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## In dragon boat, 20 oars part waters as 1 What looks serene is rigorous work

By Dorian Block, Globe Correspondent | June 13, 2004



GLOBE STAFF PHOTO/DOMINIC CHAVEZ

**Heatwave, the Dragon Boat Club of Boston's experienced team, hits the Charles River for a practice run. Below, a Verizon boat competes in the 2002 Dragon Boat Festival.**

We own this river.

Drums echo. Bodies lurch forward and pull backward. Oars cut through the black expanse.

We slice through reflections of the Prudential Center and John Hancock building. We shatter imaginary windows with wooden paddles, ride over visions of steel beams wavering in the water's slight current.

I am riding in a dragon boat, like others have done for the past 2,000 years in Asia -- and for the past 25 on this river.

In China the boats honor the patriotic poet Qu Yuan, who was exiled by a corrupt king in 400 BC. When Yuan's homeland, the province of Chu, was later invaded, his grief overcame him and he jumped into the Mi Lo River. His supporters rushed in boats to save him but were unsuccessful. To protect his body from fish, the legend goes, they beat on drums and splashed their oars. This scene is reenacted each year in dragon-boat racing at festivals on the fifth day of the fifth lunar month.

The dragon boats we ride on this spring evening are plain, only distinguished from crew boats by extra length and extra rowers. Their decorative heads and feathers are not added until today's competition. Chinese immigrants brought the custom to New England, where it has become a study in sportsmanship,

uniting team members of all backgrounds, teaching them discipline and equality. Groups of high schoolers, corporate employees, and skilled rowers take to the Charles together.

Tonight, as I ride with the Dragon Boat Club of Boston's experienced team Heatwave, I am amazed at the hollow sound of our voices counting over the water and the cacophony of splashes as we move under a footbridge.

However serene the scene may look from land -- the smooth, gliding of vessel over water -- it is rigorous on the boat. We pulse, we convulse, lurching forward, twisting backward. For each stroke forward, the body is pulled backward; for each lean forward, we must bear the weight still behind us.

We are a machine, counting sets of numbers to motivate and maintain unity. Twenty rowers must become one. Each stroke is as intense as the next. Even when we finish counting, the slowing is gradual, like a spinning wheel would be.

One rower is blind. He moves by feeling, posturing himself according to the boat's rhythm. He slices the water like the other rowers. He trusts his teammates -- rocking to the beat they have created.

Heatwave drops me off at the MIT boathouse so I can ride with a team of cancer survivors, organized by The Wellness Community -- Greater Boston and coach Peter Yew, a cancer survivor.

To me, this team seems less a machine -- I am impressed by how each woman has a rich story, each woman represents an individual struggle. Some of the rowers are hairless still in the throes of chemotherapy, others' grown-back hair blows wildly in the evening breeze. The women's voices ring in determination. They count, not quite in sync, to the beat of a snare drum, each with her own energy and intonation. The women are friendly, optimistic, and spirited. They laugh often.

Some have lived near the Charles their entire lifetime and never touched its waters. But they have come here to control the dragon, a metaphor for cancer. They get out of their boat at the MIT boathouse and celebrate a teammate's birthday with cupcakes.

I return on Heatwave's boat back to its dock by the Hatch Shell. I will row this time, "pull my own weight" as they call it, tucking my reporter's notebook in my life jacket. I attempt to reach far, slice vertically, and rock all the way forward and backward, while remaining in rhythm. I am clumsy. Mistakes are obvious, returned with splashed water or boat contact.

I stare at the back of the rower in front of me, and listen to his labored breathing. I mimic his stroke. I learn that letting up intensity on any one cut into the water throws off the entire team.

It begins to rain and we see lightning ahead of us upriver. We double our speed. Our coach encourages us to imagine our warm beds and chocolate cake waiting at home. I am instead motivated by the women I have just met. Each slice of the wooden paddle is much easier than what they have conquered. Instead of frustration, the beating drops allow me to feel I am a part of the river that runs through my city. It seems not to matter that the water is coming from above rather than below. I arrive onshore waterlogged and sore but knowing I have just become a part of something powerful.

I am also notebook-less. Somewhere between getting in and out of the boat my papers fell out of their hiding spot and into the water. I imagine my soggy notes descending into the murky depths.

However, I only need to close my eyes to feel the rhythm of the boats again -- and remember.

*Boston's 25th annual Dragon Boat Festival, the oldest in the nation, takes place today from noon to 5 p.m. along the Charles River between JFK Street and the Western Avenue bridge. More than 35 teams compete in the festival, and on shore will be traditional Chinese arts and crafts, food, music, and dance. ■*