

## ***Portrait of a Novice***

**Laura Ball — 2019 Diarist**

### **October 2018 — “Try It”**

I had the incredible fortune to know about Abreast In A Boat before I needed it. Two dear friends of mine had been AIAB members for a few seasons before I was diagnosed. Their happy, sunny photos, with arms around their team mates radiated strength and joy. After my own diagnosis, both of them encouraged me to give dragon boat paddling a try, when I was ready. Their stories and pictures gave me a lift over the two summers that I endured treatments.

Only 5 months after radiation, and one month after finishing Herceptin, I wasn't sure if I would be strong enough for sports, but I badly wanted to try it. I showed up at Captain's Cove Marina on a clear October day as the Divas prepared to put away their treasured boat, *Hope Floats*, for the season. The light paddle gave me a little taste of connectedness that the crew clearly had. I began to feel that maybe this was something that I needed to get my groove back. That beautiful fall morning on the slough left me hopeful and wanting more.



### **January 2019 — Sign up Meeting**

The information and sign up meeting for all of the lower mainland AIAB crews was held in January. I was supported by a good friend at the meeting as I listened to the history of the movement and gained an appreciation for the courage of the original paddlers. Incredibly, the original team joined together and risked their own health so that survivors of the future would benefit from their experience. Talk about guts! I began to deeply respect the seasoned members of the team. Because of Dr. Don McKenzie and these amazing women, I have a better chance at a long, healthy, active life. The stories of others who have walked a parallel path to mine and are living vital lives moved me to the edge of tears. *I can do this. I can be like them. I can be active again.* Without hesitation, I signed the registration form, chose my PFD and jersey size, and as the meeting ended, I felt optimistic that this was going to be the right place for me.

### **February 26, 2019 — Crew Meeting**

Tonight, I met the whole Deas Divas crew at the season planning meeting at Coach Lynn's home. There are so many lovely, bright women in the group and I felt very welcomed by all. Among the appys, chatter, and laughter, I see a road toward better things. New friends, new joys, and new challenges.

I met both coaches, Lynn and Eydie, and the three other novices on our crew this year – Eva, Leanne, and Deanne. The members volunteered for the many functions that keep the crew running smoothly, but the novices were told to enjoy our “princess” year; no volunteering required until our second season. The crew discussed the season schedule and decided on the regattas we would enter.

Our first event of the year is coming up fast — Richmond Oval paddling tank next Saturday. Here we go!

### **March 2, 2019 – Richmond Oval**

The Richmond Oval paddling tank gave us the chance to hold a paddle and sit in positions similar to the actual boat. It will be a steep learning curve....what should I wear? Are these shoes too slippery? Where to put my feet? How can I learn to pull my paddle out so early? How will I ever stay in time? Will I be able to unlearn canoe stroke habits and learn a new stroke? Is this paddle too long? Too short? How is everyone else so coordinated? A million questions to be pondered over the season. One thing is for sure – there will be tonnes to absorb in the coming months!

### **Friday, March 22, 2019 – First Practice Eve**

Tomorrow will be my first actual practice with the Deas Divas. I laid out my clothes before bed, hoping I would not relive my dream from a few nights ago. In the dream, I had shown up for practice only to realize I had forgotten my PFD and worn a pair of heels! The crew leapt into action and somehow helped me to pull it all together. It's a good sign – this crew will help me through the rapids.

Driving past Deas Slough earlier in the day, I thought of how often I had longed to try rowing or paddling on that pretty stretch of water. I am about to do just that.

For the anger I have felt about so many things I have lost to cancer, here is a chance to make something positive happen. My life is forever changed, but I can bring new joy and goodness into my life. Fingers crossed for a positive first try!

### **Saturday, March 23, 2019 – First Practice**

First practice! Despite a rainy forecast, it was a beautiful day to push off into Deas Slough. My early morning coffee and dog walk settled my nerves as I prepared to meet up with the crew at 8:30am. Fitted with a new AIAB PFD and wooden novice paddle...lucky number 13!

