

Long, narrow boats line up in their race lanes. They wait for the signal to begin. There they go! As they come closer, you can see the decorative dragon heads in the front and the tails in the back. You can see the colorful designs on the sides of the canoes. The drums sound louder and louder. The team in life jackets is paddling furiously. They scream and chant. In a blur of color and speed, the winning boat crosses the finish line. You and the big crowd of spectators clap and cheer. Following tradition, the paddlers of the winning boat raise their paddles over their heads. In the spirit of fun, all the racers splash each other with water. The competitors and the spectators have a wonderful time.

Dragon boat racing goes back 2000 years. The most popular legend tells the story of a famous Chinese poet, Qu Yun. He was a political advisor to the king of the Chu Kingdom. He was a true patriot who was banished from court because of his political enemies. In despair, he drowned himself in a river. The villagers raced out in boats to search for him and to chase away the fish that might eat his body.

Dragon boat racing in China commemorates the poet's death. All over the world, it is a popular team sport. Dragon boat clubs compete in races in over 60 countries during the Dragon Boat Festival. The sport is popular because it is fun for youth and adults of all different abilities. Almost anyone can learn to paddle. There are teams for youth, cancer survivors, schools and corporations. The sport fosters teamwork and camaraderie. Teams pick catchy, imaginative names such as the Blazing Paddles, the Eye of the Tiger and the Wall Street Dragons. They race to have fun, and sometimes to raise money for their community.

The team competes locally in their category. Races usually take place in June, the month Qu Yun died. Teams that qualify can compete in international competitions. The International Dragon Boat Federation organizes one race every two years in a different host city. Racing can take place in a lake, a reservoir, a river or a harbor.



To get ready for the big day, the teams prepare themselves with good training using weights and aerobics such as jogging and cycling. It is important to have the stamina to finish a racecourse that ranges from 200 meters to 500 meters. They practice rowing to build team coordination, which is very important in this sport. There are twenty paddlers sitting in ten rows. Can you imagine what would happen if the paddles clash with the ones in front or behind? The boat would not go anywhere.

It is the drummer's job to create a rhythm that allows the paddlers to stay in unison. He sits at the bow (front) of the boat, facing the paddlers and beats the drum rhythmically to indicate the timing and frequency of the strokes. The drummer is a source of inspiration when the paddlers get tired or frustrated. He is the heartbeat of the boat. The captain is the steersman who sits at the stern (back) of the boat. Unlike the drummer, he looks forward and can see where the boat is going. He controls the direction with a nine foot oar. If another boat is too close or there is an obstruction in the water, he has to steer the boat away from it.

A dragon boat race would not be as much fun without the enthusiastic spectators cheering on their favorite teams. Tents are set up for vendors who sell ethnic food. Children play games and have their faces painted. There is music to listen and dance to. The atmosphere is festive and families, young or old, come out to have a good time.

Dragon boat racing is a growing water sport, even today. You can find out where the next dragon boat race is in your area in the newspapers or on the inter-

net. Enjoy the excitement of cheering for your favorite team. Better still, join a club to be part of a team in your level. Select a catchy name. You'll get a lot of exercise and make many new friends. Whether you are on land or in a boat, you will feel the communal spirit of a dragon boat race.

—Fanny Wong, Chinese American, New York.