

Dragon boat racers paddle for their cure

By Carrie Ritchie

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To learn more

Visit Indy SurviveOars at www.indysurviveoars.org.

The sport

Breast cancer patients all over the world have formed dragon boat racing teams because some research suggests the repetitive upper body exercise of paddling helps breast cancer patients physically recover.

For a long time, such exercise was thought to make recovery more difficult and increase patients' chances of contracting lymphedema, a blockage in the lymphatic system that causes swelling. In 1996, Don McKenzie, a doctor in Canada, formed a dragon boat team of breast cancer survivors to test that theory, and his findings disproved it. McKenzie's study helped make dragon boat racing a popular activity for breast cancer survivors.

Source: www.abreastinaboat.com

A red drum sits at the front of the boat, tattooed with the names of the team's fallen. Its beat keeps the pace for the women -- all **breast cancer** 🗨 survivors -- who paddle it to victory.

The heart of the boat, as the women call it, keeps them paddling, much like the sport of dragon boat racing inspires them to keep living their lives.

"It helps me not think about me as much," said Genie Barker, a paddler for the Indy SurviveOars, a group of breast cancer survivors that races a dragon boat. "It makes breast cancer seem like just a fact of life."

Two years ago, the SurviveOars had no boat, no formal training and no sponsors. Now, they are celebrating their first racing victory and the success of their first fundraising event, which brought in \$20,000.


Dragon boating -- an ancient Chinese tradition in which people paddle long boats adorned with dragon heads -- has been shown to help **breast cancer patients** 🗨 recover from their illness physically and mentally.

The SurviveOars are trying to increase awareness about the sport that has given them so much.

"I can't even describe my joy of finding it," said Etta Biloon, the team's captain. "It makes us all feel so good about ourselves."

But the SurviveOars' early success has been interrupted by tragedies most sports teams never experience.

The team has lost four members since its formation. Two died this summer, but the SurviveOars paddled on.

"You have to deal with the loss," said Barker, 58, Indianapolis , who lost her friend and teammate Jean Jamsa this summer. "I really think every time this happens . . . we just seem to pull closer together and work a little harder, even, to honor those who are gone."

When the women are together, they don't focus on cancer, Barker said. But when one of them dies, they are reminded that their illness is a constant threat.

Biloon, 51, Indianapolis, said the women on the team have empowered her to overcome her illness and see that there is life beyond cancer -- and that it can be fun.

Dragon boat racing has become popular among breast cancer patients, but it remains relatively unknown to others.

The contemporary version of the sport requires about 20 people to paddle a long boat -- the SurviveOars' boat is more than 40 feet -- as a drummer keeps pace.

The SurviveOars formed in 2007 and began their training that winter by sitting on the side of the pool at Hamilton Southeastern High School in Fishers, practicing the paddling motion.

During warmer weather, the SurviveOars paddle on Geist Reservoir three times a week, Biloon said.

The team, which has about 70 paddlers from all over Central Indiana, began racing in 2008 and reached the finals of one of its events. The SurviveOars lost by 0.68 of a second, so they wore T-shirts that said ".68" all winter as motivation, Biloon said.

Their strategy must have worked, because they paddled to their first victory last summer.

In August, the team won the breast cancer division at the Badger Lake Dragon Boat Bash in Fort Dodge, Iowa.

"They called me, and they held the cell phone up and they were screaming," said SurviveOars President Kathy Martin Harrison, who oversees the team's operation but does not have cancer. "I was on the other end with tears running down my face."

The team is trying to get more doctors to recommend dragon boat racing to breast cancer patients, and members are finding ways to spread word of the sport.

The team wants to host a dragon boat race in Indianapolis, but that likely will take a few years of planning, Harrison said. Meanwhile, the team is offering its boat for team-building activities for local companies and organizations.

The team also will continue to participate in Battle of the Paddles, an exhibition race on Geist Reservoir, and host the Pink Paddle Party, a fundraising event it began in November.

The party raised \$20,000, which will help the team travel to this summer's International Dragon Boat Festival in Peterborough, Ontario, from June 11 to 13. The festival is like the Olympics 🏆 of dragon boat racing, Biloon said.

The SurviveOars encourage anyone with breast cancer -- male or female -- to learn more about the team. They also welcome volunteers, called SupportOars.

Being part of the SurviveOars can be a life-changing experience, Biloon said.

"Everybody supports one another to the nth degree," Biloon said. "This is a huge silver lining."