

Globe and Mail
Dragon boat story
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Dragon boating for recovery

SusanPinker

It may look like a group of friends just having fun but the 20 women paddling rhythmically across Montreal's Olympic basin are engaged in a serious project – cancer recovery. The drum is beating, the coach is hollering and the women are paddling – about 65 strokes a minute. The 2000 pound Power of the Dragon boat surges across the water. It's neck and neck with Eye Catch, a competitive team of 18 to 25 year-old women, brimming with long hair, long legs and good health. It's a tight race. It looks exhilarating. And The Power of the Dragon comes in a close second.

The women who make up the Power of the Dragon team range in age from 39 to 74, with an average age of about 65. They are a tough bunch. Either cancer survivors or cancer caregivers, these women know firsthand how to defeat a powerful opponent. They train twice a week with a professional coach to build up strength, endurance and speed, practising indoors in winter and outdoors as soon as the water in the Olympic basin thaws. "Sometimes we're paddling with snow in our teeth," says Joan Roberts, 71, the team captain. In the process, they're defying the longstanding edict that vigorous, repetitive exercise is a no-no for those in cancer treatment or suffering the treatment's common after-effect, lymphedema: a painful and debilitating swelling of the limbs that can occur when lymph nodes are removed or radiated during treatment.

A ginger hands-off approach to cancer recovery is rapidly becoming outdated. As a result of innovative research in Vancouver, oncologists around the world are now giving the thumbs-up to women who want to train for dragon boat races, or any other strenuous sport, for that matter. "When I first started this business they (cancer survivors) were told they musn't do this, they musn't do that. They couldn't lift an iron. Now it's back to normal life right away," says Dr. Urve Kuuski, a surgical oncologist from UBC who, with sports physiologist Dr. Donald McKenzie, was one of the first researchers to investigate the health benefits of dragon boat racing for breast cancer survivors.

It all started in 1996, when McKenzie and a team of psychologists, rehabilitation therapists and physicians from UBC launched the first breast cancer dragon boat team. It was called Abreast in a Boat, and its purpose was to shore up the muscle tone and mood of women who had completed breast cancer treatment.

Returning to their routines after a life-threatening illness was a hurdle for many cancer survivors, who were often left adrift without medical and psychosocial support once their surgery, chemo and radiation programs were complete. Anxiety and depression often set in. And the taboo against strenuous exercise – especially the myth that it caused lymphedema -- contributed to a loss of muscle tone and a general sense of malaise. Dr. McKenzie's group set out to challenge the status quo for this population (of about 2 million breast cancer survivors in North America alone) by recruiting and training the first group of competitive breast cancer dragon boat paddlers. Dragon boating was chosen because it is strenuous, repetitive, non weight-bearing – and therefore less likely to cause injury -- focused on building upper body strength, and importantly, a social and demanding pursuit that is thrilling to watch. A group of cancer survivors keeping pace with or even out paddling teams of firefighters or investment counsellors sends the message that life can go on after cancer.

Not only providing inspiration, the impact of dragon boat training was increased body strength and cardiovascular capacity for the women, plus a general boost in physical and mental health. The training program did not cause or exacerbate lymphedema, a fact that was documented in a 1999 study conducted by UBC Rehabilitation Sciences professor Susan Harris, a breast cancer survivor and one of the original participants in the first Abreast in a Boat team. In fact dragon boat training improved the range of motion for women who already had lymphedema. Suddenly, dragon boat racing for cancer survivors became a happening. The number of teams in grew from one in Vancouver in 1996 to at least 30 teams in Canada this year, with one in almost every Canadian city (see sidebar).

Even after a lifetime of little or no exercise Joan Roberts, a breast cancer survivor joined the Power of the Dragon team when she was recruited at age 70. One year later, Roberts is a convert and captain of the team, wearing dangly dragon boat earrings and a pullover with the team's insignia. "Have you heard of Two-Abreast?" she asks, referring to a local team of much younger breast cancer survivors. "We're the ones who beat them by two seconds. And our boat is not just a breast boat. We've got lymphedema, lymphoma, melanoma, ovaries, colon and

breast. We're all women, in a class of our own, and we compete in an open race," she says, referring to the fact that they race against competitive teams like Eye Catch as well as corporate teams. As to why she joined competitive dragon boating after a largely sedentary lifestyle, she deadpans. "It's good exercise. It's good camaraderie. And it proves we're not dead." This past winter Roberts and several other Power of the Dragon women took a bus down to Florida to a winter training camp, and paddled alongside Olympic athletes and competitors a quarter their age. Why? "We love to win," she says.

