

ACTIVE

# BLAZING PADDLES

Dragon-boat racing is fast and furious, but its benefits for women with breast cancer are long-lasting and have encouraged many to take to the water

**HEATHER IRVINE**



The sky is crystal clear and the water is still at Dublin's Grand Canal Basin. There are the distant sounds of evening commuters, and then the rhythmic beating of a drum and lapping of water as a dragon boat with 20 paddlers comes into sight.

Standing on the bank, I'm nervous about what is to come. The boat is powered by the Plurabelle Paddlers, who have invited me to have a go.

There is one stipulation about joining this crew — you must have breast cancer or have had it, a factor that sets me apart from the rest. One by one, however, the ladies welcome me. Dyanpa Watson, one of the first members, produces a paddle and provides a crash course on how to use it.

Dragon-boat racing, a fairly recent arrival in Ireland, sounds straightforward. Press your hip against the side of the boat, grasp the top of the paddle with one hand and place the other near the bottom. Pop the paddle in the water and pull through in a swift movement. Lift out and repeat.

The sport has its own language. "Easy", "stop the boat" and "back paddle" are not difficult to understand but "kick", "go hard" and "attack" are more challenging.

Marian O'Dea, one of Plurabelle's founders, is our "helm" for the session, steering and shouting instructions. I'm to the left at the back, next to a woman who assures me I will pick it up in no time.

We are commanded to attention and the chatting stops, with steely fortitude among the paddlers. We tip along with 50% effort, before shifting to 75%, as instructed. When the "attack" call for 100% is made, the determination of the women is breathtaking.

The paddlers were founded in 2010 by



Breast cancer survivors and patients at Grand Canal Dock, Dublin; below, Kate Middleton with the Sisterhood

Fiona Tiernan after she was diagnosed with a recurrence of breast cancer and was advised to take regular exercise during her treatment.

"I was told to try to do 30 minutes of walking every day. I'm the least sporty person ever, but I knew I had to do something," says Tiernan. "A friend was in a dragon-boat group in Canada. When she told me about it, I thought that if I organised an Irish club, then I would have to do it."

Before 1996, women who developed breast cancer were often told not to do repetitive upper-body exercise because it was thought to cause or aggravate lymphoedema — chronic swelling of the armpit, neck or chest. The condition occurs when lymph nodes are damaged and can be triggered by treatment. Don

McKenzie, a sports medicine physician at the University of British Columbia, set out to prove that this advice was misplaced by asking women with breast cancer to try dragon-boat racing. He chose the sport because it was fun, built harmony among a large group, and created a feeling of togetherness.

During the tests, there were no new

## GIVE IT A GO

If you want to give dragon-boat racing a go, and you have or have had breast cancer, check out plurabellepaddlers.com. All ages and abilities are welcome, but consult a doctor before taking part, especially if you are in treatment. The squad trains on Wednesdays at 8pm and Saturdays at 8.45am, meeting beside Surf Dock at Grand Canal Basin in Dublin.

The Irish Dragon Boat Association's website, dragonboat.ie, is being developed, but you can get details about it on Facebook.

The Plurabelle Paddlers have acquired a disused garage at Hanover Quay in Dublin, which they hope to turn into a clubhouse with lavatories, showers and changing rooms. Young volunteers will help decorate it and develop its garden, but the club needs donations of money, time and skills. If you are a carpenter or electrician, why not help one Saturday? You can donate online at the club's website or email dragonboatproject@gmail.com.

cases of the lymphoedema, and none of the existing ones worsened. McKenzie's study resulted in the first dragon-boat team for survivors of breast cancer: Abreast in a Boat, in Vancouver. Teams have since formed in other countries, including America, Australia, China, Italy, Poland, Britain and now Ireland. International racing events have since been organised.

Tiernan asked Abreast in a Boat for advice when setting up the Plurabelle Paddlers. She also found help closer to home. "We were extraordinarily lucky. Julie Doyle, a British coach and a long-term international paddler, had recently moved to Ireland. I tracked her down and she immediately agreed to coach us," says Tiernan.

An open day was held in April 2010, with 120 women attending despite the lack of a boat. They raised funds for equipment and were soon on the water. One of the first members was Watson, who is from Dublin.

"I got involved at the beginning," she says. "I had been into basketball and lots of other sports over the years, but had to stop when I got sick. I had a touch of lymphoedema but the paddling has helped with that." Watson says she has made great friends. "People of all levels can take part. There are some ladies in our group who are afraid of the water,

but they do it regardless. Lots of people have never done any sports before and they love it." The club has 60 active members, aged 30 to 70. Last year, a team was sent to the Malaysia International Dragon Boat Festival, and won bronze and silver medals at the inaugural Cancer Survivors World Cup.

This year, the paddlers are competing closer to home. Their first race of the season was in Athy, Co Kildare, last Sunday. It involved new crews and a mix of locals under the guidance of the Irish Dragon Boat Association. The paddlers are racing in the Barrow Regatta in Co Carlow on June 24 and host their own event at Grand Canal Dock on September 14 and 15.