The equipment questions loom large – rubber dish washing gloves versus ski glove liners? Running shoes or aqua socks? Leggings with waterproof pants? Cycling jacket for rain? All to be sorted out in good time.

Our warm up dance was led by the energetic Adriana. With many smiles and creative movements, we began to feel warm and limber. We were organized into positions on the boat (mid boat for me!) and walked in formation down to the dock where *Hope Floats* was moored.

Carefully, we loaded the boat front and back first, building toward the middle for balance. Mid boat, I was surrounded by many helpful gals, including my seatmate, the experienced co-captain, Elaine. My fellow novices and I had so many things to remember...grip, body position, paddle entry / exit, and I need to work on them ALL. For today, timing was my main focus. Simply keeping up with the paddler in front of me and trying my best not to knock paddles with those around me. Tricky!! Thankfully, everyone seems to remember what it was like to be in our novice shoes and they are extra patient.

Our coaches ran us through “easy” pace drills and technical improvement exercises. The time absolutely flew by. We had a mid-practice stop at Candy Cove to fuel up and change sides of the boat with our seatmates. It felt a bit weird to switch sides at first, but once I was in a rhythm, it was no more foreign than the other side. Honestly, both sides are going to take a lot of training, so it doesn’t matter which one I am on!

Before we returned to the dock, coach Lynn talked to us about the season goal of bringing home some gold...maybe at the big season end regatta in Nanaimo, maybe sooner. Goals!

I survived Day 1 and I’m feeling hooked already. I’ve always loved to work out and feel strong, but I haven’t been on a sports team since I was 14 years old, as my focus was more individual endeavours – skiing, running, biking, swimming. The dynamic on the boat feels amazing.

As I headed home, my left arm felt tingly and a bit sore. Hopefully that means improved circulation. I will have to remember my compression sleeve on practice days and keep up with lymph massage. The big surprise to me was how tight and sore my hips were. I will definitely need to do a lot of stretching before our next practice on Tuesday.

### **Tuesday, March 26**

Our first evening practice of the season. It was supposed to rain, but the evening turned out clear, bright, and absolutely beautiful.

I felt slightly more comfortable today. I definitely felt the burn in my hips/thighs, but hopefully the strength will come. We had some great instruction on keeping the top hand high and along the gunnel. We worked on a low splash entry with a slight twist on removal. Lots to remember.

The sunset was incredible from below the Deas Bridge. I feel so fortunate to be with these ladies. We went for dinner and drinks at Sharkey’s Pub after practice. It’s wonderful to talk, laugh, hear stories, and get advice from all of these amazing women.

### **Saturday, March 30**

Today, I felt tired before I arrived but being around the positive energy lifted me and I was once again reminded to be grateful for this opportunity.

Our fearless coaches and steerswoman navigated the busy Deas Slough. They are always working to avoid rowers, power boats, deadheads, and kayakers. The steering skills are especially impressive.

This diverse group of women does impress me, every day. We are diverse in age, background, walks of life... connected by our history. All with continuing struggles and victories. All doing this incredible thing for ourselves and hopefully inspiring others to live and live well. It is much more than a boat and a sport. While the physical is so important for all of us, the mental is even more valuable.

My fellow novices and I talked about how we are all working to find a stroke, a rhythm. There is a lot of experience and advice in the crew. We have to try and take it in but not be overwhelmed. Little by little, we will get less splashy, less clumsy, stronger.

### **Tuesday, April 2 — Our first official practice!**

In one notable drill today, we practised extending the upper arm. It showed me how much more extension I could achieve. I felt like it really helped me and I can imagine a more powerful stroke... now to actually put thought into action.

Once again, I found myself feeling tired and stressed from my day as I arrived, but the dancing warm-up had me smiling. Coach Lynn led us in a dance routine to "All About that Bass" that was just priceless. Loved it.

