

Pink Steel Dragonboat Team



Photo-Lynn Johnson/SI

In 2005, Lynn Franks-Meinert founded a dragonboat racing team called Pink Steel to honor a friend who died of breast cancer. The Pittsburgh-based team is made up of cancer survivors and gives the women an outlet and support group. Dragonboating originated in China roughly 2,500 years ago, but recently it has made a cultish resurgence in some U.S. cities. A typical dragonboat resembles a long, slender canoe, albeit one elaborately adorned with a dragon head to ward off evil spirits. A crew of 20 rows in unison to the beat of a drum.

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Pretty in pink: Cancer survivors form top dragonboat racing team

It had been 29 years of clean living, almost three decades since her right breast -- "a lot of my womanhood, my female identity," she said -- had been removed because of cancer. She'd had a boyfriend at the time. He sent flowers to the hospital and never called again. "It was a really traumatic, dark time for me," recalls **Peggy Frechione**, now 60. And then it wasn't. She recovered, married, raised children in the Pittsburgh suburbs and held a job as a nurse. Her body cooperated; scan after scan came up clean.



But in 2008 Frechione performed a self-exam and felt a lump on her left breast. The cancer was back. "I knew it right away," she says. "Here we go again." Thoughts rocketed around her head. She considered her mortality. Her family. Her job. Her identity. The damn chemo sessions. But she always seemed to come back to this: How would another mastectomy and the follow-up treatment affect her fledgling sports career?

Frechione called her coach and explained her situation. "Sorry to hear that," the coach said flatly. "But do you think you can you put off the mastectomy and the chemo until the off-season?"

Pink Steel is made up of a group of hard-driving women who take their dragonboat racing seriously.

photo-Lynn Johnson/SI

Peggy's husband, **Donald**, had his doubts -- *You have this potentially fatal mass in your body, and you're scheduling your treatment around a sports season?* -- but that's precisely what

she did. She put off surgery until November, started chemo in December, finished in March and was back paddling in a dragonboat at preseason camp. "I'm telling you," Frechione says, "looking forward to getting back on the water and competing again was what got me through."

Dragonboating originated in China roughly 2,500 years ago, but recently it has made a cultish resurgence in some U.S. cities. A typical dragonboat resembles a long, slender canoe, albeit one elaborately adorned with a dragon head to ward off evil spirits. A crew of 20 rows in unison to the beat of a drum. The sport's combination of individual effort and team synchronization has resonated with many men and women, among them **Lynne Franks-Meinert**.

A mother of two and a former college volleyball player, Franks-Meinert took up dragonboating in 2003 and, within a few years, was a sufficiently strong paddler to make the U.S. national team. "This is a workout," she says. "You're outdoors, you're with other people but you don't have to talk to them," she says. "For me that's a perfect sport."

In 2005, a friend of Franks-Meinert's, **Carol Raber**, died of breast cancer. Franks-Meinert decided to honor Raber's memory by founding a dragonboat team for breast cancer survivors in and around Pittsburgh. Pink Steel, she called it. In keeping with abundant research showing that psychosocial groups help accelerate cancer recovery and that moderate to vigorous exercise can decrease the chances of a relapse, there are all manner of sports teams and leagues for cancer survivors. Within the dragonboating subculture, there's a nationwide racing category for boats of breast cancer survivors. The twist with Pink Steel: Franks-Meinert, now 42, steers clear of what she calls "the cancer stuff." Instead, she runs her team like, well, a team.

The coach, who bears a strong resemblance to the financial guru **Suze Orman**, is not prone to sentimentality; she has no interest in creating what she calls "a floating support group." She laughs at the phrase. "You get your therapy somewhere else," she says. "You come here, you compete. I don't do 'victim' real well. We keep cancer talk out of the boat. If we're talking about anything, it's how we're going to do at Nationals."

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On a warm Wednesday earlier this summer, 32 Pink Steel members showed up for practice at the Fox Chapel Marina, 10 or so miles upriver from Pittsburgh's downtown. Herons flew overhead, the aroma of barbecue wafted in from the shore, other boaters waved. But for Pink Steel this was no sunset cruise. After Franks-Meinert assigned seats in two boats, the crews started rowing furiously, slicing through the water. Standing on the back of a boat, wearing shorts that revealed a Cat in the Hat tattoo on her left leg, Franks-Meinert yelled, "I want to see you puke!"

"Crisper!"

"C'mon, at least finish strong!"

Franks-Meinert isn't a breast cancer survivor, but she has been a victim of violent crime. About 15 years ago she was raped. Although she's careful not to go overboard in drawing parallels, she sees similarities between her ordeal and cancer survival. She felt as if her body had been invaded, she'd been stripped of power, her identity as a woman had been violated. She was also a single mother with a young daughter who was developmentally delayed. Competitive dragonboating "got me through," she says, restoring her feeling of control over her body.



