

# INTERNATIONAL BREAST CANCER PADDLERS' COMMISSION



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## Eighty Plus and Still Dragon Boating

By Eleanor Nielsen, Dragons Abreast, Toronto, Canada



*Carmel Wright, Busting Out, Ottawa*

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Breast cancer dragon boat teams have been atypical from their beginning in 1996. When most other teams were mainly young, athletic men, our teams were primarily women, many non-paddlers, and with an average age in the 50's. Now, 16 years since Abreast In A Boat launched that first team, we have members who have reached the healthy age of 80. I recently spoke to seven of them from five Canadian teams, and asked them for the highlights and perceptions of their paddling careers and what keeps them participating.

They universally attribute camaraderie with teammates and physical activity as the most important aspects of their membership. Some were new to exercise, some had participated in competitive sport for years, but all feel the benefits of staying physically active.

*I am now not only the longest playing female member at my golf club, but the oldest and I know the paddling has brought me to this point. Myrna*

*I walk an hour a day and like being physically active. My motto is walk, exercise, get enough sleep. Flo*

Contact us: [newsletter@ibcpc.com](mailto:newsletter@ibcpc.com)

Find us on Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/pages/International-Breast-Cancer-Paddlers-Commission/100527470038071>



Lilly Mallett, 82, Bosom Buddies, Nova Scotia

*Joining the team has really changed my life for the better with new friends. What I enjoy the most is the camaraderie with the women and knowing that we are all in the same boat. Carmel*

*A few years ago, one of my teammates hugged me at practice and said, "You are as old as my mother!" I took it as a compliment. There is support and togetherness in the team's activities – a comfortable feeling of "belonging" just flows from one to the other. Debbie*

*This is a terrific group of ladies – like one huge family. Lilly*

Their families and friends have been supportive and encouraging about dragon boating. Flo has granddaughters who tried it in school and came away saying, "How can grandma do races, it is so hard." Friends and family see them as inspirations and hope they will be like them when they are 80.

*In the early days, when my children were still at home, there were never complaints at the awful suppers we had on practice nights. Debbie*



Myrna Gaffney, 81, Dragons Abreast, Toronto  
Nina Burgess, 83, Dragons Abreast, Toronto



*My family hopes they are like me when they are 85. Elsie*

*My grandkids tell their friends I am a dragon boater and they tell me I am awesome and a role model. Carmel*

*I have great support from my family and hiking friends, who encourage me to continue when I express some doubts about another year. Nina*

Debbie Mosher, Bosom Buddies, Nova Scotia

In talking to these remarkable women, I learned that three are recent widows. Elsie's husband died in a car accident following the Peterborough Festival of 2010. Myrna's husband died three months after she joined Dragons Abreast and she has found her friendships on the team very helpful as a widow. Lilly had recently lost her wonderful husband and found joining the team helped her to deal with her anger and loneliness.

These are an exceptional group of women, with a sense of adventure and willingness to take on a challenge. Elsie told me she was diagnosed with cancer five times and after each new cancer experience, she took a course to learn something new. Her list includes: barbering, tap dancing, playing piano and organ, stained glass and art.



Flo Poirier 80, ChemoSavvy, Winnipeg



Elsie Higham, 84, Chestmates, Kingston

*I did that because it helped keep my mind focused on something other than cancer. Elsie*

*Having passed my "Best Before" date some time ago, I had a major concern about my ability to enter and exit the boat with agility and a little dignity. I found the coaches and my fellow paddlers only too anxious to assist each other with kindness, patience and care. Although I am a little awkward, I feel totally secure and safe with their assistance. Myrna*

If these women are representative of their peers, it is clear that the sport of dragon boating can add healthy aging to its many benefits to life after breast cancer. Thanks to these ladies for willingly sharing their stories.



