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Riding the dragon

Casual corporate competitors to fanatic paddlers can team up on the water this summer in York events

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Trying to build team morale? Looking for a new challenge? Some companies have found a way to do it through dragon boat racing, a fun, competitive and fitness-building activity.

In York Region, dragon boats are afloat on Lake Wilcox, as the Richmond Hill Canoe Club keeps two vessels at its training site.

Dragon boat racing's popularity has taken off in recent years as Asian immigrants brought their traditions along, Stouffville resident and club regatta chairperson Doug Northey said.

Teamwork is so important to the sport, more corporations have taken an interest by sponsoring vessels and having employees manning the ship.

"It caters to the fanatic, as well as the casual paddler and it has a tremendous range of ages and it's co-ed," Mr. Northey said.

"You can be on a competitive or non-competitive team and the sport caters to people of different skill levels," said Belinda Lyn, a teacher at Father Michael McGivney Catholic Academy in Markham and a member of the Scotia Rouge team paddling out of the West Rouge Canoe Club.

Introduced to the sport during her university days, Ms. Lyn noted competitors can be part of a mixed team or compete in divisions of men, women, over-40 masters squads and entries paddling for a cause, such as breast cancer.

Noting her team has 20 paddlers, a drummer and cox along with four reserves, Ms. Lyn said that leads to a highly social atmosphere.

Just as important, the skills aren't difficult to learn and can be mastered in short order, Mr. Northey said.

What is critical though is everybody being on the same page when paddling, Ms. Lyn said.

"You don't want to be like a caterpillar, where everyone is out of sync," she said.

The outdoor season begins in the next month and some of the more competitive teams have already begun training.

Ms. Lyn noted her club, which is taking to

the water in four or five festivals this season, began training just before Christmas.

Once a week, team members do pool paddling at the Mississauga Canoe Club or running and weight training at Variety Village in Scarborough.

"Other teams might start up when the weather warms up and they can get on the water," she said.

Once their boat is in the water, Ms. Lyn's squad trains three times a week, sometimes distance paddling and sometimes going short spans.

Races, she said, are usually 500-metre events. But others can be as short as 200m or as long as 6,000m.

The corporate element can be important when it comes to buying a boat, paddles and life jackets. Often, that leaves only registration fees for people to pay.

While more corporations and adults are catching on to the sport, so are youngsters.

St. Robert Catholic High School in Thornhill has had a dragon boat racing team for eight years.

"It's fanatical at our school," head coach Edith Low said.

Introduced to the sport six years ago when a teacher's dragon boat team needed new talent, Ms. Low cited the large Asian population at her school as a prime reason for launching the team.

Other schools, such as Thornlea Secondary and Richmond Hill High, have caught the dragon boat bug.

At St. Robert, about 200 students from Grades 9 to 12 attend trials in September.

Students go through a rigid routine in which they must do "hundreds of pushups, crunches, rowing tests, long-distance running and all kinds of team-building things," Ms. Low said.

"The kids can become physically fit and it's a sport where anyone can try out and has a chance of making it. It's a sport you can become obsessed with."

By March, the team is down to 55, a 50-50 gender balance plus a drummer, all outfitted with uniforms.

Once the boats are launched, she said the team pares down dryland sessions to once a week, using the other practice day at Sunny-side Park in Toronto.

Your entry fee includes training sessions

You can stay in York Region and check out the dragon boat scene, thanks to the Richmond Hill Canoe Club. It's holding a regatta June 11.

For \$35 per person (entry fee is maximum \$700 per crew) you get two training sessions until June 9 and three races on race day.

All equipment is provided, club regatta chairperson Doug Northey said, adding close to half the crews are novices just out for a day of fun.

Most of the crews are community based, such as high schools or the York Regional Police force.

"You can live the experience and pick their brains," he said.

For further information, check out

www.rhcc.on.ca

Another event takes place Aug. 19 at Seneca College King Campus (13990 Dufferin St. in King City) with the running of the third annual ATI Dragon Boat Festival in support of the United Way.

Twenty-six teams entered last year, event spokesperson Tracey McCague-McElrea noted.

Entrants must be 16 or older. One participant last year was in his 70s.

The distance is 250m and every boat is guaranteed a minimum of three races.

For more information, check out www.unitedwayyorkregion.com or contact Ms. McCague-McElrea at dragonfever@rogers.com or 905-775-7803.

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