

Rowbust Dragon Boat Team

Sixty-Two Women-Sixty-Two Stories

By
Dwight Davis

While attending the Canadian Dragon Boat Summit held here in Toronto, Canada, November of 2010, I had a chance meeting with Linda Kuska and Cheryl McLachlan from London, Ontario. The more I spoke to and thought about Linda and Cheryl during the Summit, the more I wanted to delve into their story and that of their Dragon Boat Team.

Everyone I spoke to that weekend thought the Summit was a resounding success. Those fortunate enough to attend the event, organized by Chloe Greenhalgh, Executive Director of Dragon Boat Canada, and assisted by Scott Murray, Stan Walton and Jeff Holubeshen, were given the opportunity to listen to a number of interesting and knowledgeable speakers who engaged dragon boat enthusiasts, coaches, and paddlers from across the country, with their informative and inspired presentations.

The second day of the summit, Linda and Cheryl spoke to me about the possibility of a story being written about their team. To this end I e-mailed them asking if they could forward me the information I would require.

The Rowbust Dragon Boat Team was born February of 2000, after Dr. Annette Richard, a family physician in London, wrote a newspaper article expounding the virtues of exercise as it relates to breast cancer survival. Dr. Richard encouraged survivors to attend an informal information session and it was here the Rowbust Dragon Boat Team took its first breath.

Ten years later through the efforts and lobbying of Breast Cancer Survivor Teams by Linda Kuska and Cheryl McLachlan, the community itself, in collaboration with Chloe Greenhalgh and Dragon Boat Canada (DBC), created racing rules to govern a new Breast Cancer Survivors Division (BCS). DBC, the regulatory body for dragon boat racing in Canada, gladly recognised and embraced Breast Cancer Survivors for the first time as a Division at this year's Canadian National Dragon Boat championship held in Whistler, British Columbia. The first gold medal ever awarded in the BCS Division was won by? That's right...The Rowbust Dragon Boat Team paddling out of London, Ontario...Bravo ladies.

Chloe Greenhalgh stated enthusiastically, "Dragon Boat Canada is thrilled to have a BCS Division at the National Championship and look forward to the day when BCS is a full racing division at the (CCWC), Club Crew World Championship."

Like all motivated teams, the Rowbust paddlers train year round, three days a week on the water at Fanshawe Lake, from May until mid-October. A vigorous regiment of core and aerobic exercise is also included in the training program. Once the Canadian winter sets in, the team trains two days a week at The Athletic Club in south London. The club sponsors all crew members with a six month free membership which includes but is not limited to aerobic classes, free weights and trainers. Pool time which helps to perfect paddling technique is also offered and is an invaluable bonus. The unwavering support of The Athletic Club has been a pivotal force in aiding the team in its development; the clubs management and staff are held in the highest regard by all team members.

Another reason Rowbust has done so well is the wonderful coaches they have had over the years. Orlando Tatone and Mike Sukava were there in the early stages of the team's development and set the stage for the team's competitive edge. "In the last three years Cheryl McLachlan and Sarah Shellard have" as Linda wrote, "taken us to places we never imagined we would be....not only are they great coaches," she goes on to say, "they are mentors and friends, the best coaches ever. They just seem to know what is needed and how to deal with sixty-two different personalities to get the best out of all for the benefit of the team."

The word survivors denote individuals who have conquered a traumatic event in their lives. Survivors and conquerors are interchangeable words that can be used to describe women who have fought and prevailed against Breast Cancer, even momentarily...Both words give credence to the strength, fortitude and resilience of the sixty-two women on the Rowbust Team, and this extends to all Breast Cancer Survivors. Each Rowbust paddler has her own unique story of resolve, determination, and triumph... Each has embraced one another and the Dragon, "Sixty-Two Breast Cancer Survivors, Sixty-two Breast Cancer Conquerors."

Women have a special gift. That unspoken, intangible sense of self and one another which allows for selfless bonding. The purveyors of life throughout the human experience on planet earth, women have been the foundation, the rock of civilizations. They birth, nurture, protect and teach. In my eyes each woman is a Goddess. The Egyptians had them, the Greeks had them, the Roman Empire had them and our Dragon Boat Teams have them... 21st century Goddesses with paddles in hand.

