



# Breast Strokes



[www.breaststrokes.org](http://www.breaststrokes.org)

## **Paddlers Handbook**

This handbook is a basic guide to dragon boat paddling for members and prospective members of our team. BreastStrokes is a breast cancer survivor dragon boat team. We also have 'supporter paddlers' who have not had breast cancer. In this handbook, we want to answer questions you may have, and help you enjoy the sport from day one!

This information explains our approach to dragon boating, and what team BreastStrokes does throughout the paddling season. You are always welcome to contact your membership representative (your first contact when asking to join), your team Captain, or any member of the team with questions as they arise.

### **Team Culture:**

Our goal is to provide a safe, enjoyable, supportive environment for all BreastStrokes paddlers. We want everyone to do their best, regardless of paddling skill or experience. BreastStrokes team members are committed to being kind, accepting and encouraging toward all fellow paddlers.

Our culture is one of mutual respect, where we acknowledge and congratulate others for their efforts. Team camaraderie is more important to us than winning a race – we are a floating support group. We ask you to respect our culture and appreciate the support and opportunities the club provides.

Our team is managed by volunteers, who dedicate a great deal of time to team business and function. Fundraising is how we stay afloat. As part of your membership commitment, you will be required to participate in BreastStrokes fund raising activities throughout the year. Ask your membership liaison person for more information.

### **In respect of others, please:**

- Do not wear perfume or strongly scented body products when paddling.
- Input your availability for each practice or team event, using the TeamSnap online calendar.
- Be on time for practices and races. Ask, if you're not sure when to be on site.
- Respond to team messages and requests in a timely manner.

# Breast Strokes

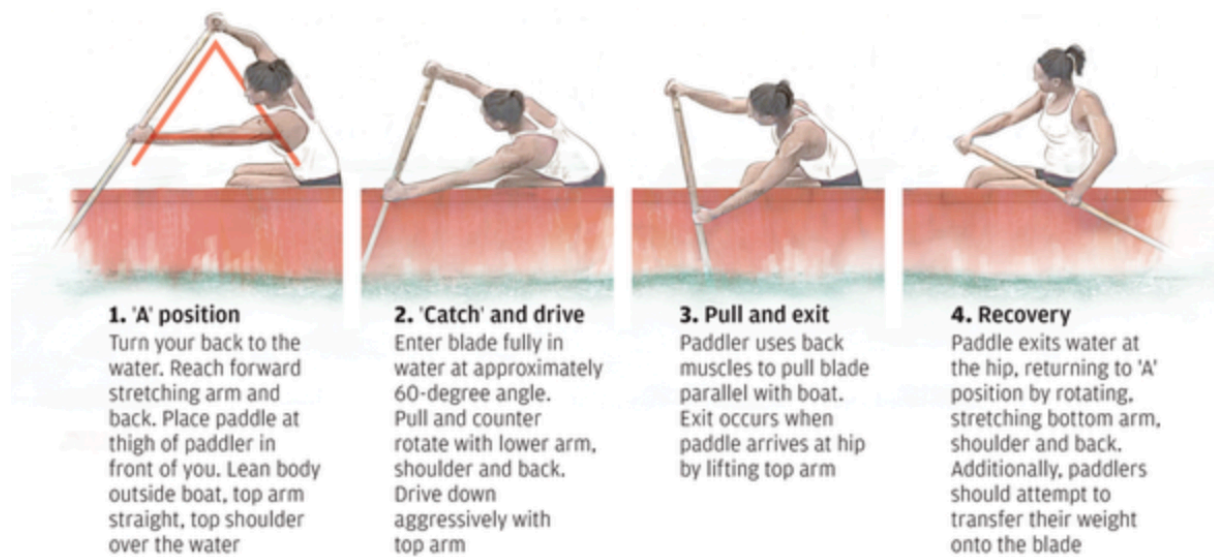
## About BreastStrokes Paddling Practices: May to September

We paddle two times per week on Puslinch Lake and at a number of regattas (dragon boat racing events) throughout our paddling season. There is a map in this handbook with our exact dock location for weekly practices. Parking space is very limited, so please ask how you can ride-share with other team members.

