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Dragon Boat Racing Fuels Breast Cancer Survivors' Fire

AKRON, Ohio, May 30 – Take 22 women who've survived breast cancer, put them in a 40-foot-long boat shaped like a dragon, and what do you get? The answer to this question might surprise you.

People from all walks of life are coming together to find support and strength by taking up the sport of dragon boat racing. A group of breast cancer survivors right here in Northeast Ohio is among the first to bring the sport to the U.S.

"Our ladies are thrilled to be bringing dragon boat racing to our area," said Douglas S. Wagner, M.D., a plastic surgeon practicing with Akron Plastic Surgeons and supporter of the team. "The team is a place where women dealing with breast cancer can find camaraderie, and physical and emotional wellbeing. Not only does the team give women access to others who have walked in their shoes, but it gives them a chance to keep active during or after treatment."

Dragon boats are 40-foot-long hulls designed to carry 22 paddlers. The boats themselves are decorated to look like dragons. This is similar to sports like rowing, canoeing or kayaking. The standard crew is comprised of 20 paddlers in pairs facing toward the bow of the boat, one drummer or caller at the bow facing toward the paddlers, and one steerer or tiller at the rear of the boat.

The sport has been in existence for centuries and was first popularized in Asia. Today, dragon boat racing is among the fastest growing of team water sports, with tens of thousands of participants in various organizations and clubs in more than 60 countries. The sport is recognized for the camaraderie, strength and endurance fostered amongst participants, and it has also become a very popular corporate and charitable sport.

Dr. Wagner is working with his patient Jessica Mader, a breast cancer survivor, who was involved with a similar group called Bosom Buddies of Nova Scotia, to get the team organized. He started by reaching out to his patients at Akron Plastic Surgeons who had breast reconstruction following a mastectomy. Over 80 patient survivors responded to the initial inquiry. Dr. Wagner has also sponsored the team by purchasing their dragon boat.



“At Akron Plastic Surgeons, we’ve seen hundreds of women dealing with breast cancer throughout the years. It’s become a cause close to my heart,” said Wagner, who has special training in breast reconstruction. “I understand how important that a woman’s emotional and physical wellbeing is when it comes to battling this disease. When I met Jessica and learned about the power of dragon boat racing, I couldn’t resist getting involved.”

Bill Staiger, an experienced kayaker and paddler with 28 years teaching experience at The University of Akron under his belt, will coach the team.

“Our boat will arrive by the end of May and we plan to have an eye-dotting ceremony on June 9, 2007 at Craftsman Park in the Portage Lakes,” said Wagner. “Then we will meet a few times a week to train. The team trains all year long. When the boat comes out of the water in the fall, we will go to a local YMCA to train.” The eye-dotting ceremony is a Chinese tradition that involves painting in the pupils of the dragon’s eyes, which are left unfinished. It’s believed that this action breathes life into the dragon.

“We hope to encourage people to start more teams in our area, and eventually, we’d like to expand this initiative and bring a dragon boat festival to our area to raise funds for breast cancer research.”

The doctors of **Akron Plastic Surgeons, Inc.** have been providing quality health care since 1985. A leading regional provider of cosmetic and reconstructive surgery, Akron Plastic Surgeons, Inc. is composed of three board-certified physicians with over 50 years of combined experience: Michael G. Parker, M.D., Douglas S. Wagner, M.D., and John C. Pedersen, M.D., F.A.C.S. For more information, call 330.253.9161 or visit akronplasticsurgeons.com.