

RIDING THE DRAGON: Powerful in Pink!

Suzanne Bodner

Dragon boating, the fastest growing water sport in the world, requires incredible technical skill, physical strength, endurance, and mental focus. Why have breast cancer survivors around the world embraced this sport with so much passion? It's all about being powerful in pink!



"Paddles up! Take it away!"

On hearing their steersperson's crisp command, twenty paddlers, sitting two abreast, raise their paddles in the air and then, in unison, plunge them purposefully into the water. They dig deep, pull their paddles through the water, and thrill to the feeling of the bow of their forty-foot dragon boat leaping into the air and surging forward across the water. Stroking powerfully together, they fly across the water to the rhythmic beat of the drum. Fueled by a final burst of energy, they drive the boat across the finish line, its spectacularly decorated dragon head and tail gleaming and shimmering with the water churned up by their efforts.

Origins of Dragon Boating

The modern sport of dragon boating has its origins in an ancient Chinese legend which tells of a government official and poet, Qu Yuan, who was banished from court by his king and eventually committed suicide by jumping into the depths of the Milou River. On hearing of Qu Yuan's actions, the local fishermen

quickly gathered at the edge of the river and furiously paddled their long boats to the spot on the river where he was last seen. Together, they tried valiantly to save Qu Yuan, beating their drums and splashing the water to scare away dangerous fish and evil spirits. When they realized that their efforts were in vain, the fishermen threw rice cakes into the water to feed Yuan's body so that his soul could make its journey to the afterlife (Chinese Culture Center of San Francisco, 2008).

To this day, dragon boat festivals around the world celebrate the spirit of community which this Chinese legend exemplifies. Modern dragon boating emerged as an international sport in 1976 in Hong Kong, and with an explosion in popularity, over 50 million aficionados from around the world now participate in a single-minded quest to fly down the 500-meter race course and cross the finish line, a dragon nose ahead of the competition. Paddling in sync is the key.

Origins of Breast Cancer Survivor Dragon Boating

"Women of power paddling strong, each with a story to share."

At many dragon boat festivals around the world, a close look at some of the paddlers stroking through the water will reveal that the dragon boat is filled with a seemingly motley crew of women of all ages, shapes, and sizes – characterized by the thinning grey hair, thick curly locks, downy tufts, or short bristles tucked into pink baseball caps or pink patterned scarves. All of these "miracles in motion" have been diagnosed with breast cancer at some point in their lives.

Some paddlers have been survivors for only a few months, while others have been living with breast cancer for several decades. Although men diagnosed with breast cancer are welcome to participate in breast cancer survivor dragon boating, the sport is mainly embraced by women. How did this worldwide phenomenon begin, and why do women diagnosed with this devastating disease gather on the waterways of the world to "ride the dragon" together?

The story begins in 1996 when a woman entered the Sports Medicine Center at the Faculty of Medicine at the University of British Columbia, Vancouver, Canada, complaining of a sore shoulder. Physician and exercise physiologist, Dr. Don McKenzie, assured her that the problem was not serious and that she could most likely alleviate the pain and regain her range of motion by following a specific set of exercises. The woman replied that she could not do the proposed exercises because she had had surgery as part of the diagnostic investigation and treatment related to her breast cancer. She had been advised that any repetitive upper body exercise would very probably increase her risk of getting lymphedema in her affected arm. As it relates to breast cancer, lymphedema may occur in the affected arm as a result of damage to the lymphatic system when the cancer is treated with surgery and/or radiation. Fluid builds up and causes painful and sometimes severe swelling of the arm which, in turn, can create other physiological as well as psychological problems in patients (National Cancer Institute, 2010). As voiced by Dr. McKenzie's patient, the medical advice of the day also warned that lymphedema could occur through post-treatment repetitive upper body exercise. Dr. McKenzie ardently disagreed.

Intent on challenging this popular medical thinking, Dr. McKenzie decided to recruit 25 Vancouver women living with breast cancer to take part in an experiment. He hoped to prove that exercise of all types could be a contributing factor to recovery after breast cancer surgery by improving range of motion and reversing muscle atrophy, thereby increasing physical flexibility and strength. Dr. McKenzie chose dragon

Figure 1.
Pink Carnation Ceremony



In an evocative 2009 ceremony in Kingston, survivors toss pink carnations into the water to honor those struggling with breast cancer and those who have lost the battle.

boating as the means to carry out this challenge because of the popularity of the sport in Vancouver, the non-weight-bearing yet strenuous nature of the exercise, and the opportunity it provided him and his medical team to work with a group of 25 women all at the same time. Both Dr. McKenzie and the survivors themselves hoped for positive results that might give women more access to exercise possibilities in their quest to rehabilitate their bodies and maintain fitness after treatment for breast cancer. In February 1996, "Abreast in a Boat" was formed – the first breast cancer survivor dragon boat team.

