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Moving Upstream

Breast cancer survivors use dragon boat racing to boost their morale and strength

by Patricia Hagen

When boats start gliding through Geist Reservoir next spring, one will really stick out. This particular vessel will be hot pink and 48 feet long - from the nose of its Chinese dragonhead to the tip of its pointed tail. Twenty women will be paddling the boat as a drummer beats out the pace.

The women are not only bringing the ancient sport of dragon boat racing to Indianapolis. As breast cancer survivors, they are banding together to have fun and get fit.

"It's a floating support group," says Lisa Heiden Peters, the Indianapolis resident who launched the group Indy SurviveOars last summer. More than 60 breast cancer survivors already have signed up for the team, which will begin training indoors in January.

The SurviveOars are joining a rapidly growing movement that

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started in Vancouver, Canada, in 1996. A sports medicine physician, Dr. Don McKenzie, wanted to challenge the notion that women should not do repetitive upper-body exercise after breast cancer surgery because of the risk of developing lymphedema, a painful swelling in the arm. He conducted a study in which 25 breast cancer survivors were trained to paddle a dragon boat. No new cases of lymphedema occurred and none of the existing cases became worse.

The Canadian women didn't want to quit at the end of the study, so they formed an organization called Abreast in a Boat and continued to race. According to the Web site www.abreastinaboat.com, the women have inspired the formation of about 120 teams in 12 countries. About 20 breast cancer survivor teams, including the new one in Indianapolis, have formed throughout the United States.

Some survivor teams participate in dragon boat races all over the world. The sport, which originated in China more than 2,000 years ago, is seeing a surge in popularity. Now there are tens of thousands of racers in 60 countries.

Spreading the word

Heiden Peters, a mother of three diagnosed with breast cancer three years ago, decided to start a team when a physical therapist, who was treating her for lymphedema, told her about dragon boat racing. To Heiden Peters, it seemed like a novel way to help others dealing with breast cancer.

"I believe completely in support groups," says Heiden Peters, a registered nurse who used to work with cancer patients. "But I do not want to sit in a support group."

Paddling a dragon boat sounded like an active, social way to work toward wellness, Heiden Peter says. "I think it's because I like to be on the water so much," she says. "There's nothing like this around here. You're out on the water together."

One of Heiden Peters' first calls was to Kathy Martin Harrison, a friend who helped bring Race for the Cure to Indianapolis in 1992. Harrison, co-owner of the Ed Martin auto dealerships, put the fundraising wheels in motion and enlisted attorneys to do the paperwork to form a not-for-profit organization. The women formed an executive committee, ordered a boat from China and

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spread the word.

Lots of people jumped on board when they were told about dragon boat racing. "It just took off," Heiden Peters says. "It's incredible how giving people are."

Generating support

The Indiana University Melvin and Bren Simon Cancer Center and Clarian Health signed on as title sponsors of the dragon boat and pledged three years of support. Other sponsors are helping to pay for the lifejackets, paddles, T-shirts and caps. The mother of a team member wrote a song. A marina manager provided a place to store the boat.

"It's so amazing. I cannot believe the energy people derive from this. It's the spirit of the dragon," says Harrison, who has not had breast cancer but has lost close friends to the disease.

Several local personal trainers have offered to lead free indoor exercise classes for the women who want to learn to paddle the long, slender boat. Starting in January in several health clubs, weekly classes will help the women improve their endurance and strength, trainer Basia Gentry says.

"Most women are very weak in their upper body," she says. The classes will focus on building strength in shoulders, arms, chest, back and core.

Personal benefits

If the Indy SurviveOars are like other dragon boat teams, the members will see many benefits, says Meghan McDonough, assistant professor of health and kinesiology at Purdue University and a former member of Canada's national dragon boat racing team. When in graduate school at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver, Canada, McDonough was part of a group of researchers who studied the psychosocial impact of dragon boat racing. They learned that the women appreciated the opportunity to connect and do an activity with other women who have walked the same medical road. They also enjoyed having the focus on paddling, rather than on breast cancer.

Doing the hard, physical work of paddling was an opportunity to focus on positive things their bodies could do after the ordeal of debilitating cancer treatment.

The Indianapolis team is eagerly awaiting the arrival of their pink boat, and is making plans to have the dragon head painted in distinctive colors. When they're ready to launch the boat, the team will have a ceremony to "dot the eye" of the dragon with red paint. It's the traditional way to "release the spirit of the boat," Heiden Peters says.

They plan to start paddling on Geist Reservoir in the spring and then enter some dragon boat festivals in other cities. "We're going to compete," Heiden Peters says. "That's our goal."

Healing Power

According to participants of Abreast in a Boat, their dragon boat experience helps them heal in various ways. Here are a few of their comments:

- > It helps us regain control of our lives.
- > It shows our families and friends we can live our lives the way we choose.
- > It reminds us to make the most of every moment.
- > It creates a new state of wellness in each of us.
- > It demands the best of us both physically and mentally.
- > It helps us overcome the loneliness of cancer.
- > It creates a safety net in the event of a recurrence.
- > It gives us pride in our accomplishments.
- > It shows us we can undertake strenuous exercise without developing lymphedema.
- > It enables us to move on with our lives.
- > It creates a new balance in our lives.
- > It encourages us to share our experience with others.

Resources

Want to know more?

> For information on joining the Indianapolis dragon boat team, visit www.indysurviveoars.org or send an e-mail to indysurviveoars@insightbb.com.

> Abreast In A Boat has information about breast cancer survivors racing dragon boats and links to teams around the world. Log on www.abreastinaboat.com.

> The Dragon Boat Channel, at www.thedragonboatchannel.com, is an information clearinghouse for the sport.

Hagen has been writing about health and fitness for 25 years. She's the author of A Mini Splendored Thing - Celebrating 30 Years of the 500 Festival Mini-Marathon.

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