It was also earring night. Two fabulous Divas who travel extensively brought back handmade paper bead earrings from Malawi. It is their tradition to bring a set of earrings to the Divas every season from their travels. The story that accompanied the earrings showed how daring and fearless these women are.

Next weekend will be a big one – Saturday practice followed by Coach Kamini's paddling mini camp at Granville Island on Sunday. I predict that I will be sore!

### **Sunday, April 7 — Kamini's paddling camp**

I'm lying in bed with a hot water bottle on my low back, hoping it will loosen up before Tuesday. We were at Kamini Jain's False Creek camp today. We started the day with all of the novices in one boat and experienced paddlers in others. Our novice boat also had some very skilled paddlers scattered through it to demonstrate drills and body positions and offer corrective advice. I think my takeaways from today are: rotation, rotation, rotation and try to put as much weight as possible on the outside of the boat. We also tried starts and mini races, which was good to experience. Today certainly left me tired and aware of how much there is to learn and improve on. For tonight, rest.

### **Tuesday, April 16**

Tonight, we worked on top hand pressure. It is so hard to know if I am doing it right. I need to just keep going when I start to feel played out. Pushing through the tough parts will build my endurance and cardio fitness.

Again, I was struck by how my mood lifts while I'm on the water. It doesn't matter what turmoil might be happening on land, a few minutes into practice, everything else melts away and I find myself in the moment.

### **Tuesday, April 23 — Coach Kamini crew visit**

Kamini Jain visited us on our beautiful Deas Slough tonight. I was feeling a little intimidated, but looking forward to anything that will help me to improve. It isn't often that one gets to be critiqued by an Olympian!

The main message for me tonight was to hinge forward further – lean and rotate. Grab and pull as much water as possible. We worked hard on starts and builds toward races. I am feeling more like I am keeping pace and am more together with the crew. Our first regatta is on Saturday – Inlet Spring. I am looking forward to seeing all of the practices pay off in real races.

On the social side, we celebrated the first third of the year’s birthdays at Sharkey’s after practice. Decorations, drinks, cupcakes, party hats, and gifts. It is important to celebrate birthdays and we all are happy to be having them. Getting older is definitely better than the alternative. ☺

### **Saturday, April 27 — Inlet Spring Regatta, Port Moody**

The carpool group picked me up at 6:20 am for our drive to Rocky Point. The wind was wild in Tsawwassen but I naively hoped that the inlet might be more sheltered. On arrival, it appeared that the wind may have subsided a bit, so we settled in to our tent, pulled out some snacks, and tried to calm the pre-race jitters. The paddlers village reminded me of a swim meet. 30 or so teams, all set up in tents – stretching, dancing, prepping for races. There were multiple AIAB crews socializing and reconnecting.

We performed our usual warm up and then were marshalled into our line up. I was paired with my buddy and crew co-captain, Pam, mid boat – part of “the engine”. The wind gusts had picked up again, and as we swayed on the dock, we were cautioned to listen carefully to our steers and our coach. It was going to be windy and wavy. We carefully loaded into our bobbing boat and began our trek out to the start position.

The waves were larger than they looked from the dock. To the cheers of family, friends, and team members on shore, we settled into our warm up and tried to adjust our strokes to the waves. It was nearly impossible to miss the tops of the waves on all the returns, resulting in constant splashing and spray. Combined with waves sloshing over the gunnels, we were all soaked in minutes. There was a thinly controlled chaos between the shouts of the marshals, the calls of the other teams, and the need to focus on our own steers and coaches’ calls.

Approaching the start line, the course marshal had us hold onto his zodiac while two other boats rafted next to our boat in the tossing surf. A fourth boat was struggling to get to the start, which meant several minutes of back and forward paddling for our crew and an incredible effort from Elisabeth (our steers!) as we waited for everyone to line up. Eventually, we found ourselves at the start marker in lane 1.

The marshal wasted no time once all of the teams achieved alignment.