Working with a physiotherapist and a nurse, Dr. McKenzie set up a prescriptive exercise program for the 25 women. Their short-term goal would be to train for the upcoming Vancouver Dragon Boat Festival. The aim of the program was to progressively introduce stretching and resistance exercises that would increase the women's flexibility, upper body strength, and aerobic capacity. They were monitored carefully over a period of several months and their affected arms were measured to check for any signs of lymphedema. As expected, their general fitness levels increased dramatically, but most importantly, no one showed any signs of increased swelling in the affected arm. With the onset of good weather, the women of "Abreast in a Boat," with Dr. McKenzie as their coach and steersperson, practiced their pad-

dling technique on False Creek twice a week. Then, brimming with excitement, they found themselves bobbing at the starting line waiting for the gun to signal the beginning of their first race. Of course, "Abreast in a Boat" did not fly past the other teams of young athletes in their race to the finish line, but just the fact that they were there together, paddling with strong, bold strokes, was a victory – an exhilarating and life-affirming experience beyond their wildest expectations. Winners all!

"Joined in battles – triumphant spirit."

Dr. McKenzie's medical project was declared a resounding success, its convincing evidence opening up the fitness options for those diagnosed with breast cancer, giving them hope that they could lead full and active lives, unencumbered by the fear of developing lymphedema.

Full of enthusiasm, the 25 women of "Abreast in a Boat" persuaded Dr. McKenzie to stay on as their mentor and coach so that, together, they could encourage others to seek out the same feelings of physical fitness, accomplishment, and support that dragon boating gave them. These pioneer women conveyed their message so effectively that there are now over 200 breast cancer survivor dragon boat teams around the world! After 14 years, Dr. McKenzie is still very closely involved with this phenomenon and is loved by thousands of

appreciative breast cancer survivor dragon boaters. Most recently, his ongoing contributions as a researcher and mentor were honored when he was invited to participate in the Olympic Torch Relay as a paddler in the dragon boat which dramatically carried the 2010 Olympic flame across False Creek on its way to the Opening Ceremonies in Vancouver.

Benefits of Breast Cancer Survivor Dragon Boating

"Miracles happen when we pull together. Dig deep, eyes ahead, all as one."

Why has dragon boating been so inspirational to those who are living with breast cancer, as well as to the friends, family members, and strangers who watch from the shorelines of rivers, lakes, and oceans around the world? It is because this sport fulfills a need for these gentle warrior women – a need to emerge from the darkness of inward-looking fear and hopelessness into an active journey of light and opportunity. As they paddle down the race course with confidence, determination, and passion, they are healing themselves physically and emotionally, and at the same time, sending powerful messages out to others:

- What better way to showcase the cause of breast cancer awareness than from the seat of a spectacularly colorful dragon boat? Decked out in shades of pink, the paddlers emphatically call for an end to the terrible toll that this disease is taking.
- Dragon boat festivals provide breast cancer survivors the opportunity to honor teammates and all those who have lost the battle with breast cancer. In the powerfully evocative Pink Carnation Ceremony, survivors toss flowers into the water in a healing, communal gesture of remembrance, much like the Chinese fishermen's throwing of rice cakes into the river for their poet, Qu Yuan (see Figure 1).
- The dragon boat is a "floating support group." The women train and practice together over many months

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(sometimes years), and so naturally, strong bonds develop. Now outside the formal medical system, they know that there is always someone right in the seat next to them with whom to confide – someone who truly understands in a way that other friends and family might not. Just as often though, cares are left behind at the dock, and the paddlers share healing laughter and outrageous fun.

- Women are often blindsided by a diagnosis of breast cancer and are left with a disheartening sense of having been betrayed by their bodies for no apparent reason. Feeling the dragon boat surge forward through the water through the sheer force of their own muscles gives these intrepid women an indescribable sensation of power, regained control, and pride.
- Breast cancer survivor dragon boaters see themselves as a symbol of hope to those who have been newly-diagnosed and for whom life's options may seem bleak. Watching the unbridled enthusiasm of a crew of women in pink who have all gone through diagnosis, treatment, and recovery is life-affirming and inspiring.

And inspired I was!

The Kingston Connection

In 1998, I faced the shock and bewilderment of my own breast cancer diagnosis and subsequent surgery, chemotherapy, and radiation treatments. I was left with a weakened body that I did not recognize or understand. And once I was no longer under the watchful eye of my surgeon, oncologist, radiologist, and nurses, I felt a sense of abandonment, isolation, and being forever different from my friends and family. But one day, more than a year after my treatment, the course of my life changed dramatically when, in my mailbox, I found a

newspaper article. It pictured a group of breast cancer survivors from Toronto in a dragon boat, passionately churning up the waters of Lake Ontario. Right then and there, I decided that it was time to step beyond my shadows in order to make a positive change in my own life and hopefully impact the lives of other local breast cancer survivors who might also be looking for an anchor in the storm.

