

Sisters paddling for the cure

Three teams enter dragon boat festival

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CALGARY HERALD

It's the most exclusive club in dragon boat racing. Age, paddling experience and extensive talent are not prerequisites for membership into Sistership.

Instead, each member of this courageous club has survived breast cancer.

The group has expanded in its seven-year history to fill three 20-member teams in this year's 12th annual Trico Homes Calgary Dragon Boat Festival.

And despite the limitations on membership, there is — "unfortunately," says Sistership 1 captain Joyce Geldreich — a growing waiting list to join.

"To wear the pink T-shirt, you have to have had breast cancer. Some of the people in our boats are active (with the disease)," Geldreich said Saturday after completing her team's first race at the Glenmore Reservoir.

"One of our main aims is we want to show people we've survived breast cancer and we're living life to the hilt. There is camaraderie and a little competition — actually, a lot of camaraderie."

All three of the club's teams — Sistership 1, Sistership Strength and Sistership Dragon Hearts, whose members range in age from 37 to 76 — will also compete in today's Breast Cancer Challenge Cup race, starting at 3:30 p.m.

Heather Webber, who is not paddling but acting instead as coach and manager of the No. 1 team this year because of an injury, said the women start training in January.

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"This sport is not a sport in which bulk is most important. It's more fitness. You need timing and technique to do well," Webber said.

"We do intensive strength and cardiovascular training. Everyone is capable of doing the Run For the Cure (an annual road race that is also targeted at breast cancer)."

The group distributes new team members to fill gaps left by those who have left the club or died, then they go to the gym to train.

They will participate in races in Van-

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COACH HEATHER
WEBBER

couver, Lethbridge, Edmonton, Victoria and Kelowna and travel to each city as one "blended" team, Webber added.

"We don't see ourselves as a support group, but we are there for each other," she said.

"Part of what we do is breast cancer awareness. Until it's touched your life, you may not think much about it.

"We're a community that depends on each other in all aspects. We know what each other has gone through and are still here," said Webber. "There's a common thread."

Following the challenge race today, Geldreich said the members of all the

teams will hold a ceremony and place petals from roses into the water in memory of those who have died from breast cancer.

More than 1,000

paddlers from 40 teams are competing in men's, women's and mixed events in the three-day event, which concludes today with racing from 8:30 a.m. until 5 p.m.

The Canadian Cancer Society will be a benefactor of proceeds from pledges raised by the participants in the race.

There also are family activities and cultural showcases all day at the southwest park, as well as plenty of room for spectators.

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