



## Feel the Burn

Trade the Gym for a Dragon Boat | by Natasha Chilingirian

Never one for giving outdoor sporting adventures a shot, I decided it was time to let my guard down for an evening of Dragon Boat racing. As I perched at the very back of the super-sized, canoe-shaped boat that held nine pairs of experienced paddlers plus one at my side, I hoped I wouldn't screw up the synchronicity of their paddling. Trying to maintain the same technique as the others on the boat, we smoothly glided out from the Willamette River shore, riding beneath bridges and the beautiful lights of downtown.

After about ten minutes of powerful strokes, I felt aching in my shoulders, biceps and back, and had to take a break. As I paddled and rested intermittently, the 19 other paddlers on the boat just kept on going. These people are in incredible shape, I thought, as my mind slowly turned to how sore my muscles would be in the morning.

For just a night, I had the opportunity to become one of the Portland Fire Dragons, a competitive paddling team whose members help keep a sport from Southern China alive in the United States. Led by the commanding yet kind Matthew Roberts, the team is in its third

year and currently preparing for their first race of the season next month in Vancouver, B.C. Surprisingly, between 20 and 40 different Dragon Boat teams exist in Portland—many of which you have probably seen on the Willamette during the annual Rose Festival—with the Fire Dragons leading the pack as one of the most active. The largest local race occurs during the June Rose Festival, but teams practice year-round for races all over the region from June through September.

Roberts founded his team with the goal of reaching a competitive level right away, and that he did. The Fire Dragons were ranked as a

competitive team (above the bottom two levels of novice and recreational) at their first race in 2004. So it's no shock that Roberts pushes his paddlers to the limit during practice (and to prove it, my entire body thoroughly ached for the next few days following my evening on the river).

Dragon Boat racing is relatively new to the U.S. and has intrigued paddlers with its exotic roots and adrenaline-producing results. Legend has it that Chinese political critic, poet and statesman Qu Yuan drowned himself in the Milo River in the fourth century B.C., and that the sport represents the search

fishermen made for Qu Yuan's body. The first North American city to host Dragon Boat racing was Vancouver, B.C. in 1976, launching a rapid growth of the sport outside of Asia. Like a sprint, the most common Dragon Boat racing distance is 500 meters, meaning each member must push out two to three minutes of power in front of the judges. "It's a sport where you can be intense and fierce," Portland Fire Dragons member Laura Martin says. "I have a competitive side of me that's allowed to show."

Besides knowledge of an interesting past and the rush of paddling a quick race, Dragon Boat racing provides a killer workout for anyone who participates. The sport requires a blend of cardiovascular endurance (in order to keep your oxygen capacity up while paddling) and muscular strength (to get that paddle in and out of the water repeatedly, and with vigor). During practices, the Portland Fire Dragons build their endurance by executing 20-minute paddling sessions using medium force, then burst out short paddling spurts using every bit of power from their muscles to increase strength.

With only a few practices per week, top-quality performance requires workouts off the water too. Roberts teaches his team to do cardio and work their lats and back muscles at the gym to improve stroke power, but without overdoing it—more than four or five sessions of weight room workouts plus practices is overkill on the muscles. Frequent exercise is hard work, but the results are rewarding. Before Martin joined the Portland Fire Dragons, the only sport she enjoyed was softball, and she found paddling made a big difference in her game. "The next softball season, I came out with buff arms and a strong back, and I was hitting home runs," she says. "It was an incredible difference."

Team member Joel Strimling took the fitness aspect of Dragon Boat racing to another level by writing an article for *Dragon Boat World* magazine describing how swimming can improve your paddling endurance and technique. He discovered that crawl and freestyle swimming mimics the rotation the body makes while paddling, so a few hours in the pool every week will help perfect strokes as well as build up stamina. Logging in 40 laps three times per week, Strimling says his additional exercise improves his performance during practice and vice versa.

"We have to squeeze in our workouts without a lot of time, and most of us have nine-to-five jobs," he says of his teammates. "But all the workouts combine to help out each other, and our fitness builds exponentially." The team also supplements their training with one-and-a-half hour practices on outrigger canoes, which, due to a smaller boat size and less people on at once, amp up technique

even further. "It's a great way to focus on individual results, because you can decipher better what your stroke is doing," Strimling says.

With each member in tip top shape, the Portland Fire Dragons will caravan to Vancouver on June 16 for three days of competition, excitement and culture blending. As the city to first welcome the sport, Vancouver hosts one of the largest races, with 90,000 paying spectators, up to nine boats on the water at once and teams participating from all over the world. On the first morning of the Vancouver races, team members will nosh on easy-to-digest protein, take a jog and mimic the scenario of a race to prepare their bodies and minds. They will also lay off the Vancouver nightlife, but once the results are in, the Fire Dragons will party like Canadians.

"It brings people from all nationalities together," says Roberts of the race. The week-

end also serves as an incredible bonding experience for the already-tight group (Roberts describes it as an "instant family of 20" for any new member of the team). Martin added that the team is so close that they help one another move, attend each other's children's birthday parties and have even found romance on board.

The Portland Fire Dragons always welcome new members to their "family," so if you'd like to experience the excitement for yourself and get a buff bod while you're at it, strut your stuff at a practice—email Roberts at [coach@portlandfiredragons.com](mailto:coach@portlandfiredragons.com) or visit [portlandfiredragons.com](http://portlandfiredragons.com) (more general info on Dragon Boats and other local teams at [dragonsports.org](http://dragonsports.org)). But be forewarned: Only 5%–10% of people who try out make it, so get in shape ahead of time and keep in mind that the level of commitment you must give to the team is high. See you on the water! **PHOTO**



The Fire Dragons get fired up

View Sonic Long Beach Dragon Boat Festival