## Dear Dr. Don: Getting your questions answered

### New Research Focus: Exercise and Nutrition



*Dr. Don McKenzie, founder and coach of the first breast cancer dragon boat team, Abreast In A Boat, Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada (1996) has agreed to do a regular column in this newsletter. Please submit your questions by visiting our website: [www.ibcpc.com](http://www.ibcpc.com) and click on our newsletter.*




*As both a doctor and a professor at the University of British Columbia and, as this is the beginning of the school year for those of us in North America, can you tell us about any particularly interesting studies undertaken recently by your students in the area of exercise and breast cancer?*

It is a new academic year and there are several students working on projects associated with their graduate degrees. We have recently completed a three year study on the effects of exercise on women who come to our 'cancer gym' during chemotherapy treatment. Two other Centres were involved in this research (Ottawa and Edmonton). We compared three exercise programs: 30 minutes of aerobic exercise; 60 minutes of aerobic exercise; and 30 minutes aerobics + 30 minutes of resistance exercise. These were supervised exercise sessions conducted three times a week throughout chemotherapy. Perhaps not surprising to the readers in this newsletter, exercise has a positive affect! It looks like more is better and that there is value in doing strength training. We will finish the analysis and publish this work in the New Year.

Perhaps more exciting is a project that we are going to begin in Vancouver very soon. We have often argued that a great deal of money for breast cancer research is generated through exercise but very little of the proceeds go to exercise and cancer research. Our experiences over the last 16 years have led us to the belief that EXERCISE IS STANDARD OF CARE and it should be offered to every woman as part of a comprehensive treatment program for breast cancer. The BC Cancer Foundation has agreed to fund a pilot project that will offer supervised exercise and nutritional advice to every patient as part of their treatment. The oncologists are agreeable, we have some money to upgrade the equipment in the gym and support students and others to help supervise the exercise and deliver the nutritional information. This is the Standard of Care that women deserve and we hope it will be the template for support by provincial government medical plans in Canada.

There are compelling reasons to support such a program. Regular exercise is important for both physical and mental health and there is ample support in the medical literature that demonstrates the benefits of physical activity on the quality of life, fatigue, depression, chronic medical conditions such as cardiovascular disease and diabetes and at least two types of cancer. The strongest evidence exists for breast cancer. Although the exact exercise prescription to provide optimal benefits is not known, and is a focus of our research, it is clear that physical activity is safe and has a measurable effect on health. In the cancer world, exercise has been shown to influence some of the biomarkers used to follow cancer progression and there are suggestions in the literature that exercise may have a direct effect on cancer-specific and all-cause mortality. Exercise not only makes you feel better and protects you from other diseases, it also may be fighting the cancer. At a time when many of the new drugs are struggling to show an effect, simple measures like walking are giving a real return on that investment.

#### National Representatives

	Mingi Pither		Hong Kong	<a href="mailto:hongkong@ibcpc.com">hongkong@ibcpc.com</a>
	Mary McAvoy		New Zealand	<a href="mailto:newzealand@ibcpc.com">newzealand@ibcpc.com</a>
	Irene Chui		Singapore	<a href="mailto:singapore@ibcpc.com">singapore@ibcpc.com</a>
	Mel Raath		South Africa	<a href="mailto:southafrica@ibcpc.com">southafrica@ibcpc.com</a>
	Susan Rowe		Ireland	<a href="mailto:ireland@ibcpc.com">ireland@ibcpc.com</a>







## Helping Your Partner Cope

By Dan Ferguson



Like all common interest groups, women with breast cancer want to help each other cope.

But what about your partners? Be they men, women or occasional.

Like breast cancer survivors, they travel a similar journey. But they seldom connect with others in the same boat – be it a dragon boat or a figurative one.

I have walked the walk now for 20 years. And I have a few tips you might use with your partner.

But first, it is fundamental to remember that, like survivors, partners are all different. And your relationship is different from everyone else's. So you have to think about whether any tip is applicable in your case.

Second, a partner follows a similar path to yours...usually a few steps behind in terms of information and reaction...but you must consider where along that path he or she is. Don't assume they are at your milestone. They might be behind or ahead.

### Tip #1

At the beginning, the partner suffers the same shock, sense of loss and fear of the future that you do. It is important to recognize this and discuss their predicament too. It is not "all about you" as some counselors might tell you. Your partner is in the boat too. The position in the boat is different but it is carrying you both even though you have different roles.