Paddling practice sessions are, for the most part, structured to prepare for dragon boat competitions. At practices, we work to improve paddling technique as well as our strength and fitness. Our professional coach guides each of us to improve our paddling stroke. During practices, you will have an opportunity to be in different sections of the boat, learning how that affects your technique.

**About Dragon Boat Paddling:** Dragon boating appeals to paddlers of all ages and is one of the easiest sports to get into. No special skills are required to join our team.

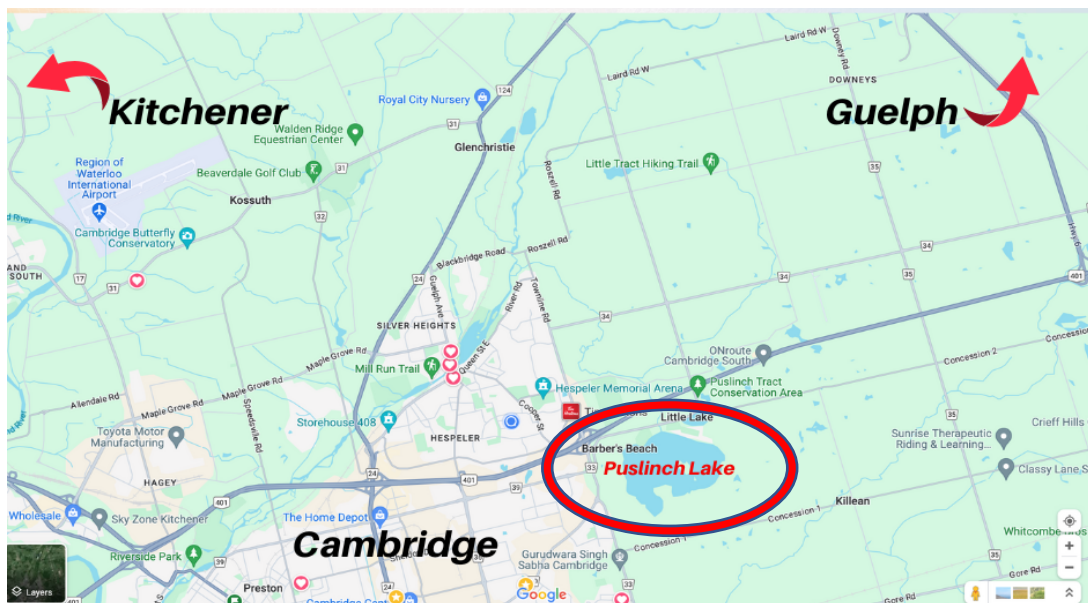
- **BreastStrokes Team Membership** is open to adult women, with our priority being breast cancer survivors. BreastStrokes has 70+ year-old veteran paddlers who still enjoy the sport and do well in competitions.
- **Skill Required:** From day one new paddlers learn paddling technique from our professional coach. New paddlers are paired with experienced team members. We work to support one another, so new paddlers feel included as they learn.
- **Fitness Benefits:** Dragon boat paddling provides a total-body workout, building strength in the upper body, core and legs.
- **Paddling Skill and Technique:** Paddling efficiently takes practice. Teams that are synchronized, with efficient paddling strokes, can triumph over crews that are younger and stronger.
- **Teamwork:** Teamwork is BreastStrokes' main goal. There are no MVP awards. Our paddlers support each other to achieve fellowship, fun, improved health and fitness, and our best possible race results!



