

Riding the Dragon Down Under

By Connie Jasinkas, B.Sc. (H.K.), M.Sc.(H.K.)

I am a Human Kinetics alumnus of 76 / 79. I learned my anatomy from the ambidextrous Dr. Boyd who attacked the blackboard, coloured chalk flying in both hands. Dr. Barklay had several of our class transporting large jugs of their own urine from place to place, establishing once and for all the diuretic properties of such beverages as coffee and beer. Drs. Wilson and Graham sharpened our minds in the arena of human performance with lively labs and challenging assignments. Dr. Charteris acquainted us with the mating habits of apes and the anatomy of gait. Like many of the early HK grads, I had the privilege to attend Camp Kandalore, and learn from a wonderful man named Sass Peepre. Sass and his outdoor education camp taught me the 'J-stroke' and the exact mass of a huge aluminum canoe on a two-mile portage. Sass and Camp Kandalore fostered team spirit and the will to overcome life's challenges (we carried *canned* peaches in 80 pound canvas packs on those endless treks!). Little did I know that many years later, paddling on the edge of the gold pool in the University of Guelph Athletics Centre, Pat Richards would be yelling at me to 'quit canoeing and start paddling like a Dragon Boater!'

Life has given me some challenges. Traversing a dehydrated lake (while feeding the bugs under a huge, heavy canoe on a blistering summer day) presented one kind of challenge. Cycling from Vancouver Island to Ontario in 1976 was another. Don't get me started on the challenges of child-birth, motherhood, and 30 years of marriage! These were chosen obstacles involving pain, pleasure, and accomplishment. These hurdles were nothing compared to a cancer diagnosis. In 1997 my world changed forever when my surgeon informed me that the lump in my left breast was cancer. By the spring of 1998, I had finished seven months of chemotherapy and a month of radiation. Like one in nine Canadian women, I could now call myself a 'survivor'.

So why would women who have gone through the trauma of breast cancer diagnosis, surgery, chemotherapy and radiation choose to participate in the challenging sport of dragon boating? The 20 paddlers, drummer and steersperson have some important, common goals: we love the company of others who are 'survivor-thrivers'; we love the physical challenge of the competitions and the training (which builds upper body strength and may help prevent lymphedema); we strive to create awareness of breast cancer and the need for more research, better treatments and a cure; we love to show people that there is life after a cancer diagnosis, and that no matter what age, size, or shape we are, we can paddle with heart and courage.



Members of the Guelph BreastStrokes Dragon Boat Team competing in Wellington New Zealand, March 2003. From left to right: Iva McDonell, Connie Jasinskas, Marlene Jofriet, and Beverlie Nelson.

Approximately 100 Canadian breast cancer survivors made the long journey to New Zealand this March to compete in the inaugural South Pacific Breast Cancer Regatta (contrary to my husband's suggestion, we flew there instead of paddling). Canadians Abreast I, II, and III included women from dragon boat teams across Ontario and eastern Canada. Chemo Savvy from Winnipeg and Abreast in a Boat from Vancouver completed the strong Canadian presence at the Regatta. Pink Phoenix, a powerful, friendly team from Oregon rounded out the North American paddlers. The morning we arrived in Auckland International Airport, the Auckland dragon boat team, Busting Out, gave us a rousing 6 AM Kiwi welcome. As a group, we simultaneously belted out the two or three different versions of "OH Canada" we knew (why do they keep changing the words?).



Exhausted Canadian dragon-boaters arrive early March 10th in Auckland.

We had some wonderful challenges in New Zealand. Our Kiwi hosts graciously provided us with a tidal mud-pond for two practice sessions before the March 15 – 16 weekend Regatta. South Pacific dragon boats are quite different from their northern hemisphere cousins. There are no cross-braces on the floor against which to push your feet while attacking the water. The seats are low, so our smaller paddlers had a boat gunnel grazing their arm pit. Last, but certainly not least, these boats are extremely unstable. The ride feels like 20 women kneeling on the same log, paddling to save their lives (literally). The first Canadians Abreast boat to go for a practice session in the shallow lake rolled the boat right near the shore. Imagine 22 surprised, frightened women taking an unplanned dump, head-first into two feet of water and three feet of mud. Paddles and middle-aged women careened in various directions. Glasses were snapped, earrings and shoes were lost in the mud, and a couple of toes were broken. Several shoulders and egos were bruised. The second group of paddlers was understandably nervous as they left the shore. This did not

improve their fate. However, they had the wisdom to roll their boat farther out and did not endure the now famous Kiwi-Mud treatment. My boat was the third to leave the shore that day, and I'm proud to say, we had a few distinct wavers, but stayed afloat! Instead, we capsized our boat on the way to the start of our second race during the Regatta. That way, there were film crews and cameras of all kinds to capture our ineptitude with Kiwi dragon boats. Later that week, during tours of the Auckland and Wellington museums, we eyed the Mauri war-canoe out-riggers with lustful envy. Most Kiwi paddlers place one knee on the floor of the boat, with the other foot in front and their nether-cheeks on the seat. This gets their centre of gravity lower in the boat and establishes an anchor against which to paddle. Not having adequate practice time to master this technique, we clung to our top-heavy North American stance with predictable results.



The Auckland experience was but a warm-up for the one to two-foot swells of the famous “Windy Wellington Harbour” Regatta that took place the following weekend. There, Canadians Abreast managed to distinguish themselves by dumping two boats simultaneously. One team was finishing a race; the other

was starting. New Zealand rescue crews were not prepared to handle that many women in the water at once, so it took some time to gather all 44 soggy Canadians and return them to terra-firma. The two boats that capsized decided to form one (smaller) team for the final day of the Wellington Regatta, and were victorious over Canadians Abreast III in the final race. After facing swells that would rival any ride at Canada's Wonderland, we all felt like winners at the end of that race!

During the time between the two regattas, we took advantage of the opportunity to explore New Zealand. This is a small country with warm hospitality and stunning scenery. There are many vistas to rival British Columbia or Cape Breton. However, unlike the Canadian Rockies, there are no large predators (other than the motorists), so hiking trails are abundant and safe. We enjoyed a farm stay, volcanic lakes and hot springs on our way from Auckland to Wellington. Following the Wellington Regatta, the team dispersed, with some members heading for Fiji, the Cook Islands, Australia, or the South Island of New Zealand. Others headed home to Canada, with many fond memories of our participation in the South Pacific Regatta.

When asked how we did in the competitions, I am proud to say, "we always came first in our lane". When asked why we take on such a challenge, my answer is, "because we can". We had a blast representing Canada and Breast Cancer Survivors everywhere. We made friends from across North America and around the world. It was an experience none of us will forget. Pain, pleasure and accomplishment? Absolutely!