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Dragon Dream Team tickled pink Cancer survivors join to launch racing boat

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NEW FRANKLIN - Nothing choppy Saturday about the waters of Portage Lakes.

Yet scores of women in hot-pink caps managed to ride the waves at Craftsmen Park.

They were members of "The Dragon Dream Team" on hand for Ohio's first dragon boat launch.

As breast cancer survivors, they already are in the same boat together.

So, they decided to make it more literal by creating a special team of paddlers, capitalizing on their positive energies.

Dragon boat racing -- in existence for centuries and first popularized in Asia -- is among the fastest-growing team water sports around.

Saturday's event -- which drew quite a supportive cast of families, including husbands, fathers and sons on the shore -- featured an official awakening-of-the-dragon ceremony and even a traditional dragon dance with assistance from the local Asian Services in Action group and members of the University of Akron's Chinese community.

Patient recruits doctor

Organizer and breast cancer survivor Jessica Mader could not have been happier about the support, including an official escort by the local Coast Guard.

The 76-year-old Silver Lake woman has been paddling with the "Bosom Buddies" dragon boat team of Nova Scotia for the last two summers.

"I left here (Akron) as a recovering patient but came back after paddling the dragon boat with spring in my step and feeling like a summer athlete," said Mader, who started paddling two months out of chemotherapy.

Dr. Douglas S. Wagner -- a local plastic surgeon -- noticed the monumental difference in Mader and immediately got on board not only as an encourager but also as the purchaser of a boat for the local team. The average dragon boat

starts at \$30,000.

"In telling him about what dragon boating had done for me, I had no intention of trying to recruit him," Mader insisted.

Wagner -- who had the 40-foot, pink and white boat manufactured in a Mexican rain forest and delivered last week -- said he was moved to do so by Mader's enthusiasm.

Mader and Wagner figured they would have the 22 people needed to fill the boat, never guessing they would actually have enough for three teams. The teams took turns, sharing the boat.

Breast cancer survivors traveled as far away as Youngstown and Canton.

Health benefits

Both Mader and Wagner agreed that dragon boat racing is the best upper-body exercise a breast cancer survivor can get, offering the least injuries.

"Dr. Wagner helped me so much, reaching out to his patients at the Akron Plastic Surgeons who had breast reconstruction following a mastectomy. He gave me his waiting room for meetings and members of his staff to help with the invitations," Mader said.

For her role, Mader was presented with an armful of pink roses by the Summit County Medical Alliance.

Lee Runkle, a four-year breast cancer survivor, wasn't able to take as active a role as she had planned. The 49-year-old Akron woman was in a wheelchair. She broke her feet the weekend before when a four-wheeler turned over on her.

"But I wouldn't miss this for the world," Runkle said.

Friend, co-worker and three-year breast cancer survivor Rebecca Shepard of Akron came to support Runkle. Shepard is in the throes of publishing a book about her own journey, one she shared with her late mother: *Joy Comes in the Morning: A Mother and Daughter's Cancer Journey*.

Kathy Jacobs of Austintown participated with her sister and fellow breast cancer survivor Barb Greene of Boardman. Another sister, Margie McClure of Boardman -- an ovarian cancer survivor who also had a double mastectomy because of her family history -- was unable to attend.

Being a member of the Dragon Dream Team "has turned my life around," said a buoyed Jacobs, who was diagnosed in 1996.

“Chemo puts weight on you. But rowing helps with the edema, swelling of the arms. And the hugs and caring -- well, they're priceless.”

Getting support

As children called out in gleeful voices to their mothers and grandmothers who were paddling on the water to the sound of drums, the moment wasn't lost on local members of the Coast Guard, who are in charge of keeping the waterways safe.

Jacqueline Dreher and her husband, Lane -- Coast Guard members -- lost a friend to breast cancer.

“Actually the treatment weakened her heart,” Jacqueline Dreher noted.

“But these ladies have so much courage. What an awesome testimony they have.”

Todd McKenney -- mercy and justice pastor at The Chapel -- called the dragon boat launch “very life affirming for the survivors.”

They called it one of the best days of their lives and a real chance to exhale with those in the same boat.

For more information on The Dragon Dream Team, go online to www.dragondreamteam.org.