### Tip #2

Partners, especially men, are not usually into support groups. But they do need to vent, ask questions, and talk out their fears and feelings. They usually are not comfortable doing it in groups or with people they know. Try to find them a counselor or special friend with whom they are comfortable to let it all come out. You are not the right person for the job. Nor is your best friend. Your partner doesn't want to alarm you or burden you with all their concerns. And they want absolute assurance of confidentiality. Just like you do.

### Tip #3

Don't make the cancer experience all about disfigurement or loss of a breast. Despite all the hype about boobs you hear in young singles' circles, your partner did not choose you because of your breasts. And so don't believe they will abandon you now.

I don't know of any statistics – or even how you would study the subject – but it is my anecdotal experience that where a relationship fails after a diagnosis of breast cancer there was probably a pre-existing fragility which might have resulted in a breakdown in the face of any serious life crisis. If your relationship was strong before, nurture it now and think positively.

My wife had a grade 3, stage 3 diagnosis, and a double mastectomy. She went through radiation, chemo and several trials of drugs over 18 years. She also recently had a terminal re-diagnosis but we are still together.

### Tip #4

Your sexual parts do matter. Of course they do. But they are not all that made you an attractive partner in the first place. So make sure you keep looking and acting like your old sensual self. Keep wearing lipstick, dressing up, dancing, being cheerful – whatever things you did before that made your partner interested in the first place.

### Tip #5

I have lost track of the number of well-meaning friends who have taken me aside and whispered that I have to be strong and look after myself. The problem is that they never explain why I have to be the strong one or what exactly I am supposed to do to 'take care of myself'.

Maybe your partner was not the 'strong one' before. You cannot expect them to change roles now. Maybe you have to continue to be strong to help your partner through this.

**Tip # 6**

It is important that your partner's life – and yours too for that matter – not become a 'life of cancer.' In other words, it is important that cancer not become the dominant topic or the only controlling factor in your life. That can overwhelm anyone. Cancer is a dreadful thing you have to cope with but there is no point in going on if your life is filled with nothing but cancer issues.

You can help your partner avoid being overwhelmed by not exposing them to everything that happens to you. Share, but don't make cancer the only thing you share. Don't make cancer the only topic of your conversations. If you go to a support group, don't tell your partner about the topics. Find a friend or counselor you can talk to and vent to so your partner does not bear the whole burden of support.

**Tip # 7**

Do not think of the journey as a battle with cancer and encourage your partner to avoid this mindset. I wince every time I see an obituary saying "after a brave battle with cancer". It is not a battle you can win or lose. The outcome has virtually nothing to do with the effort you put into it. Virtually no one "loses" the battle in the sense that they died because they didn't try hard enough. You are not fighting cancer. You are trying to live a happy life despite cancer.

Whether life, however long, is worthwhile has everything to do with how you live day to day with the challenges of breast cancer. Cancer is not a game but the sports adage is a helpful analogy: it is not whether you win or lose but how you play the game.

**Tip # 8**

One way to help your partner 'be strong' and avoid 'letting cancer control their life' is to encourage your partner to take time out for themselves. Sometimes a counselor might tell a partner that they must 'look after themselves first.' That sounds very selfish but perhaps it is better explained this way.

When you board an airplane the attendant instructs adults to put on their own oxygen mask before putting one on their child. The reason for that is that if the adult gets overwhelmed then there is no one to help the child.

The same reasoning applies to partners. If they don't keep their own physical, emotional and mental health strong they won't be able to help you or themselves.

So encourage your partner to keep up their separate activities and separate social ties which give them a break and a support system. You want them to do something every day which will fill their heads with something other than cancer.

What might do the trick will be different for everyone. It might be playing a sport, watching an action movie, building a carpentry project or playing bridge. It has to be something that requires concentration because that is what shoves cancer thoughts out of mind. And encourage them to get lots of exercise because cancer worries cause a lot of tension which will dissipate with exercise.

You and your partner both have to work on maintaining your relationship and recognizing each other's challenges.

