

SISTERSHIP TEAM

Racer says cancer an extra challenge in dragon boat race

Women on Calgary team all have or have had breast cancer

PAUL DROHAN
CALGARY HERALD

Before she even dips her paddle into the water in a big race this weekend, Bev Bronius knows she is among a bunch of winners.

Bronius, who has cancer again, is one of a crew of 22 women competing in international dragon boat races in Vancouver. All the Calgary women have or have had breast cancer.

"I have a recurrence, so this is kind of an extra challenge . . . to be able to keep fit and be on the team is important," she said.

"They are a special bunch of girls and really supportive," Bronius said before departing for Vancouver.

The women are members of the Sistership Dragon Boat team, which was formed last year and won the Alberta championship in the novice class at races last July on the Glenmore Reservoir, Bronius said.

Most of the women are in their 40s but the age of the team ranges from mid-30s to one member in her early 70s, Bronius said.

The women will be in regular novice class races Saturday and then a special race Sunday for people who have cancer or have survived it.

In addition to workshops on racing techniques and organization, there will be one that is special to Bronius. It's called Paddling Together and is for those involved with cancer.

"We will share experiences such as the fear of recurrence, discuss the loss of a team member and how to live and carry on a full and active life," she said.

Bronius had had treatments for breast cancer and thought she was OK. A year ago it was discovered in her ab-

domen. "I kept on training. Some of these practices are at 7 a.m. I thought 'I am not giving up on this.' I really wanted to do it for me. I have never been too involved in team sport so this was a chance to do that, too," she said.

The international Dragon Boat competition in Vancouver will likely attract 100,000 spectators over three days of racing which end Sunday, said Jennifer Sass, a captain of the Calgary team.

Dragon Boat racing has really caught on in the last eight years among women with breast cancer, Sass said.

For years women with breast cancer had been told to avoid strenuous upper body exercise after breast surgery, she said. Then a doctor proved Dragon Boat racing was helpful, Sass said.

Dragon Boat racing is good because people who are not naturally drawn to sport can get involved and do well, she said.

"This is a team sport, everyone is equal. There are no stars. The point is to work in unison," she said. "You learn the skill and have to work on fitness, but you don't have to be an athlete."

It is also a "de facto floating support group" that is there when necessary, she said.

"Not everybody is comfortable unloading at a support group, for example. Cancer isn't talked about much unless there is a need," Sass said.

"If someone is just in or out of treatment or having some sort of crisis they don't have to really explain a lot. Everybody gets it. There is a special kind of sensitivity . . . that is natural from people who have gone through a similar experience so that certainly makes it very valuable," Sass said.



Dave Olecko, Calgary Herald
Sistership team member
Bev Bronius with her dog
Kara.

THE ISSUE

Coping with cancer.

■ **WHAT'S NEW:**
Calgary woman will join dragon boat team in Vancouver as she battles the disease.

■ **WHAT'S NEXT:**
Race set for Sunday.