

PADDLING WITH DRAGONS

DRAGONS ABREAST AUSTRALIA



by : Jill Harrison

Dragon boating is more than a fun sport – for Western Australia's Bunbury Crewsaders and the Perth Amazons, it's also about making a difference in the lives of women who have survived breast cancer.

IN September 2007, nearly 2000 breast cancer survivors dressed in bright pink came from across the world to celebrate life by participating in a dragon boat regatta at Caloundra in Queensland, giving a huge presence and face to breast cancer, spreading awareness and demonstrating that survivors can lead a full and active lifestyle. Survivors and their supporters from Australia, Canada, Italy, Hong Kong, Singapore, New Zealand and the United States, participated in the three day event hosted by Dragons Abreast Australia.

Breast cancer and dragon boating seems a strange mix. So why are thousands of breast cancer survivors across the world taking up the ancient Chinese sport of dragon boating?

It began in Canada as a result of clinical trials by sports medicine physician, Dr Don McKenzie, into the effects of Lymphoedema, a painful swelling of the arm that may result when lymph nodes are removed during breast surgery. Historically patients were advised to restrict movement of the affected arm. This was refuted by Dr McKenzie's study, proving it was actually better to get the limb moving as soon as possible.

Dragon boating was chosen because it provides a strenuous, repetitive movement of the upper body and arms and so the first dragon boat team for survivors, Abreast in a Boat, was established in Vancouver in 1996.

Dragons Abreast Australia was formed by Michelle Hanton in Darwin in 1998 after she attended a National Breast Cancer Conference in Canberra. There are now 33 member groups across every Australian state.

Dragon boating is suitable for any age and fitness level because each paddler can train and improve at their own level by varying their stroke intensity. The increase in muscle mass and improvement in strength and cardiovascular fitness has carry over benefits into daily life. As a non-weight bearing sport, there is less risk of injury. It is a psychologically positive and exhilarating team sport that builds friendships and a sense of belonging.

The Perth Amazons, which was founded in 1999, were joined by the Bunbury Crewsaders in 2005, a first for regional WA. They aim to provide a safe and fun way to exercise and regain fitness and strength at the individual's own pace, rebuilding health, motivation and confidence in a friendly and supportive environment.

Crewsaders' founding coordinator Julie Scott reflects; "From the start I knew Dragons Abreast was for me. The opportunity to be physically active with a supportive group of fellow survivors and supporters was everything I'd been looking for. The Crewsaders provides an important support network for survivors who may feel isolated and want to have contact with other people who have shared the same experiences."

Current Crewsaders coordinator Roslyn Webb also enjoys the opportunity to create new friendships. "I think the most exciting thing for me is that at 62 having beaten cancer and 11 years down the track, I can participate in an exhilarating sport with a group of women in their mid 50-60's, have a great paddle on the inlet each week, be it serious or not so serious training, and have a good laugh at the end of it," she says.

The women also enjoy the fact that they have something in common. "What attracted me was that I had something in common with the other ladies. Although breast cancer is a common experience we have, it's not the primary focus of the group. It's nice female bonding. Even the Crewsader ladies who haven't had breast cancer still have that bond," explains Trish Gibbs from Donnybrook.




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GET INVOLVED:

“Joining the Crewsaders was the first thing I tried after breast cancer. Their support and friendship has given me the confidence to try lots of other things,” she adds. “Since then I have joined the bike ride from Albany to Busselton, walked seven days on the Bibbulmun Track and am eagerly planning more. Having cancer certainly helps you put things in perspective and for me now the fear of not being able to do something doesn't stop me from trying. Having breast cancer makes you appreciate life. I didn't want to spend time thinking or talking about it, I wanted to get out and do something.”

Beating breast cancer can give women the confidence to do anything. It's a matter of having a go, setting yourself realistic goals and having a bit of fun. 

Survivors who are three months post treatment are invited to join, although it is up to the individual when they feel confident enough to come along. Crewsaders and Amazons acknowledge the importance of supporters and welcome anyone who will put on a pink shirt and have a go. There are also ways that women who don't want to paddle can participate.

If you think dragon boating could be what you are looking for and want to give it a try:

Bunbury Crewsaders train on Saturday mornings at 8.30am at the Bunbury Rowing Club, Cobblestone Street, Bunbury. Life vests are available for people who are not confident in water. Contact Crewsaders coordinator Roslyn Webb on 9797 0678 or Coach Jill Harrison on 9725 1782.

Perth Amazons train at 8:30am Saturdays and 6pm Tuesdays at Maylands Sport & Recreation Club, Clarkson Road, Maylands, Perth. Contact Amazons coordinator Deb Rae

Further information can be found at **Dragons Abreast Australia** website (www.dragonsabreast.com.au) by clicking on your state's icon or visiting the ABC's Australian Story website (www.abc.net.au) and following the links to the story In the Pink (14/06/2004).