Pittsburgh-based Pink Steel won a national dragonboat racing title last month.

photo-Lynn Johnson/SI

Franks-Meinert wants the same for Pink Steel. "People say, 'What do you expect from your team?' and I'm like, 'I want what every coach wants: for them to work their hardest, exceed what they think are their limits and then go out and kick ass.'" In a word, she wants them to be athletes.

The expectation seems almost ridiculous. Most of the women who join the team, many born before Title IX, have never before played organized sports. How can they become jocks for the first time, at this stage in their lives, on the heels of cancer diagnosis and treatment? Franks-Meinert's hard-edged sensibility is pitch-perfect for them. "She's not interested in weakness, she's interested in strength, and that's just what we need," says **Laurie Montgomery**, a Pink Steeler since 2008. "When you survive breast cancer, when you've stared down death, you want to thrive, and Coach gets that."

From four or five charter members paddling largely empty boats, Pink Steel has grown to more than 50 women, ranging in age from twentysomething to seventysomething, of all shapes and sizes, representing the entire trajectory

of breast cancer. Some of them were fortunate enough to detect a lump early and incur only psychic scars; others have undergone double mastectomies and are just weeks removed from chemo. Regardless, they all have warmed to competitive sports. They schedule their lives around the thrice-weekly practices. They watch their diets. They attend preseason training camp. They show up for off-season workouts, held in the converted weight room in their coach's garage. "It's the most powerful thing I've ever done," says **Lori McNally**. "A lot of us don't even like having pink in the team name. It should be purple, for bruises."

As a result, Pink Steel has become like many other competitive teams. While it has a no-cut policy, there are clear lines of demarcation between veterans and newbies, naturals and grinders. There are nicknames: Wonderbra, Spaz, Mac, Black Widow and the Murphs, a pair of sisters. ("Too bad you have cancer," **Kathy Murphy** told her younger sibling, **Diane**, when she was diagnosed last year, "but you can paddle with Pink Steel now.") There's fierce loyalty and a few jealousies. There's insecurity about who is and isn't in the coach's doghouse. **Irene Povich**, one of the veterans, recently asked to meet Franks-Meinert in private, concerned that Coach had given up on her. "I need you to be a jerk to me," Povich said.

"O.K., good. I will," Franks-Meinert replied. "This moment is over. Goodbye."

Barry Lemberski, a medical oncologist at the University of Pittsburgh Cancer Institute, has encouraged patients, including Montgomery, to join the team. But he's selective. "I pick and choose because of how strenuous it is," he says. "The sorority and camaraderie are great, but not if you can't keep up." He adds that while the medical community once was concerned that exercise might cause lymphedema -- a swelling of the arm near the cancerous breast -- that's been disproven in recent studies.

For some of the Pink Steel members, there is something almost mystical about dragonboating. **Cheryl Hawthorne**, a clinical psychologist and charter member, noticed that the very act of paddling mirrors the rhythms of cancer recovery. "First you take the paddle and you have to reach out, and what's the first thing you do as a survivor? Reach out," says Hawthorne, who, deep into middle age, recently got the Pink Steel logo tattooed on her foot. "Then you dive in, find strength to deal with some problems. Once your paddle's in the water you have to pull through the resistance. Then when you get back, you pop and start over."

Adds Frechione: "When I paddle, I literally envision myself carving through the cancer."

Those with a thing for symbolism note that the dragon conjures images of power. More than a few Pink Steel members remark, "Literally, we're all in the same boat."

The coach hears talk like this and rolls her eyes. She'd rather talk about the time one of her athletes paddled so hard that her prosthetic breast was dislodged and floated to the back of the boat. ("We nicknamed it Gertrude," she says.) Or the time a 60-year-old paddler developed a potentially fatal melanoma on her hand and, without saying a word about it, simply showed up to practice wearing a glove. Or the various times Pink Steel members have delayed reconstructive surgery until the off-season.

As Franks-Meinert recounts these stories, her façade cracks and, finally, she goes soft. "I've been around people who have been through serious s---," she says. "They were supposed to die. They don't act like victims. No one says, 'Work was bad. I don't feel good today.' ... You know, tough athlete doesn't just mean a 300-pound football player."

That grueling practice, paddling up and down the Allegheny on a gorgeous Wednesday in June? While no one puked, as the coach would have liked, there were plenty of heaving chests, bloody calluses and sweat-saturated clothes when the session was over. Franks-Meinert kept a distance from the team, walking ahead on the dock. ("That's what coaches do, don't they?" she said.)

The other women stayed to hang out in the marina parking lot. They joked around, compared abs and talked about everything from movies to kids to, yes, upcoming mammograms, radiation and experimental treatments. When they finally scattered, there was plenty of daylight left in the sky.

To find out more about Pink Steel, go to <http://www.steelcitydragons.org/>.