

FAQS for the Curious

Why the use of the dragonhead design, rather than use of a simple sleek design like rowers use?

A: You can't fit 22 people into a rowing shell. This is a traditional Dragon Boat design, used in Asia during their festivals and celebrations.

What kind of speeds do the boats get? Are they the same as rowing boats?

A: We haven't clocked any using the speed gun, but a professional team can finish the 500-metre race in well under three minutes.

Who are the paddlers? Where do they come from?

A: Paddlers are ordinary people and professionals. We run a very diverse festival. We have companies that register and their teams are made up of their own staff as well as friends and family. You must have 8 female paddlers for each race, 20 paddlers per boat, and a drummer. A steersperson will be provided if you don't have one.

What kind of training do the paddlers need before they get into a boat?

A: None really. The week before the race, we offer each team two practices and, for the last couple of years, we have also had coaches available to go out in the place of the drummer teaching the new crews how to paddle.

What do the competitors do when they're not on the water racing?

A: Enjoy the down time in what we call "Tent City." Each team sets up in Tent City with their own canopy or tent and they can relax there or work on team-building exercises. The Festival also provides a Vendor Village, with varied merchandise available, a Food Court area, and a Beverages Area (beer/wine).

Where do the proceeds from the Festival go? How much of the money is used for operations?

A: Team registration proceeds are given to the St. Catharines Museum towards their educational programs. We are a bare-bones organization and we are 100% volunteer. Bill Strachan Vendor's Village: Vendor registration (at only \$70 per vendor, the cheapest in town) is included in the overall museum proceeds. Pledges: Wellspring Niagara collects pledges from the paddlers.

Do the race winners get anything?

A: Yes, best of the day has their team name engraved on the trophy. Medallions are given to other race winners. Also, the winner of the Breast Cancer Challenge race is also engraved on a special trophy. Any challenge races receive the prize decided by the Challenge Sponsor; therefore, if there was a challenge between, let's say, three municipalities, then the sponsor, perhaps a local construction company, would put up a trophy or prize. We avoid monetary prizes.

How many of the people involved are volunteers and how many are paid?

A: Over 60 volunteers for the Museum, and over 50 for Wellspring. None of the Museum volunteers are paid. We cannot speak for the other organizations, but to our knowledge, all volunteers are just that – volunteers, and much appreciated!

What kind of tasks do the volunteers take on?

A: Everything! We need officials on the water, timers on the pylons, dock people to line up, load up, and unload the paddlers into the boats, steerspeople to steer the boats, extra paddlers to help fill out the boats when teams are short paddlers, officials in the booth to record times, garbage crews, runners, people to organize the teams in the starting area, and then Wellspring has their own volunteers ... Wellspring collects pledges from the paddlers and their amazing volunteer team registers each pledging paddler.

Is there a need for volunteers who can help out in certain areas?

A: We always run short of volunteers at the end of the day. We start at 7:00 am and sometimes are still here at 7:00 pm trying to get Henley Island cleaned up! So we always need volunteers that start around 4:00 pm. Loading the boats back onto their transport takes a few people and is great fun!

Do any of the recipients of the proceeds participate in the races?

A: Wellspring participates in the races too, and they usually get enough of their volunteers, family, and friends together to fill two boats! The Museum partners up with the City, where possible, to fill a boat. Our volunteers also fill in as spare paddlers and drummers.

How did the Festival begin?

A: The Museum Board of Trustees, in 1999, was looking for a fundraiser and Dragon Boat racing was just making itself known in North America.

How has the Festival progressed since its inception?

A: It has grown so much we had had to rethink the placement of Tent City and the Bill Strachan Vendor's Village. Although we have seen a decline in the number of corporate registrations and sponsorships, we have also seen an increase in the number of smaller companies that are registering teams.

How often do Challenge Races happen?

A: We love Challenge Races, but they don't happen as often as we like! We have tried in the past to recruit teams that have a natural reason for a challenge – like city teams. We have in the past had Niagara Falls racing against St. Catharines, but with budget cuts and the economic situation the way it is, it is harder to get municipalities to spend the registration fee.

Welland has Dragonboat races. Is there any connection with the St. Catharines races?

A: Nope. Some teams paddle both, especially the travelling professional teams. We attract professional teams from across the province and sometimes even out of the province (and country) as we are a seasoned festival. We have the reputation as being one of the best run festivals, even though we are not a two-day event or as large as the festivals in places like Toronto or Ottawa. We are known for our well-organized and very helpful, efficient, and informative Dock Crew, and could probably win a medal as the best boat-loading dock crew, if such a contest existed!

What is the connection with Breast Cancer?

A: Historically breast cancer survivors participate in dragon boat festivals for many reasons, the first being that the act of paddling a dragon boat assists in the healing of the muscles damaged during breast cancer surgery. Other benefits that dragon boat paddlers realize from participation is support of other survivors, interaction with other people, a commonality with other paddlers, and some travel time if they compete in other festivals. We encourage Breast Cancer Survivor teams to participate in our festival by having a BCSTeam Challenge Race and, after that, a Carnation Ceremony that honours women who have passed away and celebrates the survivors.