke cycle. “We have some very skilled shoe engineers at Shimano with years of data to draw on.” The heels are also designed to sit as flat as possible. →





"We found that if the heels are raised just a little bit, you lose a lot of space in the cockpit. Being able to give taller athletes that little bit more space can be very helpful," says Van Dinther.

With the flexible and rubberised sole, walking is also no problem in the new shoes.

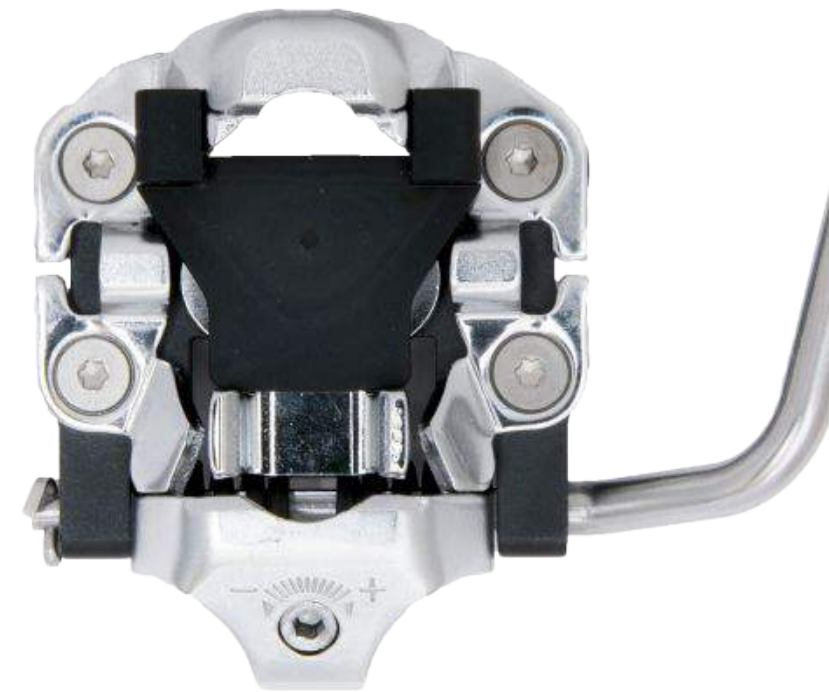
For attaching the shoes to the boat, Shimano designed and manufactured a foot stretcher in which the bindings are integrated. The foot stretcher is made entirely from lightweight pre-impregnated carbon, providing remarkable stiffness and strength. In fact, they say it is the stiffest foot stretcher setup available on the market. It will be available in a range of widths to match any shape or size of boat.

In the spirit of making the individual shoe concept available to all, Shimano have also released a retro-fit kit which converts any existing foot stretcher. With the aid of a specially designed adapter, the new bindings are simply bolted through the existing holes on the footplate. At a similar cost to replacing one pair of shoes, the hope is that it will be a simple choice for clubs between replacing old shoes - which will have to be replaced many times over - or fitting the new bindings and allowing the athletes to supply their own shoes.

The original swing-arm concept will continue to exist as a specialty product says Shimano, for athletes who want to use it, but the new footplates and retro kit will open the individual shoe concept to the entire sport. Alongside these new products, Shimano is also evolving its distribution model. Having previously sold mostly direct to the consumer, the next phase is to roll-out partnerships with local dealers.

"A shoe market doesn't really exist in rowing right now," explains Van Dinther "but we are confident it will get there. That is the way rowing is

"Will rowers be converted to the idea of owning shoes that actually fit? Shimano believes it's just a matter of time."



moving. Our hope is Shimano can add value to the rowing market, similar to our undertakings in the cycling and fishing markets."

Now more than a decade since its conception, the Shimano rowing business seems to be finding its feet. In many ways it has been a bigger challenge than predicted.

"If I explain what we are trying to do to other people within the company, who are generally cyclists, they don't believe it. The only sports where people share shoes are rowing and bowling. Even bowlers will generally be given the right size shoes. They can't see how this hasn't already happened. Because it's better for the rowers, it's better for the clubs and it's better for the dealers. Yes, the individual rower has to make their own investment, but would they not be willing to pay a small one-time fee for shoes they personally own and that are far more hygienic, far safer and far more comfortable every time they row?" says Van Dinther

"When we started this project in 2009, nobody was looking at the shoe or the foot stretcher. Nobody was thinking about it. We are proud that we have started a revolution in the area. Rowing moves a lot slower than we are used to in cycling and I think rowing has proved far more conservative than the people within the company in Japan imagined it would be. We are a very small team in a big company, we are ten people of about 12,000 Shimano employees. Sometimes it can be difficult to get the point across why things move slowly in this sport," adds Van Dinther.

Despite having the resources to do so, Shimano have opted not to saturate the sport. They could easily inject huge amounts of marketing dollars into dominating a relatively small market. But it's not the way they want to do things. "We don't want to buy market share, we don't want to buy exposure, we want the product to do the talking. That's the reason we aren't showing up to events in big trucks with 50 people. We want to grow organically and we want to earn it," says Van Dinther.

So, will rowers be converted to the idea of owning shoes that actually fit? Shimano believes it's just a matter of time. **ROW360**

