

SPORTS

Amazon for a day

Just Out writer gets a paddling (lesson) from the Amazon Dragons

BY KRONDA ADAIR

Dragon boat paddling is not for the faint of heart. Good thing the Amazon Dragons, Portland's lesbian dragon boat team, are not the fainting kind.

During the June 8 and 9 Rose Festival Dragon Boat Races, 16 members of the team will paddle a brightly painted wood and fiberglass boat weighing up to 4,000 pounds as hard as they can for three minutes. It's an impressive display of drive, teamwork and coordination that will leave them gasping and sore—but feeling accomplished.

"When you actually get to race...that's the epitome," says Sandra Lutz, three-year paddler with the Dragons. "For me, it's a very spiritual thing. The first time I really paddled in a race, I thought I'd die."

Despite the pain, it's clear these women find rowing to be addictive. Eight-year veteran paddler Barb Pallari can't seem to get away. "Every once

in a while [I] think, 'OK, this is my last year'...especially me, 'cause I'm old...and then it's like, 'Well, I can do one more year.'"

To see what all the fuss is about, the team generously allowed me to accompany them on a practice run. I climbed onto the front of the boat, where I stood clutching the colorful wings. I was not comforted to know that tiller (the person who steers) Jen Perez had fallen off the boat in choppy waters just a few weeks before.

After some warm-up cruises, which included aiming for and scooping up any floating garbage in the river, the women got down to business. Sixteen paddles poised above the water, then launched in one explosive burst while coach Les Kingsbury shouted out the cadence and encouraged individual paddlers, sometimes offering technique advice.

Just when I thought we were moving pretty well, she called out, "KISS—IT—NOW!" and the boat went into turbo speed.

Kingsbury explains, "Kiss It is one of our power strokes—you're getting down and kissing your knees then sit-



Poised for victory: The Amazon Dragons are ready to win the Rose Festival Dragon Boat Races

ting up.... Dragon boat racing is a sprint, but it's three minutes long so you can't do 100 percent the whole time. You have to vary your strokes."

Later in the practice, they put me on the last bench and I got a 30-second crash course in paddling. Though the Dragons make it look easy, an incredible amount of coordination is required.

Contrary to instinct, I worked to use my arms less and the rocking motion of my body more to pull the paddle through the water. I'm also told it's important to use my legs to push my body upward.

While concentrating on all that, I had to watch the paddler on bench five for the cadence of the strokes. And in barely a minute, I had to try to forget about my back and shoulder muscles, which were already starting to burn—and this was taking it easy!

Then, suddenly, I noticed I was having a great time. I was part of something bigger than

myself (an inefficient, winded part—but still a part), working in rhythm with 17 other women toward a definite goal—and it was fabulous. No wonder several team members describe paddling as a spiritual as well as physical experience and cite camaraderie as a main reason they keep coming back.

The Lesbian Community Project formed the Amazon Dragons in 1992 as a vehicle for visibility. The team went competitive in '94, which is when Kingsbury became involved.

After paddling for six years and tilling for two, she's now at the head of the boat, literally and figuratively. She is helping spearhead an effort to turn the seasonal Dragons into a year-round club.

"After last season, we felt that we needed to make major changes and move forward or it might fall apart," she explains. "One of our goals with the club is to do more things in the community and involve more people."

She says this will allow for women who just want to come out and paddle occasionally and will result in a larger pool from which a roster of paddlers is chosen for each race. The group is also working on getting nonprofit status and gaining new sponsors to facilitate traveling to races in other states. **J**

Cheer for the AMAZON DRAGONS June 8 and 9 at the Rose Festival Dragon Boat Races on the Willamette River in front of the RiverPlace Hotel. For information about joining or sponsoring the team, contact coordinator Eileen VanPatten at 503-762-4742 or eavanpatten@attbi.com.

KRONDA ADAIR is a free-lance writer and flash-in-the-pan paddler who's grateful for hot tubs. Write her at ephany@myexcel.com.



Coach Les Kingsbury hollers instructions while writer Kronda Adair holds on for dear life



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