



Joe Criscuolo / Contributed photo

Westbrook's Jim Palmer, co-owner of Crew Rowing in Branford, during his recent marathon row. 8/5/19

65-year-old does marathon row with replaced knee

By Lisa Reisman

BRANFORD — To explain the continuing dominance of champion swimmer Michael Phelps, scientists identified his 80-inch wingspan, double-jointed ankles and paddle-like hands. For Alex Bregman, the Houston Astros All-Star third baseman, it's his abnormally short arms that keep him from overswinging on outside pitches.

Add Jim Palmer, co-owner of Branford's Crew Rowing, to the list of biomechanical phenoms.

On Friday, July 5, the 65-year-old qui-

etly completed a marathon row. That's 42,195 meters, or 26.2 miles. It took him 4 hours and 10 minutes. He could have kept going.

According to Tom Holeva, former owner of Pull Rowing and endurance runner, that's quite a feat.

"It's probably physically harder on your body to row a marathon than to run a marathon because it engages five major muscle groups, and also 85 percent of the muscles in your body," he said.

"If you were to ask a decent endurance athlete to row even 5,000 meters, they would probably struggle."

That's how it started, when someone challenged Palmer to row 5,000 meters, roughly 3.1 miles. At the time, he'd been rowing regularly at Pull Rowing (now Crew Rowing) for about 18 months.

"I like a challenge," the Westbrook resident said. "I like to challenge myself."

Not long after, he rowed 5,000 meters with surprising ease. In the next weeks he completed an 8,000-, then a 10,000-meter row, and then a half-marathon, a distance of 13.1 miles. It took him 105 minutes. His heart rate never exceeded 120.

See Row on A10



Joe Criscuolo / Contributed photo

Westbrook's Jim Palmer, co-owner of Crew Rowing in Branford, recently completed an astonishing marathon row

four or more hours just because of my build, the tuna would be pulling as hard as it could."

The motion, it turns out, of pushing, then sliding backward on the footrest, and then reeling on the way down, is similar to rowing. In fact, fishermen routinely do off-season training on rowers.

Whatever explains his rare gift for endurance rowing, there was Palmer at the Crew Rowing studio on Friday, July 5. He'd told few of his quest — his co-owner Joe Criscuolo and a few of the trainers at Pull Rowing, including his wife April.

At the beginning, he "lacked energy and initiative," he said.

Then, with the flamenco music of Latin string guitarist Jesse Cook pulsating through the space, he gradually he got into a groove. He took breaks every 7,000 meters, drinking water and eating bites of banana. As in any endurance contest, there were mental struggles. There were mind games.

"At a certain point in the middle I just wasn't feeling it and then I said to myself, just get to 21K, make an evaluation, and then I was at 28K and I started think-

ing I can do this," he said.

That was when Criscuolo dropped in. Palmer was going faster, in strokes per minute, than when Criscuolo pushed himself in a class. "It was crazy," he said.

Though Palmer, upon finishing, once again "felt great," there were some very real dangers he faced in its aftermath.

According to a Massachusetts General Hospital study, there is an effect of "too much exercise" on heart health, including "plaque build-up and scar tissue in the heart, even in patients who have no other objective risk factors for heart disease," it reads.

In other words, "this isn't something that people should try at home," Holeva said.

Still, what Palmer did "is definitely a unique accomplishment," he said. "Anyone who knows our sport of rowing will tell you that."

Palmer's message is simple. "You can surprise yourself on how much you can do. If you stay committed, you can get to physical levels that you never imagined.

Fair enough, but especially, it seems, if you're uniquely built for it.