Linda Kuska is a past president and was a member of the board of directors of the team for five years. She is an original member of Rowbust dating back to its inception twelve years ago. Linda is well positioned to speak about the team and its mandate. She writes, " With incredible spirit, teamwork and perseverance, Rowbust is poised for success in each Dragon Boat Festival in which it participates, while ever promoting increased awareness of Breast Cancer and celebrating the greatest gift on earth...Life!" She continues. "Each one of us has faced our own health challenges and has come away from the battle a much stronger and more enlightened person. This is not to say the journey has been an easy one. Journey's vary, but the outcome is the same, we take each moment and live it." Linda goes on to say, "Our training is fun and challenging but more than that...it keeps us mentally and physically healthy, when at times in the past we didn't know if we would survive. Our positive, can do attitude, garnered from our participation in dragon boat racing helps our families deal with the stress of this inconceivable illness. Above all, and with much pride, we educate other's afflicted with breast cancer that they too can challenge their nemeses and succeed."

Cheryl McLachlan who has coached the team for the past three years adds. "When I retired from the Canadian Seniors Dragon Boat Club (CSDC) in 2007, after the worlds in Australia, I thought that was it. But along came Rowbust, and I have never looked back. Sarah Shellard, who also drove to Toronto from London with me as part of (CSDC) decided to join Rowbust as well and quickly became one of the best sterns in the area...both Sarah and I love coaching and working with Rowbust, giving back to a wonderful community . Most rewarding is Metamorphosis 101- individually and as a team! Watching folks gain confidence, self-esteem, drop pounds and become fit, all of it!!!"

The Rowbust Team crew run the full range in age, shape and size. Twenty new women were welcomed into the team family this past year, bringing the total crew to sixty-two. An appreciable difference from the original twenty-five they started out with. A number of past presidents and original members of the team such as Loraine Warnock, Catherine Ebbs, Linda Kuska and residing president Gail-Lynn Gastaldi are very active in filling speaking engagements at social and community events. The presentations detail their individual breast cancer stories. They discuss the Rowbust Team's history and philosophy, plus the value they gain from exercise and participation in dragon boat racing.

The enhanced quality of life experience inherent from bonding through training with like minded individuals, who have experienced breast cancer, creates a sense of care and fellowship. Such comradeship is an immeasurable gift to one and all.

If you were to Google women of history you would be amazed at the results: Cleopatra, Catherine the great, Elizabeth (1st), Florence Nightingale, Rosa Parks, Gloria Steinem, and Simone De Beauvoir are but a few you would find... a quote from Lady Nancy Langhorne Astor, the first female member of the British Parliament says it all, "We're not asking for superiority, we already have that...all we ask is equality." The past two decades has seen that equality blossom on the athletic podium, where cameras click and peers applaud as medals of distinction, Bronze, Silver and Gold are presented to and received by incredibly gifted female athletes. Such was the case in Whistler, British Columbia, 2010, as Linda, Cheryl Sarah and their teammates on the Rowbust Dragon Boat Team conquered the coveted first place position and triumphantly mounted the podium to receive their medals...

In 1896 the first Modern Olympic Games were held in Athens, Greece. Fourteen countries represented by 245 men competed in 43 events in those games. No women competed as it was felt by Baron Pierre de Coubertin the founder of the International Olympic Committee (IOC) that their inclusion would be impractical, uninteresting, unaesthetic and incorrect. Now how incorrect could the Barron have been?

The Beijing 2008 Olympic Games saw 4,306 female athletes participate. The words, "You've come a long way baby!" ring out loud and clear.

When asked what is next for the Rowbust Team Linda answered without hesitation, "Continue with Nationals...Go International... Worlds...Who knows? The possibilities are endless! Have we lost sight of what we started as, and what our vision was, absolutely not! We will continue to mature as a team, educate people and assist in changing the lives of women who are fighting the battle. The next twelve years will be no different than the last twelve. Just look at where we started and where we now are...Canadian National Dragon Boat Champions (2010)...incredible."

The last words Linda left me with expressed the essence of her belief and that of the Sixty-two Goddesses whose paddles grace the water as the crew of The Rowbust Dragon Boat Team...

Just, WISH IT, DREAM IT, DO IT!!!

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