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## Sistership gains strength by paddling their butts off

By Gaydon Willis

Twenty-two hearts, one goal.

That's the logo on our new racing shirts.

We are Sistership. Breast cancer survivors. Paddling our dragon boat with one purpose in mind: to finish the race.

How do we do it? With a lot of guts, determination and hard work.

No one said it would be easy. Dry land training starts months before we hit the water. We go to the gym a minimum of twice a week. We do yoga, run, walk, swim, bike, compete in triathlons — you name it, we do it to get in shape.

In May we hit the water for twice a week practices. We often paddle three km non-stop before we catch our breath. Twenty-two women, making a come back to form a close, cohesive team with the same purpose in mind: to finish the race.

The tension begins to build two hours before race time. We gather in our tent to get directions from our coach, then a half hour warm-up which includes running/walking, sit-ups, lunges, jumping jacks and stretches.

Back at the tent we get the signal to get our gear and head for the waiting area. We do more stretching, receive final direction from our coach and begin the process of focusing.

Finally, the call comes and we put on our life jackets, grab our paddles and get into bench order. We head for the holding area and wait our turn to board the boat. Other teams join us and special cheers begin. Our call comes. Here we go!

Once on the boat we number off, one to 22. We push off and make our way to the starting gate. We are silent and race ready. All eyes are on the coach.

We hear the command "Attention please!" We bury our paddles. The horn blows and it's 10 hard, strong strokes to get the boat up out of the water.

Another 10 to move us forward. Then it's 20. And another 20. And another 20, each set stronger than the last.

Everything on the boat is moving forward. Our paddles are in sync. Our eyes are focused on the lead bench. Our minds and energy focused on the finish line. We are One.

we get stronger the closer we get to the finish line. It's now within a paddle away. We "empty the tank." We **don't stop until we hear the command: "Let her run."**

We are spent. It is then that we hear the crowd. How did we do? We are so focused that we are not aware of our standing.

Then we hear the announcement: "In lane one, first, Sistership." That's all we need!

We won gold and bring home the Breast Cancer Cup again.

Later that day we hear: "In lane four, third, Sistership. A bronze medal in the Ladies final.

How sweet it is. Let's keep the momentum going girls! Halifax, here we come!

Gaydon Willis is a Cochrane mother of six, a registered massage therapist and a breast cancer survivor willing to share her story. [Gaydonwillis@shaw.ca](mailto:Gaydonwillis@shaw.ca).