

Dragons on the lake



A pause in the middle of the lake for a lesson on paddle technique from Colleen McLaughlin as Dragons in the Wallowas club members take their boat on the water. Elane Dickenson/ForThe Chieftain

Two Hong Kong-style racing boats arrive in Joseph for maiden Wallowa Lake voyages

By KATHLEEN ELLYN
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Dragon boats glided across the waters of Wallowa Lake last weekend, and legend has it they will return later this summer.

The boats are part of a centuries-old tradition in China, where a crew of paddlers, a captain and a tiller race long watercraft decorated with ornate dragon embellishments.

Michael Lockhart, president of both the Wallowa Lake Tram and the Wallowa Lake Tourist Committee, has been working hard to get dragon boats on the water this spring and he managed to bring two Hong Kong-style racing boats to the lake.

It's all leading up to the "7 Wonders Cup Races" on Aug. 27-28. The event will feature a 250-meter race, a 500-meter race and a slalom race unique to Wallowa Lake.

The boats that came last weekend are loaned on a "swap lease" that requires the local club — Dragons in the Wallowas — to do a few repairs while they have them.

A group of 24 club members and interested residents gathered for a presentation by Colleen McLaughlin, 73, head coach for the 200-member Golden Dragons race club in Portland.

McLaughlin talked about how she began paddling in a dragon boat when she was 60. The 73-year-old later demonstrated that she could easily out-paddle any of the Wallowa County contingent.

"Most of our paddlers (in Golden Dragons) are 60 and over, and many of our paddlers are in their 80s and still compete and we have women over 90 who paddle," McLaughlin said.

Her presentation included tales of wins over younger teams, an inspirational reading of why she is involved in dragon boats and

stories of the tight friendships that dragon boating engenders.

"I have paddled with people who just came back from their chemo treatments," she said. "I can't begin to tell you how many people have said 'thank you for saying you paddled well today' — it's a small thing, but they were in a bad spot just then and they needed that. It's wonderful having people around you who support you."

The crowd was wowed by the Awakening Ceremony, which featured painting the red pupils on the black eyes of the dragons on the two boats and an uplifting prayer by United Methodist Minister Cherie Johnson of Joseph.

Sparklers were lit and two lanterns were set flying into the skies as part of the ceremony.

The boats were taken out four times over the weekend with regular members of the club taking up the lion's share of benches and paddles, returning again and again to make the most of the training. Three members stepped up for tiller training on how to steer the boat and three for captain/coaching/caller positions to lead the crew.

No one is obligated to be on the "race team," and casual boaters are welcome in the club.

Megan Bowen of Enterprise, who has experience with two Portland crews — a medal-winning traveling team and The Golden Dragons — will both captain boats and create a flexible paddling schedule with the assistance of several other members. Practices (three a week) will move the teams toward the August races.

McLaughlin left the group with an image they can't wait to replicate: "A dragon boat is a spirit of two things: water and air. When you get to that point — you'll feel the boat fly."



The first running of the Dragons in the Wallowas Club coasts into the dock after an intense practice with Rick McLaughlin at the tiller and Colleen McLaughlin (both of Golden Dragons) instructing. The two Hong Kong-style racing boats arrived Friday and hit the lake over the weekend. Elane Dickenson/ForThe Chieftain



Members of Dragons in the Wallowas improve their paddling technique under the critical eye of Colleen McLaughlin, head coach of The Golden Dragons of Portland. Elane Dickenson/ForThe Chieftain



Wallowa County Dragons in front of The Outlaw on Friday. The dragon boats are on loan to the Dragons in the Wallowas club for the summer. Kathleen Elynn/The Chieftain