*Paddlers get ready...breathe out*

*Attention...breathe in*

*Go!...let the breath go and pull that paddle back HARD*

*1-2-3*

*1-2-3*

*BUILD 2-3-4-5-6-7-8*  
*BUILD 2-3-4-5-6-7-8*  
*Reach with POWER*

And we were launched into paddling long and strong in our first race! Ignoring the waves breaking over the gunnel, gritting our teeth, and striving above all to stay together, together, together....

The chaos of the set up had not yet ended. Seconds into the race, I started to notice the marshal barking orders at the boat next to us in lane 2, while also shouting at our boat to PADDLE HARDER and KEEP GOING! Resisting the urge to look at what was happening outside our boat, I focused on paddling as hard as I possibly could as we moved down the 200-meter course.

With the encouragement of our coach in our ears, we pushed even harder as we were ordered to FINISH IT NOW! I made a real rookie mistake as we soared across the finish line – pulling my paddle just as my seat passed the marker. I vowed not to do that again in future races, but to keep paddling until told otherwise.

Panting, spent, but exuberant, we recovered our strokes and paddled back to the dock. My first race as a novice was in the books. Adrenaline pumping, we tumbled out of the boat, helping one another as the boat continued to toss.

Not until we were back on land, did we hear the tale and see the video of what all of the mid race fuss had been about. We had come within inches of being struck by the boat in lane 2. By the grace of Elisabeth's steering and the marshal's intervention, we narrowly escaped what could have been a serious collision. I, like many of my crew mates, was so focused on the race that I didn't see how close the other boat came to hitting us. That was a good thing, or I might have panicked and pulled my paddle, which would not have helped us to avoid the crash. The cool heads of the coach, steers, and paddlers on the left who saw and continued to do their jobs, saved us.

Our race time came in at 1:01, which was very respectable for our first 200 meter race, especially considering the evasive maneuvers needed to save our skins! With the nerves out, we fuelled up on snacks and water and prepared for the next heat. We warmed up and began our walk down to the dock, but the wind had picked up further and the races were delayed. The officials tried to wait out the gusts, but in the end, the regatta was cancelled. The thrill of our first race was quashed by the cancellation of the remainder of the day. We made the best of it – taking photos and packing up for the trip home. Though the day didn't finish as we wished, I can truly say I got my feet wet today!

### **Saturday, May 9, 2019**

This practice was #10 – already! We are working our endurance up to 500 meter races, aka 2.5 minutes of going as all out as we can. For me, it is not so much the cardio that is the challenge as it is the muscles that need to be strengthened and built.

The weather has been gorgeous. The sunsets on the slough are spectacular. Otters and eagles make regular appearances in our practices. We always swing by to wave at a fellow paddler, Dorothy, who waits to greet us from her balcony. Practices are a soul enriching experience every time.

## **Tuesday, May 14, 2019**

Tonight was a wet downpour kind of night, but I wasn't cold. We worked hard, with an emphasis on getting up to and maintaining race pace. Our next regatta will be in 10 days, so we have to work our endurance up to the 500 meter distance.

Last practice, my sweet friend, Louise, lent me her composite paddle to try, taking pity on my tired novice arms. It felt like paddling with a feather in comparison to the wooden novice paddle! I am now definitely looking forward to the reward of the lighter paddle next season.

The tone tonight was bit more focused, more serious. With our first 500 meter regatta soon, we need to bring out our competitive sides. For some reason, I felt especially awkward today. My top hand was clenching and unclenching involuntarily. Weird things like that happen some days and I really have to re-focus myself and find better form. I wonder if there is some residual tightness in my left arm from the cording I experienced after my surgery? In any case, I will keep on with stretching and massage, knowing that exercise is the best thing for my arms. I have developed blisters on both of my thumbs, probably from my gloves. Another gear issue to puzzle over.

I was a little further up the boat tonight than I have been. I always learn a lot from sitting with a new partner, surrounded by different paddlers with different strokes. I pick things up every practice from those around me and the adjustments we make for each others' strokes.

