

We Are All In the Same Boat

Paddling with the WonderBroads dragon boat team

By Leslie Omstead

Teammates arrive at practice eager to catch up with friends and share in life events. The early birds uncover the boat and put bumpers on the dock. A teammate with a big truck expertly backs the trailer into the water where we launch the boat and tie her to the dock. We start our practice with a warm-up, often to music. It's like an aerobics class with movement specific exercises to prepare our bodies to paddle.

With paddles, life jackets, gloves, seat pads and water bottles—we head to the dock and load the boat. There are 20 paddlers, a drummer and a steer in a dragon boat.

A line-up for seating in the boat is done by a teammate who is no longer able to paddle. She sits in the drummer position at the front of the boat and calls out the practice. It is her job to make us work as hard as we can. Her courage and determination in the face of the disease is awesome. We wonder, to ourselves, if we could ever be that strong.

With everyone in position, the steer calls “eyes and ears in the boat!” We untie and the steer calls “shove off!” which begs the response from the team “you shove off” and we quietly snicker at what we just said as the boat leaves the dock.

“Back it down!” is the next command and we raise our paddles and back up the boat until we hear “let it run”. Paddle position is across our lap and the boat continues to glide back as the steer turns us to face the channel. “Hold the boat!” she calls and our paddles quickly stop the boat. We pause in the quiet of the day and take a breath and then we



hear the familiar “paddles up!” command. All paddles are raised up to the ready position and the steer calls “take it away” and we do. We take that boat away. Away from the shore, away from the day, away from the worries, the grocery lists and anything else that was on our mind. This is our hour to paddle...only that.

We are challenged by the practice. It is hard work but we are athletes and we need to prepare for our races. We all work as hard as our personal best. We push ourselves and encourage our mates. Our coaches make us do starts and finishes over and over until we do it in perfect time, every time. We are brought to the brink of exhaustion by long paddles that never seem to end and we love it because we then reflect on the fact that we are here and we are paddling on a dragon boat team and we are so proud of that.

“Practice doesn't make perfect” coach Pat says, “Perfect practice makes perfect”.

Eventually it is time to head back to the dock. We do some section work on the way. “Engine room only in 3-2-1!” is the command and the middle four seats take over the paddling as the front and back of the boat take a break. The engine room is built of eight strong, tall paddlers. Imagine the workings of an engine and the strength and rhythm of that driving the boat ahead. They huff and



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We give hope, strength and caring to each other through courage, commitment and camaraderie and we understand each other because we are all in the same boat.

puff and motor us through the race with sheer power.

Next we hear “six pack in 3-2-1” and the six paddlers at the back of the boat take over the rhythmic paddling as the engine room pulls out. The three seats at the back are the ‘six pack’. They have a special duty to the steer as she uses them for fine movements at the start line of a race. They also set up the first strokes of our finishes. We feel a swell of energy surging us ahead from the back just before a finish is called in a race.



“Strokes in 3-2-1” is the command for the front three seats to take over and the six paddlers responsible for the timing of the strokes take over. The strokes need to be quick and responsive. They need to sense what the boat can do and take it there. They get the boat off the start line with a burst of energy. It needs to be up and gliding as quickly as possible. They set the pace for the race.

We listen, we watch, we paddle and the hour on the water is soon over. We feel so accomplished!

Back at the dock, we unload the boat. Next, we cool down with stretches as we discuss the practice. We pass around information about the upcoming races. Paddlers assist each other to get the boat back on the trailer and parked back in the lot. As we snap the cover back on, we chat about all the things we want to share.

Soon we will be at another race. All these

paddlers brought together by sheer chance. Who would have thought that the diagnosis of breast cancer would give us something so positive? Few of us would have known each other if the disease hadn't brought us together. We give hope, strength and caring to each other through courage, commitment and camaraderie and we understand each other because we are all in the same boat. 

Editor's Note:

Leslie's 52 team mates are all breast cancer survivors—14 of them have lymphedema, and wear beautifully designed compression sleeves with maple leaves (see cover photo). The team races both nationally and internationally and are fierce competitors—placing 5th in the world, in Australia 2007. The team is consistently among the top contenders. Last year they celebrated their 10th Anniversary! Italy is their goal for 2014.



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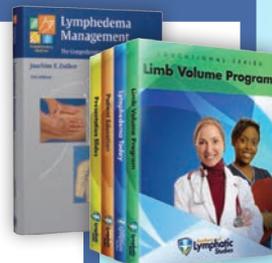
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