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SPOTLIGHT

Date Night with a Dragon introduces locals to dragon boating

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May 27, 2023

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Photos: Katherine Mansfield/Observer-Reporter

Steel City Dragons head coach Bob Randolph teaches Date Night with a Dragon attendees the dragon boating stroke leading them onto the Allegheny River on May 20. Randolph is actively recruiting men and women for the mixed team breast cancer survivors for the organization's Pink Steel team.

It was chaos.

When, according to Chinese legend, revered poet and minister Qu Yuan drowned himself in the Miluo River in 278 BC, locals raced to the water, hopped in boats and splashed their paddles to scare off dragons. In an effort to deter fish from his body, they also dropped sticky rice balls into the river.

On Qu Yuan's death anniversary every year after, locals gathered in long boats and paddled to the beat of a drum, a tradition that lives on today in the sport of dragon boating.

"The great thing is, it's something that people of all ages can do," said Bob Randolph, head coach of the Steel City Dragons and chairperson of Steel City Dragon-Boat Association, Inc. "We've had people in their 70s, 80s, 90s, there are amputee teams, there are blind teams. They can hold their own. People ... who have other sports injuries and have kind of given up on sports, they can still do it because it's a fairly gentle stroke. So anybody can be an athlete and get better within their capability at this."

The Steel City Dragons dragon boating team was founded in 2002 by the Urban Redevelopment Authority as part of a sister city celebration and moved to its home base, Fox Chapel Yacht Club, in 2005.

"They were going to celebrate the anniversary of a sister city relationship with Wuhan, China. They heard that there are dragon boat festivals, so they bought two dragon boats and loaned them out, one to Steel City Rowing, and another to Three Rivers Rowing. They had an exhibition race here in town and then that was kind of it," Randolph said.

But Steel City Rowing caught the dragon boating bug and put out a call for team members. Pittsburgh's first full season of dragon boating was 2003; the Steel City Dragons have been rowing down the river as a team and its own entity since 2005.

The team's first boat was granted by the Urban Redevelopment Authority; after it wore out, the SCD bought another, and now has two up-to-date boats, Randolph said. Boats hold 20 rowers, 10 on each side, plus one steerer who stands on the back and a drummer who sets the paddle pace.

Having two boats is a big deal, considering when the team started, Randolph wondered if he'd be able to fill one boat.

"It's grown slowly," he said. "We have had some ups and downs. The pandemic really threw us for a loop because, you see how close we are in the boat. That just was not something we could do. We just kind of went on hiatus for about a year-and-a-half, some people drifted away. So we're building back up."

Part of the team-building – literally speaking – is outreach events like Date Night with a Dragon. On May 20, couples from Pittsburgh and surrounding areas gathered at the yacht club, where they were fitted for life jackets, taught how to "paddles up!" and row before hitting the water.

Many of those in attendance had never heard of dragon boating before the date night event.

"I thought we were going to have our own boat," said Marino Swanson, of North Hills, who attended the event with Kaliana Villa. "She said it was date night, so I thought we were going to have our own boat. I didn't know anything about this until I came."

"I guess I knew a little more, so it was what I expected it to be," Villa added with a laugh.

Dragon boats sit long and low to the water, giving date night attendees a unique sunset view. Before the last rays of sunshine sank below the horizon, two boats of novices (and a few SCD team members) learned to paddle together. They were so good, Randolph taught them a race start and the boats took off in a flurry of small strokes, miniature waves and lots of adrenaline.

Randolph entertained with the sport's history and played some tunes before the boats docked and the after-party began. Champagne, chocolate and popcorn made a romantic end to the evening.

"The people here ended up being the nicest people ever. You can tell how much they all really care about doing this and how they wanted to show that to other people," said Jessica Yarger, who enjoyed a date night with Sam Santangelo.

Santangelo felt welcomed, too, and a little surprised when he and Yarger showed up for their life vests, paddles, and first glance of the boats.

"I was expecting maybe 10 people and there's a room of what, 50? I didn't know they were 20-person boats, so that was really cool to see," he said.

By the end of the paddle session, Yarger felt confident in her stroke. Santangelo said he needs a little more time on the water to get the hang of it, but both agreed dragon boating is something they'd try again.

"Definitely," Santangelo said.

Randolph is actively recruiting men and women for the mixed-team Steel City Dragons, and women for Pink Steel, a team comprised of breast cancer survivors.

"One of our coaches at the time had a neighbor who passed away from breast cancer. She had seen at some of our races there were special breast cancer survivor boat teams and read up on it," Randolph said. "There's some doctors who have done studies with breast cancer survivors and found that it reduces lymphedema swelling, it speeds recovery from surgery. There are just all kinds of benefits, and they kind of form a support group. She she decided to create our Pink Steel breast cancer survivor team. We go to a lot of races together and cheer each other on."

Beverly Cwalina was so enthusiastic about dragon boating after her first ride that the Peters Township resident is now a member of Pink Steel.

"A breast cancer survivor who is in a Facebook group for 412Thrive invited a bunch of Thrivers to come out and give it a try. Now that I'm surgery-free and feeling well, I was happy to come back. This is my first year," said Cwalina, whose husband, Mike Cwalina, joined her for the date night event. "I've been wanting him to come and try it. It's something we can do together. Its a lot of camaraderie, friends. It's a lot of fun."

Cwalina said coaches help dragon boaters fine-tune their strokes, and most practices include a race between Steel City Dragons and Pink Steel.

"That makes it kind of exciting," Cwalina said. "We always do that race start. It's really important to get good at that."

Dragon boat season runs from May through October. Practices are held Tuesday and Thursday evenings and Saturday mornings, and the team often dines out after a couple hours on the water. Both the Steel City Dragons and Pink Steel compete in several national races each year, and those willing and able attend workshops as far away as Toronto.

"We're very serious at serious time, and we're very fun the rest of the time," Randolph said.

Those interested in joining the Steel City Dragons are encouraged to attend a practice, with advance notice to Coach Randolph. Practice schedule and additional information can be found online at <https://www.steelcitydragons.org/>.

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