# Breast Strokes

## Practices – Where and When

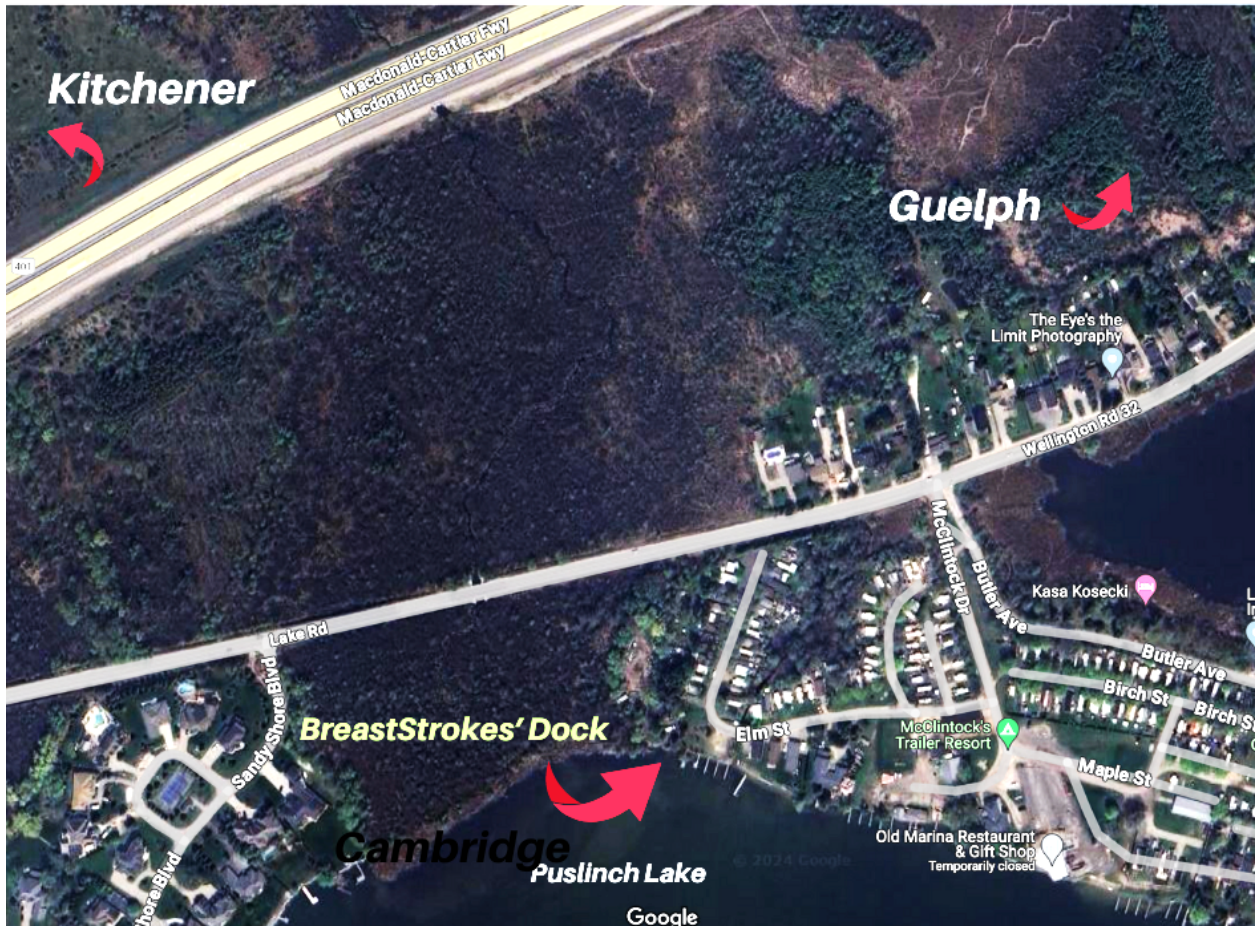
- **Location:** BreastStrokes paddles at Puslinch Lake (see maps below), leaving from our dock at the end of the McClintock Ski School Road. BreastStrokes' dock space is generously donated to us by the McClintock family. **Google maps link:** <https://maps.app.goo.gl/fWczPw6MHuZtA7Yw8>
  - As noted, **parking space is limited.** New members are advised to ride-share with BreastStrokes' alumni. Our experienced paddlers know where the dock is, and we reduce cars onsite.
- **Practice Times – Using TeamSnap:** ***Please indicate attendance for each practice on TeamSnap at least 24 hours in advance.*** TeamSnap is our team communication app where all practices and events are posted. Our Captain, Steer and Coach need to know how many we will have in the boat each practice: <https://www.teamsnap.com/>
  - Once you have joined the team, you will be given details re: how to set up your TeamSnap profile. This app works on smartphones, iPads and computers.
  - Adding a profile picture and other details helps everyone get to know you – and you can browse the team roster to get to know others.
  - ***Practice information (including weather cancellations when required) will come to you through TeamSnap, so it's essential that you are connected.***
  - Rescheduling or cancelling practices due to weather conditions can be done up to 4:00 pm on the day of practice. Emails or texts will be sent out from our captain with reason for cancelation!
- **Be Punctual:** Regular practices are Tuesday & Thursday evenings. We usually meet at 6:00 – 6:15 pm and are on the water by 6:30. This allows time for important announcements, warm up, and assignment of seats in the boat. ***Monitor TeamSnap for any changes to practice schedule.***
- **Practice Duration:** Practices last approximately one hour.