Roberts' bout with cancer was years ago, but there are paddlers on dragon boat teams confronting recurrences and active treatment. As to whether they should continue training during treatments that Kuuski describes as "not pretty" is an individual matter. But it's also a question being asked more formally during ongoing research at UBC. Aerobic exercise regimens are now being tested on patients undergoing chemotherapy, and preliminary results are positive, says Kuuski. "An aerobic exercise program through chemo shows that it does improve the mental mindset, if not a patient's physical state," she said from her office in Vancouver. She offers an opinion on whether dragon boat team members currently experiencing clinical setbacks should continue racing. "From my experience, if they can do it, they'll be there," she says. Susan Harris agrees. On her team, most of the women going through treatment participate by drumming, not willing to miss out on what she calls "the incredible joie de vivre of participating in a sport after cancer. We have a whole host of women with metastatic disease who continue to participate in some way. During my treatment I was too exhausted. I sat on the shore with a bald head waiting to get back into the boat. It's an incredible metaphor for living a full life and facing the devil," she says of the dragon boat experience.

That's the view of Joan MacNab, 68, whose first breast cancer surgery was in 1996. She started dragon boat racing in 1997 and is now on the Power of the Dragon team. Having been a short distance runner in her youth, MacNab says she joined a dragon boat team "for the thrill of competing. Every time I get in a boat, I'm racing to win." she says, preferring competition to "sitting around in little groups talking." Despite a lumpectomy and a mastectomy, metastases have recently been discovered in her liver and MacNab is set to begin radiation treatments any day. "I'm not sure if I can paddle, but I'll ask," she says, adding a little wish. "I hope I'm not even out of the boat at all." About the Power of the Dragon's handsome, hard-driving coach,

Matt Robert, MacNab is pleased that he's hellbent on building up the women's endurance. "He doesn't coddle us at all and that's what I want."

Robert says he doesn't treat the Power of the Dragon team any differently than he does the elite women's team he also coaches. "We do a lot of endurance workouts – 4 x 10 minutes, or 6 x 1000 metres. I'm aiming for them to be ready to paddle at 2 minutes 40 seconds for 500 metres," he says while steering the boat standing barefoot at the stern and clutching his stopwatch. "We have to be very powerful to lift the boat out of the water," adding that the 50-foot boat weighs 2000 pounds at the starting line, plus the body weight of 20 paddlers. Robert is not at all concerned about how his Power of the Dragon ladies will do during the upcoming June Dragon Boat competition in Ottawa. "They're very efficient paddlers. The way I see it, they've beaten cancer, they can beat anything."

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Sidebar 1. History of the Dragon

Dragonboat racing has been a part of the Chinese spring calendar for 2,400 years. One of the centrepieces of the Dragon Boat Festival, the races are rooted in a holiday tradition devoted to warding off evil spirits and the spread of disease that historically accompanied summer weather in Asia. The Festival, which falls on the fifth day of the fifth month of the Chinese lunar calendar, commemorates the life of the poet Chu Yuan (343-290 B.C.), who jumped into the Miluo River after not being able to convince a government statesman to give up his corrupt ways. Chu Yuan was searched for by people living alongside the river, who unable to find him, threw food and rice into the water packed into bamboo trunks. The Chinese community remembers the example of Chu Yuan every spring by eating rice dumplings wrapped in bamboo leaves, and by holding boat races on the Miluo river. Dragon boat racing has now become popular in Asia, Europe and North America and Canada now has over 1000 dragon boat teams, with several in each city. Approximately 30 of these are comprised of cancer survivors. The exact number of dragon boat teams is hard to estimate as it is a grass-roots phenomenon, says Sunny Lam, coordinator of Montreal's dragon boat festival, who compiled the folklore surrounding dragon boating from a historian in Hong Kong.

Sidebar 2. Paddles Up!

Want to see dragon boat competitions in action or join a team? Go to one of the many dragon boat websites (e.g. www.dragonboat.ca, , www.dragonboat.com, or www.dragonboat.net for links to events and teams in your area. Here is a sampling:

June 8 –9: Pickering Dragon Boat Festival, Boston Festival, Charles River

June 14-15: Sault Ste. Marie, Roberta Bondar Pavillion

June 22-23: Ottawa, Rideau Canal, Vancouver Harbour, Toronto's Centre Island

June 30 –July 1: Lethbridge

July 20-21: Montreal, Olympic Basin, Waterloo, Calgary

August 16-18: Edmonton's Louise McKinney Park, Victoria, BC.

Sept. 8-9: Kingston, Stratford

Sept. 14-15: Kelowna

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