

Diary of a Novice Paddler 2005

Diana Wort is the captain of the Tuesday False Creek Novice Crew "Abreast and Beyond."



Tuesday, April 5/05

Wind! Pelting rain! Unseasonably cold temperatures! A whole parcel of nervous novices who had never set foot in a dragon boat! Some of us didn't even know how to swim. Is this any way to start your first year as a dedicated Abreast in a Boat paddler? You bet it is! Short of a hurricane, it can only get better from here.

As I looked around at the huddled groups of women, I wondered how this shivering bunch could ever turn into a cohesive crew. Then I saw the smiles, shaky but eager. We were all here, despite the weather, despite the unknown, despite our own personal self-doubts. Figuratively, and literally, we were all in the same boat—or soon

going to be!

There were forms to sign, lifejackets to distribute, paddles to retrieve and fuschia shirts to try on. (Special thanks to all those ladies who leant us their old shirts so we novices could look the part.) Then Juanita led us and the Falsey Creek Crew through our warm up. We needed it desperately!

Finally it was time to get in the boat.

Oh! There is so much to learn! I was so pleased when we actually got moving. Although, between the wind and the current, I think we made better time going backwards when we shipped our paddles for instruction and drifted. Lita was wonderful. I really appreciated her one-on-one paddle instruction as she crawled through the boat. I also liked the smirk she tried to hide when we all tried to paddle together. I think we must have looked like a drunken centipede.

One time she actually laughed out loud. That was when we were doing a long stretch, finally starting to get some rhythm and she yelled, "Don't forget to rotate!" Our concentration shifted and you could hear the unmistakable sound of paddles bashing all up and down the boat.

The weather did not get any warmer and some lips were definitely blue by the time we finished, but finish we did. Cold on the outside but full of the warmth of accomplishment on the inside.

Never has a beer tasted better!

Saturday, April 10, 2005

What a difference in the weather! Vancouver really smiled on us today. The snow shone on the mountains and the spring blossoms scented the air. We even saw a mating pair of mergansers paddling by us.

I was Stroke today along with Tracy, an experienced paddler. That is hard work! I discovered early on that I was having a problem with pulling out of the water in time and was so pleased when Lita gave me some “lift the torso” advice. However, come Sunday I had some mighty sore torso lifting muscles!

Lita put us through a series of one-minute drills. At first we all thought, “Hey! This is no problem. A race is less than 3 minutes? This will be piece of cake.” By the end of the lesson, those minutes were getting longer and longer! I was sure the salt water must have affected Lita’s stopwatch.

I wanted to share the thoughts that were going through my head as Juanita lead both crews in the warm up and the fuchsia sea rippled around me: It is really amazing to be with this group. A year ago I could not have imagined being surrounded by dozens of spirited, dynamic, fit and HEALTHY breast cancer survivors. I find myself filled with such a myriad of emotions; amazement at the sheer extent of breast cancer; both humbled and comforted to realize my plight is not unique; and, most of all, uplifted and enthused enough to embrace my future with both strong arms!

Tuesday, April 12, 2005

Okay, this isn’t fair. Two cold wet Tuesdays in a row. Who do I make my complaint out to? I was talking to a woman in the Falsey Creek boat who had paddled for 4 years and only had to paddle in the rain once! This year’s novices are 2 out of 3!

Seriously, except for the ominous thunder and the pelting rain when 6 ladies and Dr. Don went to get the boat, it wasn’t too bad. The sun even tried a couple of watery appearances, but the drizzle kept winning the battle.

We were in a thinner boat today and full to capacity. As strokes, this meant Tracy and I were squished right together. The rest of the crew started calling us “Siamese twins.” We had to ask each other’s permission every time we needed to stretch or shift position. After a while, we got to know each other really well! I’ll tell you one thing, Tracy sure is a good hot water bottle!

Our coach, Lita, didn’t have that benefit, standing up there alone at the windy bow of the boat. Throughout the practice, I watched her “warm-up” pants get wetter and stickier with the rain. Her fingers even started to prune as if she had been too long in the bathtub! Mind you, I didn’t help. I listened carefully to everything she said, and concentrated diligently on one part of the stroke as she suggested, all the while trying to keep timed with Tracy. It happened during time when we were focussing on “the catch.” I was trying so hard to get a perfect placement into the water that I guess I wasn’t watching my exit. Lita was yelling the time, “One! Two! Three! Four!” when suddenly, “One! Two! Thr—cough! Cough! Splutter!” My blade had caught the top of the water and completely doused Lita in frigid water from head to foot. I couldn’t have done better if I’d been trying.

Needless to say, Lita looked very happy when it was time to head in.

Later, as we sat in the bar, chatting over our half-price Tuesday pizza and beer, I decided that dragonboat racing was definitely the sport for me. For one thing, it was on the sea, which I’ve loved since a small child. When ever an adult asked me what I wanted to be when I grew up, I answered without hesitation, “A mermaid.” Secondly, it is a sport of

cooperation. There are no stars. You all pull together. Remember the kid who always got chosen last for teams? That was me. With dragonboating, I can feel like an integral part of the team, not just ballast. Finally, there is the camaraderie. Where else could I be surrounded by such a dynamic, enthusiastic, life-loving cluster of women?