# Breast Strokes



## BreastStrokes Dock Site at Puslinch Lake



Google maps link: <https://maps.app.goo.gl/fWczPw6MHuZtA7Yw8>



# Breast Strokes

## Padding Equipment and What to Wear – PFDs Clothing & Paddles

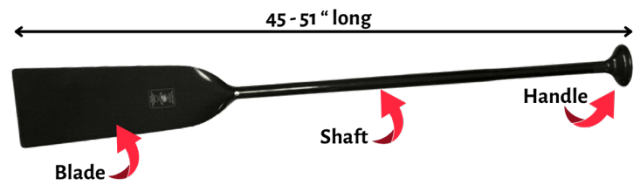
- **PFDs** (personal flotation devices):  
BreastStrokes provides each member with a high quality, certified life jacket. PFDs must be properly fastened and worn at all times while on the dock and out on the water. No exceptions. Ensure your PFD fits properly and please take good care of it. You may use your own PFD if it is approved by our Captain, and Coach.
  - **Proper PFD Fit:** Hold your arms straight up over your head and have a friend gently pull up on the tops of the arm openings. If the jacket rides up over your face or chin, it is too large. Try a smaller size.
- **Clothing:** Other than a PFD, wear comfortable exercise clothing. You will be issued a practice T-shirt when you join the team. Dress for the weather, in clothing that breathes and allows you to move. Many members wear a T-shirt and track pants, yoga pants or shorts (depending on temperature).
  - **Dragon boating is a water sport** – you will get splashed! You may want a set of dry clothes for the drive home.
  - **Footwear:** No flip-flops or bare feet, please. Wear closed-toed water sandals, water shoes or trainers that you don't mind getting wet.
  - **Gloves:** Personal choice. Some paddlers use gloves all the time (example: fingerless weight training gloves) to protect their hands and improve grip. Others find gloves inconvenient or uncomfortable. It's your choice.
  - **Uniforms:** During competitions (dragon boat festivals, regattas and team public appearances), all BreastStrokes paddlers must wear the team uniform – a short-sleeved team shirt and black pants (of your choice). Team pants and jackets are available for purchase, but not required.
  - **Hat or Visor:** Sun protection is recommended. Make sure your hat will stay put in a strong wind.
  - **Sunglasses or Eyewear:** Make sure you attach a floatable sport strap to the earpieces so you don't lose your eyewear during practice.
  - **Bum Pads:** Some paddlers like to use a seat pad. A gardener's kneeling pad can work (but is typically quite thick). Padded cycling shorts are helpful. So are kitchen drawer liners (waffled foam sheeting), that can be cut to your preferred size. Seat pads are appropriate (not required) for practice, but are not used during a dragon boat race.
  - **Water Bottle:** Bring a sealable bottle where the mouthpiece is covered. Your water bottle will be on the floor of the boat, rolling around with things you don't want in your mouth!



# Breast Strokes

**Paddles:** The team provides each paddler with an IDBF (International Dragon Boating Federation approved) carbon fibre paddle. Some paddlers prefer to purchase their own carbon fibre paddle (that's a personal choice, and not required).