A hot bath and a hot dinner were what I needed tonight. I gladly stripped away the wet clothes, and sank into the tub, mentally preparing for the races to come.

## **Tuesday, May 21, 2019**

With the Women's regatta just around the corner, we worked on starts and had at least one full length race. The longer pieces are starting to feel shorter and more manageable, which speaks to all of the endurance building we have done. I have great hopes for us this weekend – we have an amazing amount of power when we work together.

## **Saturday, May 25, 2019 — FCRCC Women's Regatta**

It was a 6am pickup today with my T-town carpool. We hauled chairs, paddles, PFDs, snacks, and backpacks stuffed with clothing down to our site at False Creek in a light drizzle. The tent was particularly stubborn to set up today, and we had just gotten it all assembled when the rain really started to pelt down.

Using the awning of Science World for cover, we warmed up and got into our race line up. We marched down to marshalling, pumping ourselves up with the Deas Divas chant...

- |    |   |    |   |
|----|---|----|---|
| 1. | <i>We're the Divas from the Deas<br/>We paddle with grace and ease<br/>We paddle where eagles soar<br/>We're the Divas hear us roar</i> | 2. | <i>Each of us has paddled through<br/>More than we meet in the slough<br/>Losing breasts and losing hair<br/>No more losing anywhere!</i> |
|----|---|----|---|

We were out on the water in no time and positioned for our first heat of the day. I felt a little tight, but the race slipped by and we placed a close 2<sup>nd</sup> in the heat with 2:38. After a brief snack and water break, we warmed up for our second heat. We improved upon our time, with a 2:35 result. I definitely felt warmer and more comfortable. My breathing was easier and everything less tense.

Our 3<sup>rd</sup> race of the day was the breast cancer survivor race. Eight teams of survivors competed in two heats. We were pretty revved up. We sang our chant, danced to *All About that Bass*, and joked around about the million and one things to remember while still staying limber and focused.

We paddled hard, reached from the front, pushed from the back, and by the end, we had placed first in our heat! We paddled (or should I say floated on air?) to the dock to raft together with the other teams. We watched the second heat from our boat at the dock, aware that our first place finish in heat one was not at all secure.

The rest of the boats rafted in with ours, and pink carnations were handed out to all of the paddlers. Touching words were spoken and we sang our "Fight Song" together. I was overwhelmed with emotion. The striking image of 160 paddlers, all there for the same reason, hit me along with a sense of deep gratitude and a wish for everyone still in treatment to be strong. After tossing our carnations into False Creek, drying our eyes, and hugging each other, we unrafted and docked. As we walked up from the dock, the other teams formed a "paddle arch" ahead of us, high-fiving and cheering us on. We joined the arch as we came to the end. I loved it.

The results of the survivor race were announced, and the Deas Divas placed 2<sup>nd</sup> overall! We faced some formidable competition and had a lot to be proud of.

In our final race of the day, for "all of the marbles", we readied ourselves in lane 4. We gave all that we had left in the tank, but came up just short. A group of lovely young paddlers from Portland, Oregon edged us out, but we were still pleased with our final time.

One of the highlights of the day was the great swag from the paddlers village. I picked up dragon leggings, a new yoga top, a silver paddle pendant, and a dragon saddle to ward off nasty dragon bites. I have experienced so much growth in a short time. My heart is full tonight.

### **Sunday, June 9, 2019 — Vessi 500 Regatta**

Our third regatta of the season was under sunny skies. I felt much more prepared for this day at False Creek. We followed our routine of pre-race preparation, and found ourselves feeling and performing very well. Our first heat resulted in a personal best time of 2:35 (woot woot)! Our second heat was a bumpier 2:42 (ouch)! Our third and final time was a scorching 2:34 and change... wow! Beating our previous personal best for the season, and landing us a silver medal in division C!

All of the hard work and practice has paid off. It is rewarding to achieve PB's – personal bests – and take home some bling to prove it. There is nothing like the team spirit and support of everyone.