Saturday, April 16, 2005

Isn't it amazing how weather conscious you become when you know you are going to be out on the water for an hour and a half?

When morning dawned to the sound of rain, you could almost hear groans from dragonboaters all over the lower mainland. But, surprise! By the time we were spread out on the grass doing our warm-up, the sun was actually shining! There was extra energy in our step. "What is it about sunshine that makes us feel so good?" Juanita sang out, as she led us through our paces.

We had a wider boat today so Tracy and I weren't "joined at the hip" quite so much. I was able to practice rotating without bumping into her. Today we learned about the "leg push" and the "exit." I have been looking forward to the latter since I don't want to douse Lita again. It turns out I need a shorter paddle.

We started out a bit rough this morning. Perhaps we were getting used to our new positions. There was lots of paddle bashing and chortles and Lita got that smirk she had when we first started. Later, Dr. Don started sounding out the count and that helped, except he was FAST! (Pant! Pant!)

The girls at the back said that Dr. Don kept things pretty loose back there. There sure were lots of giggles! Jane said, "Laughing and timing, we can't quite manage to do both at the same time!" I wonder whether the laughter caused the bad timing or vice versa? All in all, it was a great, if tiring, practice. I think we all left with that "good tired" feeling and a smile on our sunny faces.

Tuesday, April 19, 2005

What amazing weather we had—except for the wind! That was a bit surprising because in town there seemed very little. Once on the water, we realized it was coming straight down the inlet.

This wind gave us a scary moment when six of us went to get the boat. It was beside the dock with another tied to it. Dr. Don untied the far one and stayed on the dock so we could slip out from under. Instantly the wind caught our boat. We started moving in directions we didn't want! Dr. Don was yelling instructions but we were moving faster than our poor paddling could compensate for. We were drifting farther and farther away from the dock without our steersperson! Six panicking novices completely at sea! Finally, before we left the Sea Village area all together, we grabbed on to a moored Aquabus and the Falsey Creek crew gave Dr. Don a lift out to us. Once our steersperson was aboard, we were fine but for a while there, I thought we really were going to be "Abreast and Beyond!" Beyond hope!

After the warm-up, Lita gave us our orders. I was at the back of the boat for a change! Quite a different perspective. I loved being able to see the rest of the boat and watch the different strokes. I think that helped me hone my own stroke. All those different

components were starting to come together... except the exit. I still tend to catch the water as I sweep forward. I'd like to blame it on the chop but poor Beth was soaked by the time we got in. Thank goodness for the warm weather so she didn't freeze!

We gathered at Sammy J Peppers for dinner and afterward, some of us were swapping stories. Marcia told us of a serendipitous moment in her journey. Before she knew anything of her disease, she had signed up with her family to go on a breast cancer run. As it turned out, the run took place during that awful time period between the tests and the actual diagnosis—that time when you “know” but fervently hope not—the time when all those dire possibilities thunder about in your head. Marcia reached the finish line before the rest of her family and as she was waiting a woman was speaking of her own journey. This woman was 72 and had been diagnosed 35 years before! As she spoke, Marcia found herself drawn in and soon those dire possibilities started to turn to hope. It struck her so hard that all she could do was sit there, tears streaming down her face. Indeed, even as Marcia told this story to us, her eyes took on that dewy look. My eyes felt hot and my throat tight too as I realized... I wanted to be that woman! I want to bring hope to others. Then it occurred to me, perhaps I already am. In fact, we all are! Every time we don our joyous fuchsia shirts and people see us laughing, every time we dip our paddles in the water, we are spreading the word.

Given time restraints, I have not done Marcia's story justice. When you have the time, buy her a beer and ask her to tell you herself. It is truly inspiring.

Saturday, April 23, 2005

Again we were blessed with wonderful weather, warmer than I'd ever experienced as a dragon paddler. However, I think in some ways the weather had a negative effect—at least at first. Most of us would rather be enjoying a leisurely picnic than bending our backs o'er the paddle.

Right from the beginning, Lita worked us hard. Once again, I was near the back. Today I found it sometimes difficult to hear Lita, but that wasn't her fault. There was so much noise out on the water today. False Creek was full of every muffler-challenged vessel imaginable from Jet-Skis to tugs. One motorboat with an alarmingly loud idle, hung around a great deal. It was manned by a few young bucks who seemed particularly interested in our boatload of women. I even heard a Joey-from-Friends-esque, “How you doin'?” We girls at the back started calling them “the stalkers.”

I had a shorter paddle today. (At 5'2", I am by far the shortest novice in our crew. We are a tall bunch.) It was so much better. The person in front of me only got sprinkled, rather than doused. And, as always, once we were out on the water for a while and worked out those kinks, the practice was great fun.

Lita introduced us to “Power Ten”. “Oh, I don't like the sound of that,” muttered Alice. When we tried it, we were all amazed at the difference it made. But Alice was right, it was a lot of effort!