## Dragon Boat Paddle



- **Paddle specs:** All dragon boat paddles must meet IDBF paddle specs. They can be made of wood or carbon fibre. There is no restriction on weight (lighter is usually preferred!). Length must be between 45 and 51 inches.
- **Paddle Length:** The coach will help each paddler find her recommended length of paddle. Generally, taller people need a longer paddle, but paddle length also depends on a paddler's strength and technique. A paddle that is too long for you may cause shoulder strain or injury. Paddle length can be changed throughout the season if necessary. Your coach will help you find your best fit.

**Safety:** BreastStrokes' priority is the safety of all paddlers. Motorized vessels use Puslinch Lake, so we must be observant. This means knowing paddling commands and ***LISTENING to the steersperson at all times.***

- **Loading the Boat:** Please follow your Captain's instructions. The ramp to the dock and the dock itself can be slippery. You will be called from the shore in pairs (with your paddling partner), onto the dock for boarding.
- **Health Issues:** Health screening forms must be completed by all paddlers. Team members with health issues or allergies will inform the Captain before practice. Examples: allergies to bee stings; diabetes requiring medication. Any paddlers receiving breast cancer treatment must have medical clearance before paddling.
- **Weather Conditions:** You will be informed through TeamSnap when practice is cancelled or re-scheduled due to weather. Should conditions deteriorate during a practice, we will come off the water immediately. Examples: thunder storms, high winds, poor air quality, heat warnings.

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**Dragon Boating Commands:** To work and be safe as a team, it's important to understand the language used by your **steersperson / coach**. Commands vary somewhat between teams, so here is what you will hear in our boat, and what the commands mean.

- **"Quiet in the Boat":** This important command must be respected for the safety of all in the boat. Chat times will happen between sets of paddling, but when quiet is requested, please remain silent and listen for instructions.
- **"Walk the Boat Back":** Paddlers dock-side in the boat carefully use their hands to push the boat backward toward the lake.
- **"Push Away" or "Push Off":** The side of the boat closest to the dock uses their hand or the handle of their paddle to push the boat away from the dock.

# Breast Strokes

- **“Back it Down”**: These are paddle strokes used to move the boat backwards. We use these strokes to leave the dock, but also when lining up to the start of a race. Paddlers reach their paddle behind their hip and push the blade forward. Listen to the drummer and coach / steersperson so you can do this in time with the rest of the crew.
- **“Paddles Up”**: Everyone lifts their paddle into the “A-Frame” position, ready to start paddling together.
- **“Take it Away”**: Follows the “Paddles Up” command during practice. Using the paddle stroke you have learned, listening to the drum and keeping in synch with paddlers around you, begin paddling.
- **“Feather the Boat”** (brace the boat): Used to stabilize the boat when people are changing seats. Paddles are extended straight out to the side of each paddler. Blades are pressed flat onto the surface of the water. Move the blade side to side (pressing down on the water) like icing a cake. Keep doing this until asked to stop.
- **“Draw”**: This stroke is used to move the boat sideways. Paddlers on one side of the boat are asked to draw (“right side draw”) by reaching out sideways, perpendicular to the hull of the boat, and pulling water toward and under the boat. Draw strokes can also be used to turn the boat (“front four paddlers left & back four paddlers right, draw on my command”). This action would rotate the boat to the left. This action may be used when docking or when positioning the boat for a race.
- **“Hold the Boat”**: Probably the most important command! This action stops the boat from moving forward (or backward). Paddlers bury their paddle blades vertically (perpendicular to the hull), to slow or stop boat movement. **When asked to HOLD, don’t stop holding until you’re asked to stop or relax.**
- **HOLD HARD!** This command is given to stop the boat quickly or stop all drifting. Paddlers bury the blades as above and apply substantial force against the direction of movement. This brings the boat to a quick stop, or stops it from drifting forward (for example, at the start line of a race).
- **Hold for Drift:** This hold keeps the boat from drifting sideways due to winds or currents. Bury the paddle blade fully in the water, keeping the blade parallel to the side of the boat to reduce or stop lateral movement of the boat.
- **“Ready, Ready!”** Used in a race or practicing starts. Paddlers are poised like runners in the starting blocks, waiting for the starting horn. During a race, always listen to the steer/coach in YOUR boat for your commands.
- **Start Commands in a Race:** These will be reviewed before a regatta (race). The crew will load the boat and paddle 500 m to the race start line, maneuvering as required to approach the start in an orderly way. The race starter will say, “All boats hold” “Paddlers are you ready?” “Attention please!” Then a horn will sound to start the race.
- **“Let it Run”**: This is everyone’s favourite command! Stop paddling and rest your paddle on the gunnel (across your lap and on the side rail of the boat). Let the boat continue to glide. Listen for this command at the end of a race, or paddle training interval. Relax, but keep listening for your next command.