It was a wonderful day in a week where I had terrible days on a personal level. It reminds me to always keep my grateful heart.

### **Thursday, June 13, 2019 — Boat to Somewhere**

Knowing I will have to miss a few practices for some life events, I decided to join the “Boat to Somewhere” for some more time on the water this week. Tonight brought new experiences with a different coach and new crew – some familiar faces and many new to me. AIAB members from other crews participated and brought friends and family members to try the sport.

It was a gentler workout, but provided a chance to work on technique at a slower pace. Seeing new paddlers in the boat illustrated how much we, as novices, have learned since those first practices in March. I still feel I have so much to learn and improve on, but with time and repetition, I will build on what I now know. I enjoyed the experience so much – one more thing that AIAB offers.

### **Tuesday, July 2, 2019 — Last practice of the season (#25)**

Wow. Hard to believe how these few months have zipped by. We practised relatively lightly tonight, not wanting to overexert ourselves before the big regatta in Nanaimo next weekend.

There was a very special part to the evening, replacing our usual Candy Cove stop. I dare not say too much, as I wouldn't want to spoil it for future novices. Let me just say that the novices received a special treatment to mark the end of our novice year. Giggles, celebration, and the friendship of this awesome crew reinforced that I definitely made the right choice to sign up and “give this a try”!

### **July 5/6/7, 2019 — Nanaimo Dragonboat Festival**

This is our final regatta of the season and I can't believe it. It feels like we have just gotten started and it's ending. The butterflies are flying high as I pack my bag and triple check the paddling checklist from Coach Eydie. There's no running back for something if I forget it!

### **Friday**

I boarded the 12:45 ferry with my carpool and we met up with most of the crew on board. We shared stories, lunch, and a big bag of bangles for the breast cancer survivor “Bollywood” themed dinner on Friday night. After arriving at the hotel and pairing up with our roommates, we changed into our saris, dresses, and suits for dinner. Eva expertly wrapped and wrapped and wrapped saris before and during dinner. Her skilled hands made over attempted wraps into beautifully draped, securely fitting outfits. I took the easy road and wore a simple skirt and blouse. It was an impressive sight to see all eleven survivor teams assembled for dinner, singing for our supper before we could partake in the buffet.

After dinner and beverages, we enjoyed some Bollywood-inspired dancing from other teams and took in a *Bhangra* dance lesson. In a very moving moment, we were all called forward in groups based on how many years of post-diagnosis survival we had marked. It was definitely emotional to see the circle growing with survivors all the way out to 30-40 years. Not only are these ladies survivors, but they are dragon boat paddlers...they are thrivers. We were led by bagpipe down to the waterfront for a paper lantern ceremony. I struggled with my emotions. The deep gratitude I feel

for where I am right now is still tinged with the sadness of loss for ones dear to me. I hope I never lose my grateful heart.

With the hugs and love of those around us, we made our way back to the hotel to switch our focus to the future and the excitement of racing to come over the weekend.

### **Saturday**

With my roommate and friend, Deanne, we excitedly dressed and packed up for the first day of racing. We met with our other novice friends, Leanne and Eva, to decorate the tent and prep for the day. The rain seemed to be inevitable and no sooner had we festooned the tent with scarves and pretty colours, when the skies opened up, drenching everything and everyone. It's quite an experience to have 20-some ladies packed into a 10x10 tent with all of their paddling gear! The rain could not dampen our spirits and we headed down to our first heat – rain gear, plastic ponchos, and a lot of determination.

We paddled hard in heat 1 and were surprised to hear our time was 2:40 and change. It felt good, we felt fast, but our time didn't reflect that...hmm. The currents and tides are certainly a factor, but we vowed to dig deeper in heat 2. Heat 2 felt even faster and better, so we were even more surprised to hear our time was almost identical to the first heat. However, we weren't about to let that get us down. Tomorrow would be a new day and we will let the chips fall where they may in our placements for Sunday's medal races.

