

Dragon Boat Symbol of Hope, Strength

Breast cancer survivors boost health and self-esteem,
raise awareness of the disease

By Stacey Curry Gunn

Dragon boat team members and their coach gather for a group photo at a race this summer.



One sunny afternoon in September, pink carnations floated on the water as dozens of women silently paddled eight brightly painted dragon-shaped boats along Stratford's Avon River. One by one, they glided beneath a bridge, where two performers from the Stratford Festival sang "You'll Never Walk Alone."

It was an unforgettable tribute to women with breast cancer - those who have died and those who survive, and it left not a dry eye in the boat, says Marlene Jofriet, a member of the Guelph and Wellington BreastStrokes Dragon Boat Team.

The Stratford event stands out in her mind and the minds of her teammates because it was the first time they had seen so many breast cancer survivor teams together at one dragon boat festival. In all, there were eight teams from across Ontario, each with at least 22 members.

Dragon boat racing arises from Chinese tradition. Its popularity is surging in North America as more and more communities hold races each year. It's also become a focus for teams of breast cancer survivors who see it as a fun way to achieve better health and self-esteem and to raise awareness about the disease.

"When you get in the boat, again you are fighting something," says Jofriet. "In some ways, you're defying what's happening. You're like a warrior going to war, and you hear the beating of the drum, the paddles are thrashing the water and the boat is moving, kicking forward."

Jofriet completed radiation therapy last December and

joined the group in January, at the insistence of her husband, Jan, University professor emeritus in the School of Engineering. She trained all winter, but suffered a setback in March when she fell and fractured her spine. That didn't stop her from competing when race season arrived three months later, however.

"I was absolutely determined I was getting in that boat," she says. "It was the most delightful moment in my life . . . it's hard to describe it in words. It was wonderful."

The team's coach, Pat Richards, co-ordinator of U of G's lifestyle and fitness program in the Department of Athletics, says the dragon is a symbol of strength and hope for the team. "The women relate to the dragon in terms of who they are and the challenge they live with. Surviving breast cancer doesn't mean it's over. They are living with it and surviving it all the time."

The makeup of the BreastStrokes team attests to the random, fickle nature of the disease. Members range in age from their 30s to 70s. They include a writer, artist, musician, biologist, veterinarian, researcher, teacher and receptionist. They are mothers, sisters and daughters. Some have been physically active all their lives; others are more sedentary. All are unique, yet all share this challenge.

Team member Nathalie Lemieux, who successfully fought breast cancer three years ago at age 29, notes that the team is "sort of like a support group on water. We want to take an active part in life and assist others who are going through breast cancer. The overall goal is making sure we're healthy."

Lemieux, a 1999 B.Sc. graduate of Guelph and now program co-ordinator at OVC's Wild Bird Clinic, has been inspired by the strength of her teammates.

"I've met women who were diagnosed 10 and 20 years ago, so it gives you hope," she says, soberly adding that she's also met women "who haven't had the same luck."

All the women on the team are really close, she adds. "We've formed a bond that you really can't explain."

Lemieux has been steersperson for the team since it was launched three years ago on the initiative of Guelph grads Margaret Brewer and Valerie Powell. Brewer and Powell had paddled with a breast cancer survivors' team in

Hamilton and brought the idea back to the Guelph and Wellington Breast Cancer Support Group.

"I do it for fun," says Brewer. First diagnosed in 1994 at 49, she is now fighting a second battle with the cancer. "The camaraderie is tremendous, and it allows us to bring awareness of the disease to the public."

The team has come a long way since its early days, when training began in a church basement. They sat on chairs and used sticks and brooms to mimic the paddling action.

Brewer laughs as she recalls the first time the group practised in a real dragon boat at Guelph Lake. "It was tremendously exciting, but we couldn't get the boat back to the dock."

Richards came on board as the team's coach at the start of its second season, providing a major boost for the endeavour.

"Pat is great to work with," says Lemieux. "She has such a high spirit. She's right there with us and wants to do what she can for us."

Richards assesses each team member, checks their range of motion and creates a personalized training program.

Breast cancer surgery often damages the surrounding tissue and nerves, permanently reducing arm flexibility, and can cause the shoulder joint to freeze. The removal of lymph nodes can result in debilitating swelling known as lymphedema.

For some women, the medical profession offers little guidance about resuming physical activity or rehabilitation after treatment for breast cancer, says Richards. They may be told what they can't do, rather than what they can. Some are told not to lift or carry anything.

But Richards says she's convinced there are both physiological and psychological benefits to be had from physical activity: increased flexibility, range of motion, strength, endurance and self-esteem.

In addition, "the spirit and soul are just touched and brought back to life," she says.

Under their coach's careful watch, the "dragon ladies" embarked on weekly aquafit classes and held paddling

sessions sitting on the side of the Athletics Centre's gold pool. This fall, they are adding weight training to their program.

"Dragon boat racing is an intense anaerobic sport," says Richards. "You get in a boat and paddle your buns off. It places heavy demands on the back and upper body - it's a very tough race."

Richards has seen the dragon boat training and competitions make a "huge difference," particularly for women who haven't been active before. She also runs a Beyond Breast Cancer program to help survivors become healthier and stronger. This program is open to all survivors of the disease.

Through these activities, she is conducting research and compiling data "to educate the medical profession about the absolute necessity of physical activity" after surgery and cancer treatment. "The reoccurrence of other types of cancer is so high, their bodies need to be as strong as possible."

For the BreastStrokes team, the training paid off in another way this summer. They competed in four dragon boat festivals, and at Stratford, the last of the season, they reached their goal of finishing the 500-metre course in under three minutes.

The team is now intent on finding the funds to get its own practice boat, instead of renting one at each festival. Another option would be to join forces with another team in Guelph that's interested in sharing a boat.

"You don't get the same stroke or range of motion when practising from the side of the pool," says Lemieux. "The way the water moves is a whole different matter when you're in a boat. We would all benefit greatly from getting our own boat."

The team invites all breast cancer survivors to take part in the Beyond Breast Cancer program and/or join the team. It's an opportunity to "share the spirit, obtain healthy living and, most important, celebrate life," says Lemieux.

Adds Brewer: "We're always looking for new members. They don't have to be athletes. We're all shapes and sizes and levels of fitness. Some are good at sports, some are terrible at sports, and that's fine. Pat will soon get them in shape."

For more information about the BreastStrokes team or the Beyond Breast Cancer program, check out the Web site www.breaststrokes.org or call Richards at Ext. 2742.