

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. 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.



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.

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? Where to put my feet? How can I learn to pull my paddle out so early? How will I ever stay in time? 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!

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. 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 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!

This diverse group of women impresses 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 to me.

April 7, 2019 — Kamini's paddling camp

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. Today certainly left me tired and aware of how much there is to learn and improve on. For tonight, rest. 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.

April 27, 2019 — 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. 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, then marshalled into our line up and carefully loaded into boat to begin our trek out to the start position. The marshal wasted no time once all of the teams achieved alignment 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.... With the encouragement of our coach in our ears, we pushed even harder as we were ordered to FINISH IT NOW! 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.

Our race time came in at 1:01, which was very respectable for our first 200 meter race. With the nerves out, we fuelled up on snacks and water and prepared for the next heat. 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!

May 25, 2019 — FCRCC Women's Regatta

It was a 6 am 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.

Our 3rd 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. 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 2nd overall! We faced some formidable competition and had a lot to be proud of. My heart is full tonight.

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.

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.

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. 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. There's no running back for something if I forget it!

Friday night's cancer survivor “Bollywood” themed dinner was an impressive sight. Eleven survivor teams assembled for dinner, singing for our supper before we could partake in the buffet. After dinner, 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. 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 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.

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, “Divatude”. Five turns around the buoys and about 10 minutes later, 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 4th! So proud of them all!

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. I could see Boat 3 out of my peripheral, but wait ... it was getting closer and closer ... to the point where a collision was inevitable. After much discussion and video review, the officials awarded the silver medal to lane 4 (us!). Another medal to add to my collection of 3 from my first season. What an amazing feeling.

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