Inspired by the flair, fitness, and friendship that I soon learned was an integral part of breast cancer survivor dragon boating, and mentored by one of the original members of Vancouver's "Abreast in A Boat," I founded the team "Chestmates" in my hometown of Kingston, Ontario, Canada. On a grey winter's day in March 2002, "Chestmates" became part of the blossoming network of pink paddlers across Canada. Throughout the years since then, our members have warmly embraced our differences in background, age, and fitness level to create a close-knit team where everyone feels a sense of belonging. Our youngest arrives at practice on her bike; our oldest, an octogenarian, breezes in after her hula-dancing class; and those who are unable to paddle that night watch over the team

from the shoreline. We are together. We are adventurers living in the moment, and we are rewarded with a collection of moments that enrich our lives. Like my teammates, I receive life's many gifts of friendship and support, and I appreciate every blessing. One such blessing came my way in the form of a poem.

The "Take it Away" Story

The story begins with these inspirational words written by Deb Schutt. Deb is a Kingston "Chestmates" member who, two years ago, about the same time that she wrote her poem, was dealt the cruel blow of a diagnosis of Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis (ALS).

Take it Away!

*Women of power paddling strong,
Each with a story to share.
Joined in battles – triumphant spirit –
Always a shoulder to spare.*

*Miracles happen when we pull
together.
Dig deep, eyes ahead – all as one!
Miracles in motion, we glide through
the water,
Winners of every race run!*

*Paddles up! Take it away!
Paddles up! Take it away!
And make everyone strong,
As we paddle on!
Take it away!*

Deb's dream was that her words would one day become the lyrics of a team song that "Chestmates" could sing on Kingston's Cataraqui River to focus our thoughts as we pull away from the dock in our dragon boat. But the universe had bigger ideas for this little poem. Through a series of serendipitous zig-zags and ever-looping and widening spirals which gathered momentum along the way, "Take it Away" has become a global anthem connecting breast cancer survivor dragon boaters around the world! Its message of hope, friendship, and celebration is inspirational not only to paddlers, but also to

Figure 2.
"Take it Away" CD Cover



Note: Artwork by Nancy Douglas. Printed with permission.

Figure 3.
“Chestmates” 2010 Dragon Boat Team



The “Chestmates” dragon boat team from Kingston joined 72 other survivor crews at the Peterborough International Breast Cancer Survivor Dragon Boat Festival in June 2010.

those on shore whose lives have been touched by breast cancer.

Stu Woolley, the Kingston songwriter who gave Deb’s lyrics a lovely melody, says that the “Take it Away” project has been sprinkled with pixie dust from the start. As Project Coordinator, I still marvel at how a group of community members, who had no previous creative connection with each other, came together in a collaborative and wildly magical way to give birth to the keepsake “Take it Away” CD (see Figure 2). All of the talent that culminated in the creation of “Take it Away” was donated with a full heart that embraced the meaning of the song and the powerful impact that it could have – both as a local fundraising tool for Breast Cancer Action Kingston and as an international anthem that would give strength to those of us who, all as one, ride the dragon.

In June, 2010, “Take it Away” connected us all at the International Breast Cancer Survivor Dragon Boat Festival in Peterborough, Ontario, which brought together 73 survivor crews from England, Italy, South Africa, New Zealand, Australia, the United States, and Canada (see Figure 3). From the first series of powerful drumbeats to the final triumphant chorus, “Take it Away” inspired us all to join together in a burst of song with paddles held high in the air. Now the song will do its good work in the hands of those who took the CD back

home with them. And who knows what magic will happen as the circle of energy spreads in unimaginable ways!

Back here in Kingston, Deb’s voice has since been silenced and most of her muscles have atrophied from the ravages of ALS. But her bright sky-blue eyes and her radiant pixie smile shine through her pain to tell us that she is ecstatic that her poem has touched the hearts of so many. The same fiery spirit of the dragon which lives on in the depths of Deb’s soul inspires her thousands of sister paddlers around the world to celebrate life with gratitude for every breathing moment.

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Suggested Readings

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Suzanne Bodner, BA, MEd, is a retired teacher and coordinator of the “Take it Away” breast cancer survivor dragon boat project, Kingston, Ontario, Canada. Under the auspices of Breast Cancer Action Kingston (BCAK), she has initiated and managed several programs to promote the well-being of breast cancer survivors. These include an annual healing retreat, an exercise program, and a yoga program. In 2001, she founded the “Chestmates” dragon boat team and served as Captain for four years.

Note from the author: This article is dedicated to all of my sister breast cancer survivor dragon boaters who have enriched my life beyond words. I wish to give heartfelt thanks to the many partners who made the “Take it Away” dream come true, especially Small World Media Group and Scotiabank, Kingston. The “Take it Away” CD is available for a \$10 donation to BCAK. Visit www.bca.kingston.org for details.

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