# Breast Strokes

## Who is in charge of the boat?

For everyone's safety, there is a chain of command in a dragon boat.

- **Steersperson** ("Sweep"): This person stands at the back of the boat, operating the steering oar. The steersperson can also be your boat Captain and/or Coach, or may be there just to steer, with the Coach and Captain seated elsewhere in the boat. **The steersperson is responsible for the control and safety of the boat at all times.** Steerspersons control the boat when leaving the dock, when paddling, and when returning. They avoid marine hazards and dangerous situations (like inclement weather). Safety is their priority! Sweeps can only maintain safety when the crew is listening and immediately responsive to their commands.
- **Captain** (and assistant Captain): Elected by the team, this person is responsible for the team's function and well-being. In consultation with the Coach, the Captain establishes the team paddling roster (who sits where in the boat). They welcome new paddlers, create an atmosphere of friendship, and are a role model for the team. Captains work closely with the team Coach. (Captains may also be an official coach for the team, and Steersperson). The Captain is the voice for the boat when talking to race officials at regattas.
- **Coach:** BreastStrokes hires a professional coach (and has other qualified coaches on the team who volunteer when needed). The Coach establishes the team's training plan, coaches paddling and race technique. The Coach, Captain and Steersperson work together to create useful, enjoyable practices and racing experiences for the team.
- **Drummer:** This person sits in the drummer's seat at the front of the boat. They motivate and help synchronize paddling. Drummers work with the Captain, Coach and Steersperson to help ensure team safety. Your drummer may also be a Coach or a team Captain, so may help run a practice or race.
- **Team Manager:** Your Team Manager has key responsibilities for BreastStrokes:
  - Collect all signed BreastStrokes waivers and health screening forms from all team members at the **beginning of the season.**
  - Register the team to participate in regattas; gathering and submitting all necessary forms and regatta waivers for the team.
  - Act as the liaison with the race committee (Team Manager is BreastStrokes race planner and coordinator), working closely with the team Captain and Coach.



## Who Sits Where?

Teams usually race with twenty paddlers, a drummer and steersperson.

At practices the boat may have a full crew or distribute fewer paddlers evenly throughout the boat.

Front-to-back and side-to-side weight distribution must be considered when setting up the boat. The Coach, Captain, and/or Steersperson must know how to move paddlers to improve boat balance. Having a boat off balance can seriously affect how it tracks and glides.



# Breast Strokes

## Typical Crew Placement in the Boat:

The boat crew is divided into three sections. **Fronts** (the first 3 seats – six paddlers); **Engine Room** (the middle 4 seats – eight paddlers); and the **Backs** (the last 3 seats – six paddlers).

We encourage paddlers to try different seats in the boat, to get the feel of the water in these different positions.

- **Fronts** (first 3 rows of seats – six paddlers): The front paddler on each side is called the **Stroker**. These are strong, consistent paddlers with good timing and reach. The rest of the boat takes their cue from the stokers, who set paddling pace under the direction of their Coach and Drummer.
- **Engine Room** (the middle 4 seats – eight paddlers): This is the powerhouse of the boat, usually occupied by bigger, stronger paddlers.
- **Backs** (the last 3 seats – six paddlers): Good technical paddlers sit here. The water is moving very fast past these paddlers. In practice, novice paddlers may sit here, so they can pull up and rest when required without affecting other paddlers.

