

Kitchener neighbours Marina Fritz (left) and Jill Malleck, both members of the Stratford-based Kupsizet dragon boat team, will be in Vancouver this weekend for a celebration of the 10th anniversary of boating for a cause — support for breast cancer survivors.

It's been 10 years since breast cancer patients took up dragon boating. Now they're really ready to celebrate

BY VALERIE HILL,
RECORD STAFF

Jill Malleck survived an aggressive form of breast cancer and subsequently found within herself something she didn't expect — a competitive spirit.

Malleck and Marina Fritz, both of Kitchener, are members of the team representing Canada at a three-day international Ten Years Abreast Celebration, which starts Friday in Vancouver, and the women are ready to pump.

"I like the physical activity, keeping in shape... you do it for the team," said Malleck, a mother of four who admits to being uninterested in fitness prior to her 1987 cancer diagnosis.

Today, she lifts weights, attends cycling classes at a gym and rows with the Stratford-based Kupsizet dragon boat team, which is made up exclusively of breast cancer survivors.

Fritz's story is similar: The mother of three was diagnosed in 1998, just a couple of years after her son Brandon, then eight, underwent successful treatment for a type of cancer called neuroblastoma.

After her own chemotherapy and radiation treatments were over and her children were a little older, Fritz decided to join the dragon boat team, too. "You feel driven, you're in a boat with 20 other women," she explained. "For me it's that social thing. We paddle on the (Avon) river and tourists wave, kids come over and talk to us."

Fritz and Malleck live close to each other, but had not met before joining Kupsizet.

"Now we're best friends," Malleck said with a smile.

Both agree they got into dragon boat racing for the camaraderie of being with women who have suffered the same fear, endured the same therapies and now face the same uncertainties.

"They've gone through the same journey," Fritz said simply.

Dragon boat racing has its origin in southern China more than 2,000 years ago. It was introduced as a paddle sport in the mid-1970s and spread quickly around the world.

Ten years ago, Dr. Don McKenzie, a sports medicine physician at the University of British Columbia, used the sport to prove a theory: Medical thinking at the time suggested post-surgical women should not engage in repetitive upper body activity, which was thought to trigger lymphedema, an accumulation of lymphatic fluid.

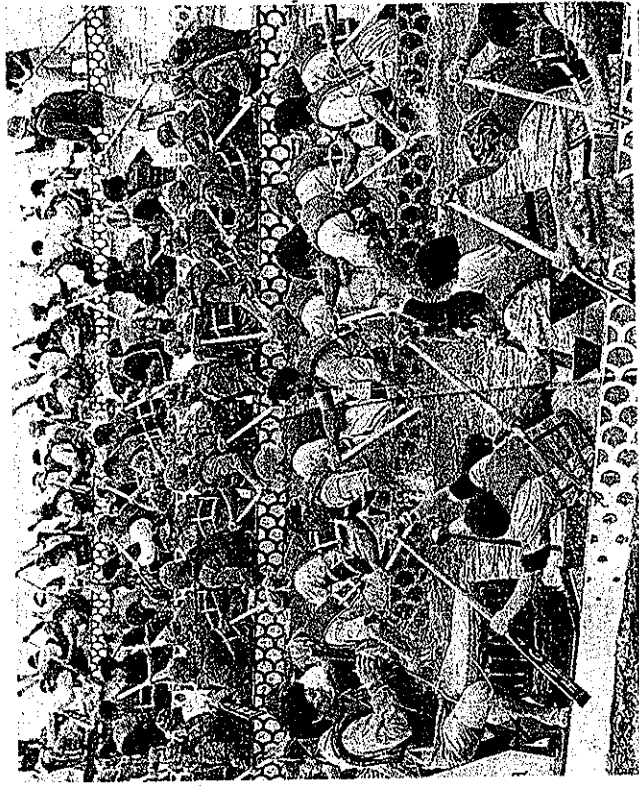
Mckenzie didn't believe it and put together a dragon boat team of 25 breast cancer survivors, monitoring their progress as they trained.

The results, published in the Canadian Medical Association Journal, showed that none of the women developed lymphedema, and so a new sport for breast cancer survivors was born.

A decade later, those meagre beginnings are being celebrated with the festival in Vancouver, where it all began.

The Canadians Abreast national team is made up mostly of Ontario women who volunteered to pay their own way. Besides Malleck and Fritz, the boaters hail from Stratford, Windsor, London, Guelph, Peterborough, Lindsay and North Bay, as well as Vancouver and Nanaimo, B.C.

They will compete against more than 60



CANADIAN PRESS

Dragon boat racing, kept in rhythm by drumbeats, took Canada by storm. On Saturday, the fifth annual Peterborough Dragon Boat Festival, held at Little Lake, drew 104 teams which were raising money for the Breast Assessment Centre at the Peterborough Regional Health Centre.

teams from around the world, including Poland, Italy, Singapore, New Zealand and Australia, and club teams from across Canada and the United States.

"We thought we'd really be doing our country proud," Malleck said. Besides, as Fritz added, "it's fun, it's hard work, we love it."

Malleck said women interested in joining the Stratford Kupsizet team can call her at 894-1198, or just show up at the Avon River in Stratford, on the Little Island across from the Festival Theatre, any Tuesday at 7 p.m.

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"It's fun, it's hard work, we love it!"

MARINA FRITZ
ROWER