Beth and I both tried steering for a while. Beth was up there a good long time and Dr. Don said she was a natural. (Except for the two times she fell over, into the boat, luckily—not overboard!) Someone said I looked right at home standing up there but that's only because they weren't close enough to see me shaking in my reefwalkers. I was steering at the end

of the practice and Dr. Don told me to steer into the dock. I did. Steer into the dock, that is. Thunk! Oops. We were going so slowly there was no damage done, except to my pride.

Tuesday, April 26, 2005

Today we were all pumped because it was the Media Event to kick off 10 Years Abreast. Cameras, celebrities, microphones, reporters AND sunshine! What more could you want? We had to wait a while for our actual practice because both boats were being used for the celebrity paddle. Even then we had a cameraperson sitting in our bow.

After a few misadventures, it turned out I practiced steering again. I'd like to say I had it all down pat now but that would be a huge lie! In fact, near the beginning, when I was focussing on getting us out of Alder Bay, Dr. Don moved aside and suddenly! There was the hind end of a huge, expensive yacht in front of us! When did that get there? I was panicking thinking I'd never get the boat turned in time. Dr. Don just calmly called out, "Hold the boat!" We stopped with what seemed like inches to spare and the yacht owner laughingly chugged out of the way. I got a lot of ribbing for that, especially from my friend Beth. (That's what friends are for, right?) The practice was short but concentrated. We did Power Five Drills and Pod Drills, Odds and Evens Drills and the ever favourite Pause Drill. Afterward, we met with the Barnet crew for dinner at the Cat's Meow. What a great bunch of ladies! Such fun and laughter! It left me wondering—how does one ever choose which dragon crew to join after the end of the novice year? Every crew we've met so far has been amazing!

Tuesday, May 3, 2005

Oh my! It's May already! At the end of this month we have our first race! I'm starting to get nervous already. It's hard to believe we will be ready in time. However, I must admit, our timing is getting much better and, if nothing else, we are getting better at rotating. Today we practiced our starts followed by power 10. (Last week was power 5, we've graduated!) Beth was doing the steering for a while. Dr. Don is right; she is a natural. I steered for a while too but I still have the annoying habit of cursing the boat for not turning as I want it to, only to discover I'm pushing the paddle the wrong way. Had another good docking though.

Today after practice we went off to Keen to get our paddle shoes. Mary, busy lady, met us there dressed and ready for a square dance jamboree. She looked great! Once at Keen, I realized it was the same place I got my beloved Vasque hiking boots. Kuts Shoji and Leslie Shoji made very sure we all got shoes that fit us just right, even if they were different than the size we'd signed up for. They also gave us black paddle pants. What generosity! Thank you Keen!

Saturday, May 7th, 2005

Oh my! Did we ever look silly this afternoon! We have been practicing our starts and doing pretty well, I thought. Then we got to the "Up! Up!" We just couldn't seem to get the theory down. The routine went a bit like this: Lita yells, "Starter has the race. Attention please—go!" Our buried blades churn forward in 4 $\frac{3}{4}$ strokes. 1-2-3-4! Two reach strokes. 1-2! Now! Two up ups. Bash! Bash! Paddles flail. Spray fountains. Lita loses her balance because she's laughing so hard. Yes, we will need a bit more training on that part. I was steering again for a while and think I'm finally starting to get the hang of turning in the

direction I should. I even had to thread through the moored pleasure crafts to make room for the tug towing a HUGE barge. Took the right side under the bridge. The tide was out. I had visions of barnacles scraping our hull but Dr. Don figures we had a whole three inches of clearance!

Special addition: Safety Demonstration at Barnet

Thanks to the ladies of Barnet for hosting this and a special thanks to Susan who went far beyond the call of duty for this demo.

It all started out innocently enough with John standing on the shore explaining the H.E.L.P. position and the various rescue methods. When you are high and dry, they sounded simple and we were all nodding in understanding. Little did we know that we were soon going to witness a the makings for “America’s Funniest Home Video.”

Susan, dressed from head to toe in a wet suit and life jacket, got into the chilly water. I was impressed already! She walked out to the middle of the dragonboat and promised not to use her feet while the people on board tried to get her in the boat. First they bobbed her — - which entails dunking her repeated in the drink. Then they hauled on the life jacket. Unfortunately, the jacket, which was quite tight enough to keep her afloat, was not tight enough to stay on while the two woman dragged at it. It started slipping. Finally, it was up around her shoulders and the only visible part of Susan was her hands waving about. She looked like a gooseneck barnacles I saw at the Aquarium last week.

Plop. Back in the water. Susan stood up to tighten that strap — and so did many women standing on the shore, I tell you! Synched up tighter, Susan tried again. Still the ladies could not quite get her in, despite her yelling, “Come on, sisters!” John did it with one mighty yank. Then, threw her back in as if she were a rejected fish! The other rescue methods worked much better and Susan was repeated hauled into the boat — and tossed back.

I learned a lot and now have a lot more respect for the water and Search and Rescue. I’d love to see the video but rumour has it that you can’t hear John at all. All you can hear is laughter from the women standing safely dry on shore.