*Dan Ferguson is a retired judge and former Chair of the board of HearthPlace Cancer Support Centre in Oshawa, Ontario. He is still married to his partner, Anne, who is a 20 year breast cancer survivor "par excellence"*

## Won't You Join Us?

IBCPC membership has grown to one hundred and seventeen member teams representing nine countries including Australia, Canada, Ireland, Italy, New Zealand, Singapore, South Africa, United Kingdom, and the United States. We welcome two new Canadian teams, Sistership of Calgary, Alberta and Hope Floats of St. Catherine's, Ontario.

All breast cancer survivor teams interested in participating in the Sarasota Participatory Festival in October of 2014 must be IBCPC members. A Membership application can be downloaded from the IBCPC website: [www.ibcpc.com](http://www.ibcpc.com). Just click on the membership application link on the menu to the right of the home page. There is a \$100 fee for lifetime membership.



## The Yukon's Paddlers Abreast Story



*Photo by: Derek Crowe*

Although Yukoners with breast cancer do not paddle dragon boats, we feel we are members of the international breast cancer paddling community because we do paddle a voyageur canoe in a 715 kilometre canoe and kayak race. It is our isolated northern Canada version of southern dragon boating.

Here, in the words of one of the founding members, is how it started:

“While undergoing chemotherapy after a mastectomy in 2000, I realized how important my physical health was to me. I make large scale paintings requiring agility, strength and full arm rotation. I didn’t want to hear that I couldn’t reach or lift or carry. Through research into post-cancer physical activity, I learned about dragon boating. There is no dragon boating in the Yukon, but there is the world’s longest canoe race: the 715 km Yukon River Quest. I was determined to do it.” (Ava P. Christl, paddler in 2001, 2002)

Another founding member tells us about that first time Paddlers Abreast paddled the Yukon River Quest:

“On June 20<sup>th</sup>, 2001, families and supporters stood on the banks of the Yukon River in Whitehorse and cheered as 11 women pushed off in ‘big orange’ (a big, heavy, plastic voyageur canoe), bound for Dawson City. It was the first time ever that a voyageur canoe had participated in the Yukon River Quest, and for these 11 women, all survivors of breast cancer, the goal was just to finish the race in the allotted time of 100 hours. After finishing in just under 86 hours, there was exhaustion and euphoria, and champagne all around! This turned out to be more than just a quiet victory in the larger world of breast cancer stories, because for each of them, it was a deeply personal success.” (Cindy Gilday, paddler in 2001, 2002, 2004, 2008, 2009)

Since that first race in 2001, Paddlers Abreast has fielded a team every year, sometimes with paddlers who are not themselves breast cancer survivors, but are paddling “in support of” family or friends who have had breast cancer. One of our aims is to continue to participate in the Yukon River Quest, and from the next two testimonials, you will see why we feel it is important to keep our group going.

“From being afraid of the water in lakes and rivers, to being passionate with the Yukon River is what has transformed me after joining the Paddlers Abreast! I watched the gals in the beautiful canoe in the past and admired their strength to paddle the race to Dawson City. I had no idea what all was involved but I thought they sure have what it takes to do that! Then, in March of 2006, I was diagnosed with breast cancer and my journey began. As a member of Paddlers Abreast, I feel honoured to be in the voyageur canoe paddling in the Yukon River Quest race with these strong willed, passionate women. Yes, we can do this, yes we can conquer the gruelling race and overcome the sore muscles, the sleeplessness and the fatigue, and yes we can show other cancer survivors there is life after cancer.” (Maralyn Rogers, paddler in 2008, 2009, 2010, 2011, 2012)





Here are some words from a very recently diagnosed woman, who has applied to be in the voyageur canoe for the 2013 race:

“I was told that I had breast cancer in both of my breasts in June of 2011, and my whole life just stopped right there. I couldn’t imagine doing things like I had done before. I had a bi-lateral mastectomy in February of 2012. I joined Paddlers Abreast in June. People told me to take my time for healing but my spirit wanted to feel that I was alive. I clearly remember the day I paddled with all the other survivors in the boat on Schwatka Lake. We paddled hard, laughed, joked and sang. The water was cold, and the tears just didn’t stop running down my cheeks but I was smiling and fulfilled. It was the best moment to truly feel that my life goes on. The Paddlers Abreast team has taught me the importance of facing this journey with a positive attitude!” (Midori Kirby)

In the years since that first race, the team has greatly reduced its racing time (50 hrs. 16 min.). But completing the race faster and faster each year is not our aim. We want to make sure that survivors who want to be in the boat will be in the boat. All that is needed is their commitment to the training and doing the best they can.

