

Every year, Portlanders present to the masses the spectacle that is the Rose Festival. Part high school beauty pageant, part county fair, it offers the opportunity for residents to smugly bask in the knowledge that they live in one of the damn nicest places in the United States. It's a self-congratulating display of hometown pride that many could live without but that just as many relish and adore.

For others, the draw and excitement of the festival is not in the streets but on the water. Out on the Willamette, eclipsing the glitter of the princesses (oh, right, now they're ambassadors), petting zoos and minor celebrity appearances, the annual Dragon Boat Races are among the event's prime attractions.

The Amazon Dragons, which might be the only out gay dragon boat team in the world, were founded 11 years ago by the Lesbian Community Project as a way of drawing positive attention to Portland-area lesbians. "What I love about it is the rhythm of that many women doing the same thing at the same time," coach Wendy Murray zealously explains. "I like the demands on my body."

The Dragons have turned heads at the Rose Festival through the years, placing in almost every race. Their run of success was broken last year, when they failed to place.

Murray says they also never have placed first. "But we're looking to change that," she claims.

The team is 34 strong, although it will be cut to 25 for race day. Each boat has 16 women paddling, one coaching and one steering.

They race against about nine or 10 other teams of women, and there's usually a good one from Canada. On race day they compete in a minimum of three heats, and if they're doing well, they race twice more on the second day.

"We put our strongest boat forward for the first race of the day," Murray explains. "Then we put fresh bodies in for the later races."

Women interested in becoming a Dragon first and foremost must show a real commitment to the team, Murray says. This means a willingness to subject oneself to at least three hours of "dry land" training (calisthenics and strength-building exercises) a week.

Additionally, the Dragons hold training sessions on the Willamette as well as team-building exercises. Many soon realize the rigors of boat racing can be overwhelming.

Murray, who balances racing with her family life and a day job as an office manager for a chiropractic clinic, says a few potential Dragons drop out after a week or two. Those who make it through the conditioning and the early mornings on the water will compete June 9 and 10 during the Rose Festival.

The races start under the Ross Island Bridge and end 550 meters downstream

Row, row, row your boat

Amazon Dragons aim their oars to win

BY MITCH CALE



Tough work if you can get it (above); the 2001 team (right)

under the Hawthorne Bridge. Although each race lasts anywhere from three to three and a half minutes, it can "seem like 25 minutes or sometimes four hours," Murray says.

"Three minutes doesn't sound like a very long time, but you're using your whole body, and it's a real workout," she assures. "The next day

you feel wiped out but exhilarated."

For those who want to support the Amazon Dragons without getting wet, Murray suggests making a donation. Outfitting a dragon boat team is expensive: Between \$2,000 and \$2,200 is needed every year to keep it financially afloat. The entry fee alone is \$1,200, and uniforms and other race day needs will swell expenses even more.

Ideally, Murray says, Portland businesses would agree to act as annual sponsors of the Dragons; the team has begun a letter-writing crusade urging contributions. Individual donations also are appreciated, of course, and she stresses that they need not be monetary.

"Goods that we can auction to raise money" would be useful; a uniform supplier and "free massages or chiropractic services" also are needed. This year, a naturopathic student is helping out with massage, but the team always can use more help of all kinds.

Murray adds that any contribution more than \$250 will be acknowledged by the Dragons on their uniforms, should the donor wish. After expenses for the 2001 race are met, the team will start squirreling away funds for next year's entry fee.

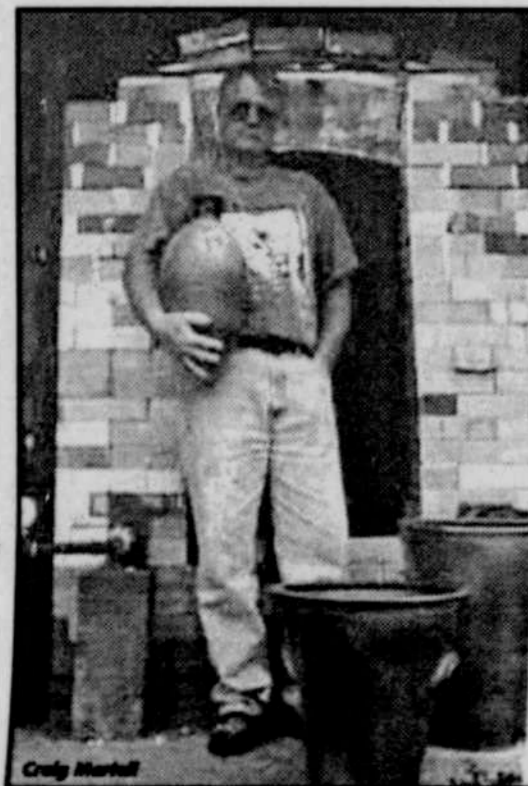
Money aside, something every member of the community can do to support the Amazon Dragons is come out on race day to cheer them on down the Willamette. After all, this might be the year they take first. ☐

Women can try out for the AMAZON DRAGONS if they act fast between now and April 30. For more information or to make a contribution call Wendy Murray at 503-286-2374.

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