

THE SPIRIT SOARS AS THE BODY MOVES

and the Mind Discovers - Training for Dragon Boat Racing for Survivors of Breast Cancer.

By: Pat Richards, BPHE, CALA Trainer, University of Guelph

October 1997, Chatelaine: "This year over 17,000 women will be diagnosed with breast Cancer, one of the leading causes of death in Canadian women between 35 and 55 years of age."

"Meet a team of breast cancer survivors who are determined to beat the disease." This article refers to a team called "A breast in a boat", the first team in Canada to compete in Dragon Boat racing from Vancouver. "They rebel against medical advise to take it easy. They push themselves physically and heal themselves emotionally. And once you've watched this hearty crew at play, you'll want to stand and cheer."

Approximately 2 million women in North America are survivors of breast cancer. All have varying degrees of problems associated with the operations and therapies required to treat the disease. Common therapies include: chemotherapy, radiation, removal of lymph nodes, severing of pectoralis and associated muscles, removal of lumps from the breasts and removal of the entire breast(s). These treatments all lead to compounding problems.

The lack of research involving the post - treatment phase of breast cancer means physicians tend to err on the side of caution. Since 1882, the first radical mastectomy for carcinoma of the breast by Halsted, physicians have warned women about using the affected side of their body. Women were instructed not to lift objects or do repetitive movements. As a consequence of this advice, their everyday lives changed drastically. Many women were inhibited from any form of rehabilitation that would return them to a normal daily living regime.

Today, many women are concerned about a condition referred to as 'lymphedema'. From my research it appears that lymphedema is swelling of the involved area and the chest area due to the combined effects of removal of lymph nodes from the axilla and radiation. Lymphedema can develop at any time following breast cancer surgery - from within one month after treatment to 30 years later.

According to Susan Harris, "Why the Dragon Boat Experience is Important for Women Living with Breast Cancer"; "Well - meaning physicians and physiotherapists often caution these women to refrain from lifting more than 10 - 15 lbs with the involved upper extremity; to avoid certain sports, such as canoeing, water-ski-

ing and specific swimming strokes, such as breast stroke or butterfly; and to refrain from repetitive activities, such as knitting or raking. These contra-indications limit both the quality and enjoyment of life for women who otherwise feel and look quite healthy - and there is, as yet, no research to suggest whether or not these activities actually lead to lymphedema."

According to my sources ... activity should help prevent lymphedema, not promote it.

Dr. Don McKenzie, University of British Columbia, a one time competitor with the Canadian Olympic canoe team, is presently studying the effects of strenuous activity on survivors of breast cancer. He started the dragon boat race concept.

I have often wondered... "Why Dragon Boat Racing? This is a very demanding sport, anaerobic in nature, with 22 people in a boat!:

According to Don McKenzie this event is a traditional Chinese sport that requires 22 participants, including drummer and steers person, to paddle a giant dragon - head canoe. Demanding teamwork and upper body motion, it has long spiritual traditions. In ancient China, dragon boat races were held to commemorate the suicide of poet, Qu Yuan. One legend has it that the racers were supposed to search for the spirit of the poet and move their boats through the water from the north, the region of the death, to the realm of life in the south. Dragon Boat racing has always been popular in Hong Kong and came to Canada in 1986, during Vancouver's expo. Now there are Dragon Boat festivals all across the continent. It seems like an ideal sport to test the resilience of breast cancer survivors.

This is the year of the Dragon for the Chinese culture, and for me as well. I have accepted the task of coaching and training the Guelph/Wellington Dragon Boat team of breast cancer survivors. My training bias is water to initiate the physical conditioning sessions. At the appropriate time, paddling and specific strength training will be integrated into the schedule along with aquafitness training.

My team of 30 breast cancer survivors, are an interesting group who are eager to see what lies ahead; as am I.

If you have any suggestions or comments to help the team please forward them to me at the following email: prichard@ath.uoguelph.ca. Thank you.

Stay tuned for training ideas and the the progress of this unique group.

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