Recognizing that paddling a gruelling 715 kilometre race is not for everyone, Paddlers Abreast is working on starting a recreational paddling program, which we hope will get more survivors out paddling in a supportive atmosphere.

Respectfully submitted by all members past and present of Paddlers Abreast, Whitehorse, Yukon, Canada.



**Steering Committee**



Jane Frost	President	Canada	<a href="mailto:president@ibcpc.com">president@ibcpc.com</a>
Michelle Hanton	Past President	Australia	<a href="mailto:pastpresident@ibcpc.com">pastpresident@ibcpc.com</a>
Jo Parry	Vice-President	Australia	<a href="mailto:vicepresident@ibcpc.com">vicepresident@ibcpc.com</a>
Jenny Yule	Secretary-Treasurer	Canada	<a href="mailto:secretarytreasurer@ibcpc.com">secretarytreasurer@ibcpc.com</a>
Louisa Balderson	Communications Director	Great Britain	<a href="mailto:communications@ibcpc.com">communications@ibcpc.com</a>
Betty Solley	Development & Membership Director	United States	<a href="mailto:membership@ibcpc.com">membership@ibcpc.com</a>





## Dublin Dragon Boat Regatta 2012

By Susan Rowe, Plurabelle Paddlers, Dublin, Ireland



The second Dublin Dragon Boat Regatta, bigger and better than last year's, held over the weekend of 15th & 16th September at the Grand Canal Dock basin in the centre of Dublin and hosted by the Plurabelle Paddlers and the Irish Dragon Boat Association attracted over 50 teams.

We welcomed Thames Dragons from the United Kingdom and from Germany, The United German Dragons, two breast cancer survivor teams from Canada - Canadians Abreast and North Shore Dragon Busters, and Louisa Balderson and Sue Cogley from Paddlers for

Life - Windermere who made the trip from the Lake District for the weekend.

The weekend began with a reception at the Canadian Embassy where we were welcomed by the Canadian Ambassador, His Excellency Loyola Hearn.

After two rigorous days of paddling we started to look forward to 2013 when we will welcome the second breast cancer team formed in Ireland - The Cork Dragons.

[www.plurabellepaddlers.com](http://www.plurabellepaddlers.com)

## What in the World is Going On?



### October 13, 2012 Las Vegas, USA

In recognition of Breast Cancer month, Rose Dominican Hospitals will host the 4th Annual Rose Regatta Dragon Boat Race and Festival at The Village, Lake Las Vegas Marina. [www.roseregatta.org](http://www.roseregatta.org)



### October 13, 2012 London, England

British Breast Cancer Dragon Boat Paddlers will meet for their annual Networking Day. This year Breast Cancer Care, an important cancer support organization will be sponsoring this event. This is a by invitation occasion so contact [paddlersforlifeuk@gmail.com](mailto:paddlersforlifeuk@gmail.com) to reserve your seat.



### October 20 & 21, Brooks Lake, Texas, USA

The Ninth Annual Gulf Coast International Dragon Boat Regatta Brooks Lake, Sugar Land, Flat Bend County, Texas. Join the two Texas breast cancer teams [director@texasdragonboat.com](mailto:director@texasdragonboat.com)



### May 9 & 10, 2013 Sea of Galilee, Israel

The second dragon boat festival in Israel will take place this weekend.

[www.dragonboatisrael.com](http://www.dragonboatisrael.com)



### May 25 & 26, 2013 Florence, Italy

Dragon Boat Pink Meeting. The third annual event being held the week before Venice's Vogalonga [www.florencedragonlady.it](http://www.florencedragonlady.it)



### July 24-28, 2013 Szeged, Hungary

11<sup>th</sup> International Dragon Boat Federation (IDBF) World National Championships

[www.idbf.com](http://www.idbf.com)



### October 24-26, 2014, Sarasota, Florida, USA

IBCPC Participatory Dragon Boat Festival [www.teamsosmiami.com](http://www.teamsosmiami.com)