

Baltimore Dragon Boat Club

By Chris Thomas

“One hundred percent,” Coach shouts from the bow, where he is perched on a tiny wooden seat, seemingly made for someone half his size. An audible grunt can be heard from each of the twenty paddlers aboard the forty-foot dragon boat as they refocus and obey the command.

It’s a little after 8 a.m. on a beautiful Saturday morning in July, and the **Baltimore Dragon Boat Club** (BDBC) is nearly 1500 meters into a run up the Patapsco River towards Ft. McHenry with the scent of molasses from the Domino Sugar factory in the air. A particularly intense race practice is underway, and the team’s stamina is being tested.

“Fifty percent,” Coach bellows several minutes later. The paddlers take the power down and know that this is

where they must recover, since the call for one hundred percent effort will be coming again soon. When the call comes, each paddler digs their paddle in deeper and pulls twice as hard.

“Up!” is the next command they hear. The two paddlers on the first bench, known as “stroke,” increase the rate as the grunts and groans echo around the boat. Everyone gives what energy they have remaining to maintain the pace.

“Let it ride,” Coach finally declares. Each paddler lets out a loud gasp as they pull their paddles out of the water. Paddlers exchange fist bumps and high fives, proud of the fact that they survived this delightful torture. After a few minutes of rest and a quick drink of water, the steerer, standing at the stern with an oar in hand, gets the boat turned around and pointed back towards Under Armour’s Tide Point

campus. “Sit ready!” comes the call. It’s time to do it all again.

In 2008, BDBC was created by a group who learned about the sport while participating in the biennial Catholic Charities Dragon Boat Races. Because these races only occur every two years in downtown Baltimore, people wanted more! The club has grown since its inception from fifteen to nearly 100 people, as dragon boat racing has become the fastest growing water sport in the world. While BDBC is in its 11th year, the sport itself dates back over 2000 years to southern China. It is believed the races were held in festivals to honor a local popular minister who fell on the wrong side of a government dispute and met an untimely demise. Dragon Boat festivals are now held worldwide, and the club competes in several of them each season in North Carolina, Virginia,



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Photo by Michael Gallagher

New York, Pennsylvania, Florida, and Puerto Rico. Every June, the club hosts its own festival in downtown Baltimore, and it is attended by teams from up and down the East Coast.

While everyone enjoys the competitive nature that the festivals provide, the

social aspect of the club is what keeps a lot of people coming back. BDBC is very welcoming to new paddlers, and membership is quite diverse, ranging from ages 12 to 85, different nationalities, fitness levels, and backgrounds. The comradery gained from hot summer

practices and tough races translates to great friendships both on and off the water.

Race practices, like the one described above, are attended by experienced paddlers who are training for the next competition. These practices are often more intense and feature a granular focus on technique. Open practices are more relaxed, and anyone can attend, no matter their skill level. The coaches spend time covering the basics of the stroke and getting new members comfortable wielding a paddle. Wednesday evening open practices are followed by social night near the dock where snacks and refreshments are provided.

Whether you're looking for exhilarating competition, improving your physical fitness, trying something new, or just looking to make some friends, BDBC has all of this and more. Find more information at baltimoredragonboatclub.com.

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