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Taming the Dragon

BY ELIZABETH WHITTINGTON

Dragon boat racing embraced by breast cancer survivors.

After breast cancer, the last thing Debbie Byrd of Lilburn, Georgia, imagined herself doing was taking up a new sport. But there she was, pushing herself to paddle with 19 other breast cancer survivors in the middle of False Creek in Vancouver, Canada. If she looked to her right, she might find another boat full of breast cancer survivors from Singapore; to the left, Australia, Canada, Italy or another team from the United States, each in a long, narrow boat painted in the Chinese tradition of a dragon with the team's flag whipping above them. Hundreds of people lined the banks, creating a sea of cheering pink.

“Looking at all the women there, they were all so strong, always smiling and laughing. You didn't see anyone give up,” Byrd says. “It was just the most amazing weekend.” During the weekend of June 25, 2005, Byrd and 1,500 other breast cancer survivors and supporters gathered in Vancouver for the 10-year celebration of the first breast cancer survivor dragon boat paddling team—a phenomenon that began as a science project.

For years, physicians warned survivors that repetitive motion after lymph node removal, which is common in mastectomies, or damage to the lymph nodes from radiation could result in lymphedema, a condition that occurs when excess fluid collects in the tissue, causing irreversible swelling in the legs and arms. In 1995 Donald McKenzie, MD, PhD, a sports medicine physician in Canada, tested the myth that repetitive upper-body exercise caused lymphedema in breast cancer survivors. To test his theory, Dr. McKenzie enlisted several breast cancer survivors and formed a dragon boat paddling team, calling themselves Abreast In A Boat.

Dragon boating, which has since become one of the fastest-growing water sports in the world, uses a drummer, a steersperson and 18 to 20 paddlers to propel a long, narrow boat. Because of the number of paddlers and size of the boat, keeping in sync with teammates is essential, but very difficult. Since the inception of Abreast In A Boat, breast cancer survivor teams have appeared across the United States, with many more in Canada and countries worldwide. Other cancer

survivors have also taken up paddles and formed teams as a support group, form of exercise and awareness tool.

A New Sport

Brenda Hochachka, of Vancouver, Canada, was one of the first breast cancer survivors recruited for Dr. McKenzie's study. "When we had our first meeting, Don showed us a video of the world championship-winning False Creek team and none of us could believe that we could ever do this sport," Hochachka says. "Some of us had been told to be careful about doing any strenuous upper-body exercise because of the risk of lymphedema after surgery and radiation. We had been told to not carry groceries, lift our kids, vacuum or dig in the garden."

Dr. McKenzie, along with a physiotherapist and nurse, carefully monitored the women throughout the season. His theory was confirmed when no new cases of lymphedema occurred and none of the existing cases became worse. Since that initial study published in 1998, most physicians now encourage breast cancer survivors to exercise their upper body.

After the study, the women planned to finish the 1996 dragon boat season and go their separate ways. But remarkably, it has now grown to six crews and sparked breast cancer survivor teams all over the world. "It was so much fun to be a team member, get fit, play on the water with a group of new friends and do something positive for our minds and bodies," says Hochachka, who was captain of the original Abreast In A Boat team. "It really is no surprise that many other women have embraced the sport." She says beyond dragon boat racing, many of her team members have gone on to do other things, such as mountain climbing, as part of their recovery program. "It is a fact that some of the women are more physically active as a result of Don's program than they have ever been."



Members of Chemo Savy listen to their drummer for coaching and motivation during one of the 10 Years Abreast Celebration heats in Vancouver. Photo courtesy of Abreast in a Boat.

Practice Makes Perfect

More than 60 survivor teams from around the world gathered to celebrate and compete in the 10 Years Abreast Celebration in Vancouver to mark the anniversary of the first Abreast In A Boat team. Although Hochachka and other original team members were honored, newer members also participated in the festivities, including Ysa Luz.

Luz became interested in dragon boat racing after hearing about the teams in her hometown of Vancouver. Diagnosed with breast cancer in 1993, it wasn't until four years later that Luz decided to join the team. But that same year, Luz was diagnosed with thyroid cancer and had to postpone her dragon boat plans. "In 2003—10 years after my breast cancer diagnosis—I paddled," she says. To prepare, the women trained for three months before getting into the water. Luz says the first practice was exhausting and served as a huge learning experience for most of the women. "Twelve of us had never paddled in a dragon boat," Luz says. "Others had never paddled anything."

In dragon boat racing, it's not the strength of the paddlers, but their rhythm that makes the boat glide across the water. "If you don't do it absolutely, precisely in sync, you cancel each other out and you don't move," Luz says. Her first time on the water, Luz says that it took nearly an hour for the team to paddle out of the lagoon to start the practice. Three years later, Luz has paddled with the Abreast In A Boat team in numerous competitions around Canada and even an international regatta in Singapore.

More Than a Support Group

In addition to the exercise benefit, dragon boat racing teams have become a support group. A member of the Dragon Boat Atlanta team, Byrd says it was the community of survivors she craved after diagnosis. "I didn't want to sit in a support group," Byrd says. "I wanted to breathe fresh air. I wanted to do something positive, something that would give me strength."

That sense of community is obvious to many who watch the teams practice or compete. Sandi Buhrmaster-Jelinski, an eight-year member of the Pink Phoenix team of Portland, Oregon, says many women are inspired by support they see within the team. She specifically remembers one practice when a woman approached them to say she had been diagnosed with breast cancer just the day before. "She said it was great seeing us, a variety of ages, variety of sizes, where no physical ability is required," Buhrmaster-Jelinski says. "It's fun, but at the same time, it's very emotional because it's two-fold. You're happy there are a lot of women getting involved, but at the same time, there are too many women out there being diagnosed with breast cancer."

Recurrence is also an issue many teams must cope with. The Pink Phoenix, the first team of breast cancer survivors in the United States, now hosts an exhibition race at Portland's Rose Festival in honor of their founding captain, Michele Gorman, who died of a recurrence in April 1998. Each year after the Gorman Cup, the crowd becomes silent as survivors stand in their boats and throw pink carnations in the Willamette River in memory of her and others who have died of breast cancer, a tradition many survivor dragon boat festivals have adopted.

Byrd says that although she wasn't very athletic before her breast cancer diagnosis, she has only missed a couple of practices since she began more than three years ago. But it's not the competition of dragon boat racing that motivates her—it's the fact that she's celebrating life after cancer. "It's not looking back to what you've been through, it's looking toward the future," Byrd says. "We can't wait to be in the next race. We're looking forward because we're here."