The big lift of Saturday was absolutely the Guts and Glory 1500-meter endurance race. Our crew entered 10 paddlers along with Fort Langley's Fortitude crew to make an AIAB composite crew, "Diva-tude". Most of our paddlers had not participated in a Guts and Glory race before. I was part of the cheering squad from shore as the Diva-tude crew started first in the race and maintained a healthy gap between themselves and the boat behind them. Five turns around the buoys and about 10 minutes later, we were thrilled as our crew crossed the finish line, exhilarated. There were tears of joy and accomplishment from the paddlers. Truly inspiring to see these strong ladies not only finish the race but come in 4<sup>th</sup>! So proud of them all!

Saturday night's dinner was a group dinner with Fortitude. Once again, lots of laughs and great conversation. I was absolutely beat and slept soundly. Three more races to go!

### **Sunday**

Rain, rain go away.... Despite a slightly clearer start to the morning, the downpour hit once again. There's no controlling the weather, so we put on our big girl rain pants and got to work. In our first heat of the day, we felt especially strong and swift...and our time reflected it! We came in with a scorching 2:30. We were placed in the ladies' Diamond A final – wow! That was high tier for our crew and we would have to really bring our "A" game to the final.

In the meantime, we prepared for the breast cancer survivor race. There would be 10 teams competing and we had been placed in the final, medal heat along with three strong teams. We positioned our boat and gave the whole race our all. We pushed through the power 10, break-

through, and mini blast...the finish was incredibly close! As we paddled, rubber-armed, back to the dock, we debated if we had placed in the medals and if so, which one? There was no way to tell until the results were announced (incorrectly at first!) and then re-announced. We placed 3<sup>rd</sup> overall, earning us a bronze (rose-gold?) medal! The gap between us and the two teams above us was slim. I was thrilled! We collected our hardware, took team photos, and then refocused for the big finale.

The final race of the season had all the elements of a great sports story. We entered the final as the underdog, in lane 4. Our crew was preparing to leave it all out in the water and come back fully spent, no regrets. Our start felt like it was the most powerful of the weekend and we did not let up our pace or our rate. Power 10, breakthrough, mini blast....it felt like we were all together in the zone. Coach Eydie called for us to "Finish It Now"! I could see boat 3 out of my peripheral and knew we were slightly ahead of them, but we needed to really push to keep any lead. Focus in the boat, focus on my strokes, but then...wait! Boat 3 was getting closer and closer to us.....to the point where a collision was inevitable...right between my seat and the seat in front of me, boat 3 struck us. My crew mate in front of me and I were forced to pull our paddles and push their boat away twice, making it impossible to continue paddling normally. There was no denying that the collision had altered the race completely. At the direction of Elisabeth, we collected ourselves, crossed the finish line and headed back to the dock. What had felt like our best race of the weekend was now marred with controversy and uncertainty.

Our coaches, steers, and captains immediately pursued a protest with the race officials. After much discussion and video review, the officials awarded Lane 4 (*us!*) the silver medal. Another medal to add to my collection of 3 from my first season. What an amazing feeling. While the final race of the season did not go according to plan, it reinforced what coach Lynn had spoken about the night before. You never know what surprises, excitement, challenges and rewards lie on the water for any given race. This is part of the draw that keeps paddlers coming back. Every day and every race is unique.

### **The Novice Experience Draws to a Close**

With a new passion in my soul, I am hanging up my PFD and paddle for the season. I am looking forward to next season when I will keep learning, improving, and developing these amazing relationships. This sport and these wonderful ladies helped me find the confidence in my body that I had lost. Next season will be just as thrilling, and I will get to do it with a new composite paddle!

To all of the beautiful Divas, I want to say thank you. You have changed me and I will be forever grateful.

### *Ripples*

*When you create a difference in someone's life, you not only impact their life, you impact everyone influenced by them throughout their entire lifetime.*

*No act is ever too small. One by one, this is how to make an ocean rise.*

*— author unknown*