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## Paddling Basics

A detailed discussion of paddling technique is well beyond the scope of this handbook. The best way to learn to paddle is to DO it, repeatedly, with good coaching.

There are numerous websites and YouTube channels to give you some paddling basics before heading to the water for the first time. **Here's one we like:**  
[https://youtu.be/Wv\\_4PDz\\_KWM?si=1fgu\\_Sas8F6y7Dmv](https://youtu.be/Wv_4PDz_KWM?si=1fgu_Sas8F6y7Dmv)

## Helpful Tips:

- **Get Comfortable in the Boat:** Keep your outside hip against the gunnel (the outside edge of your seat). Find a good spot for your feet. You'll be pushing through the legs and engaging the core with each stroke to get the boat moving quickly.
- **Hold the Paddle Correctly:** Wrap your top hand around the 'T' grip with the thumb underneath. The bottom hand is usually kept about a hand's width from the top of the blade. Your grip should be as relaxed as possible.
- **Paddle Efficiently:** There should be no wasted motion. Think of all your paddling happening on the outside of the boat. Your top arm is always over the paddle as you pull through the stroke, and it should stay there even on the exit. Find a good rhythm. Keep your shoulders relaxed and down (not around your ears). Relax your neck. Breathe regularly!



# Breast Strokes

- **Reach Forward:** Lead with the bottom arm. The amount of available reach may depend on your seat position, but you should always have enough space to reach out under paddle of the person in front of you.
- **Clean Entry:** Make every stroke with as little splash as possible. If the paddle is 'plunking', you are probably over-reaching.
- **Pressure on the Blade:** Make sure the paddle blade is fully buried and get the feel of constant pressure throughout the stroke.
- **Clean Exit:** Get the paddle out of the water quickly and cleanly. Never let your paddle hang at the back of the stroke. The paddler behind you needs space to move her paddle forward.
- **Rest as Needed:** Novice paddlers will need to pull out and rest. So do experienced paddlers at the start of the season! When you're feeling tired or uncomfortable, rest your paddle across your lap and the gunnel, and rock your torso in time with the paddlers around you. Breathe, relax, and rejoin the action when you feel ready.
- **Keep in Time:** There's nothing more frustrating than clacking paddles. **Look up the boat at all times.** Visualize the paddles going in together and out together.
- **Relax and Keep Strong:** As you paddle, think of a bungee cord attached to your navel and forehead. This will remind you to keep your torso long, open and strong. Your power is coming from your core and legs. Your arms play only a supporting role.

## Training Tips: *Do I need to work out to start paddling?*

- **The short answer is, it wouldn't hurt!** BreastStrokes team supports staying healthy both in the boat and off-season. A well-rounded fitness program will help you build your paddling skills more comfortably, and it's good for you anyway. Seek professional advice if you're currently inactive and want to improve your health through increased activity.

## Training Plan for the Paddling Season

This refers to the way practices are structured to improve skill, endurance, and speed throughout the season. It's up to your Coach and Captain to plan this for the team, but here's some background information so you understand the plan.

- **At the Start of the Season:** Lower intensity, longer duration sets of work are done to increase endurance. Paddling technique is also a focus to help new paddlers integrate and seasoned paddlers to wake up their muscles!
- **Progression Toward Racing:** Moderate to higher intensity work, continued coaching of paddling technique, and introduction of racing strategies.
- **Race Training:** Higher intensity, shorter duration work, continued coaching of paddling technique. Practicing racing strategies: starts, mid-race pacing, and powerful finishes.
- **Festivals and Regattas:** These are dragon boat races held throughout the paddling season. Events are held across our province and country, as well as internationally. BreastStrokes team members have competed in many countries as well as local festivals in our community. The shortest races are 200 or 250 metre sprints. Typical races are 500 metres. We have competed in a few 2 kilometre events. In most cases, we enter with a 20-paddler crew. Festivals are now offering 10-crew races. Your team manager will clarify the nature of events to help you decide how you would like to participate.