Dragon-boat racing may be relatively new in Ireland, but interest is picking up. Worldwide, more than 50m people take part in the sport. Many will have watched Prince William beat his wife, Kate, in a dragon-boat race during the pair's tour of Canada last summer. Kate once trained with the Sisterhood, the first all-female dragon-boat team to paddle across the English Channel. Security fears, however, meant she had to pull out of the 2007 attempt.

Teams are being set up across Ireland and there are plans to establish more. The Plurabelle Paddlers are involved in the development of the sport — Watson and Doyle are on the board of the Irish Dragon Boat Association. The club has also set up a programme for transition-year students to raise awareness of breast cancer and the sport.

"We want to encourage young people to adopt a healthy lifestyle," says Tiernan. "We want to introduce them to dragon boating, to have fun and see another side to cancer, other than the scary stuff. It's a perfect sport for those who are not naturally athletic. It is not like hockey or rugby, where there are stars of the team."

The programme has nine schools on board, with five more expected to take part in the autumn. The paddlers hope to include a junior league at their regatta in September, when dragon-boat races will be held over courses from 200m to 2km.

On my outing, a two-boat race took place over 200m. It lasted for over a minute, but seemed to be over in a flash. My arms were sore and I was out of breath but felt elated. Team spirit and a buzz of achievement powered the boat as we paddled back to the pontoon.

Heather Irvine is deputy editor of Outsider, Ireland's adventure magazine; outsider.ie

A crew in Athy during the town's dragon-boat regatta this month

PERSONAL PICKS

## Get the Gear

How to look cool and keep warm when you're out on the water



**The North Face Powerstretch Gloves**  
Fingers will be first to feel the cold when you're out on the water, especially when the sun goes down. These gloves are made from Polartec material and keep hands nice and cosy, even when they get wet. They also dry quickly, and are designed to create a flexible and comfortable fit.  
€15, 53degreesnorth.ie



**Icebreaker 280 LS Crew**  
This top is made from merino wool, which combines the best qualities of traditional wool, synthetics and cotton. It's soft, breathable and doesn't itch. It also keeps you warm in the cold and cool in the heat while staying pong-free, no matter how much you sweat. That's something co-paddlers should appreciate.  
€79.95, greatoutdoors.ie



**Columbia Compounder Shell**  
A good waterproof jacket is essential for outdoor activity, for obvious reasons. This one is guaranteed to keep you dry, but will keep you cool if you're doing physical exercise. It's fully sealed, made from Omni dry technology and is ultra-breathable. There's an adjustable hood and underarm vents. Oh, and an extra bonus — it looks great.  
€235, greatoutdoors.ie



**Helly Hansen Pace Tights**  
These spandex training tights are perfect for dragon boating. They provide a bit of warmth, but allow full flexibility for a good range of motion. There's a zipped pocket at the back, which is great for stashing items such as car keys. Zips on the lower calf make it easier to pop the tights on and off.  
€50, hellyhansen.com

## Adrenaline Fix

Races to get the blood flowing

Next weekend's events range from the easygoing to the hard-core. The **26 Extreme Coast to Coast** is a multidiscipline race of 200 miles along the Shannon-Erne waterway from Enniscrone, Co Sligo to Newcastle, Co Down in the east. Starting on Saturday, it involves two days of running, cycling and paddling. Also on Saturday, Waterford hosts an **Adventure Race and Duathlon**. The former involves a 14km run, 42km cycle and 6.4km paddle on the river Blackwater, while the duathlon consists of two runs and two bike rides along a woodland, mountain and lakeside course. Sunday's **Lough Key Tri a Tri** is perfect for newcomers to the sport thanks to its short swim.  
irishtriathlon.com; 26extreme.com; waterfordadventurerace.com; loughkeytri.com

## 'The power generated is incredible'

If anybody can develop dragon-boat racing in Ireland, Julie Doyle, pictured with her team, right, can. She is chairman of the Irish Dragon Boat Association and has been involved in the sport for 16 years — ever since she first tried it at work on a team-building day. Doyle has won world and European titles for Britain, and was recently selected for the British team's premier squad for the European championships in Nottingham in July.

A quantity surveyor, Doyle moved from London to Rathvilly in Co Carlow in 2008 with her husband, Mick. She coaches the Plurabelle Paddlers and spends much of her spare time trying to boost the profile of dragon boating and organising regattas throughout Ireland.

"Our race day in Athy last Sunday was fantastic," says Doyle, 40.



"Teams travelled from other parts of the country to compete and others were made up of local people who we had trained. There are more race days planned in Carlow, Athlone and Dublin."

The Irish Dragon Boat Association owns three racing boats and the Plurabelle Paddlers have two. There are only two dragon-boat clubs in Ireland, both in Dublin, but it is hoped new ones will be formed.

"There is a new club based at Grand Canal Dock as well as the Plurabelle Paddlers, but it hasn't a name yet. We also have a number of teams who have raced before and who will travel to events. We are working on establishing more clubs," says Doyle.

Up to 22 people, including a helm and rhythm drummer, can race in one boat. The craft and equipment costs about €10,000. The boats are 40ft long, about 3ft wide, and can travel at more than four metres per second.

"It's a very exciting sport. The power generated is incredible," says Doyle. "Racing is competitive and very exciting. It's also a very inclusive sport because there are about 20 places and everybody is part of a crew rather than performing as an individual within a team, as they are in other sports."