

Special Feature: The Dragon Boat Experience, Canada

By Eleanor Nielsen, Canadian Cancer Society

More than 18,000 women are diagnosed with breast cancer each year in Canada. Over half of them are fortunate to survive and go on to lead long lives. But many of the thousands of survivors are constrained by advice to avoid strenuous, repetitive upper body exercise, for fear of developing lymphedema. In 1996, Dr. Don McKenzie, a sports medicine specialist in Vancouver, set out to challenge the generally accepted guideline and formed the first dragon boat team solely composed of women living with breast cancer.

Dragon boating is an ancient Chinese sport dating back more than 2000 years. It is full of mythology based on man's struggle with nature and lifesaving metaphors. It was introduced to Canada at the 1986 Vancouver Exposition, and has rapidly become the fastest growing adult team sport in the country. Most teams are composed of young, fit adults. When the first breast cancer survivor team, Abreast in a Boat, participated in the annual Vancouver Dragon Boat Race Festival in 1996, it was indeed an unexpected addition.

Since that time, the dragon boating movement has grown to include over 600 women. Each team has 22 members - twenty as paddlers, a steersperson or cox and a drummer. The boats themselves weigh between 800 and 1360 kgs and are 13.5 metres long. It takes a co-ordinated team effort to move them, and extraordinary ability to race competitively. Modelled on the Vancouver team, Toronto's Dragons Abreast was formed in 1998 with thirty- three eager women with an age-range of 30's to 74 years of age embarking on an unknown journey. The dragon boat season in Toronto begins in February with pool practice, during which the paddling stroke is learned and practised.

All women are encouraged to participate in a fitness program that includes stretching, progressive upper extremity strength training and aerobic exercise. Late in April, the team goes "on water", which in Toronto means the cold waters of Lake Ontario. The first time in a dragon boat is an experience never to be forgotten and is reminiscent of learning any new skill. You feel like a child embarking on a new adventure and not sure where it will take you!

Women joining the team speak of it as the "light at the end of a tunnel", "the only positive thing that has come from breast cancer", and "an opportunity to focus on living rather than my fears". Finishing or winning a race is analogous to fighting breast cancer. Team members put their hearts into it with unexpected vigour.

Dragons Abreast now has over 60 team members and will likely have three crews this year. An enormous and unexpected support system has grown from what started as a sport. We have witnessed and been there for four team members who have died of breast cancer and are with others as they fight recurrence or metastases. Even this has been a gift as the unthinkable becomes real and less frightening.

An unexpected outcome of the teams has been the inspiration they provide to others in the community at large. Most of the large Canadian festivals have a race specifically for breast cancer survivor teams. Spectators at these races cheer us on with unprecedented enthusiasm. We receive notes, calls and standing ovations. It has been exceptional to see and to realise that through challenging breast cancer, we have become a symbol of hope.