

Think you have what it takes to race dragon boats?

Updated: Jun. 08, 2016, 2:37 p.m. | Published: Jun. 08, 2016, 1:37 p.m.

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By [Dillon Pilorget](#) | [The Oregonian/OregonLive](#)

Most every Portlander has seen them, the dragon-shaped boats that take to the Willamette River each spring in practice for the [Rose Festival Dragon Boat Races](#).

From waterfront walkways or atop bridges, the traditional Taiwanese boats can be seen ripping through the water like a dragon's teeth rip through the flesh of its prey.

Any sport that involves piloting a dragon is bound to be intense from the get-go. And with a team of paddle-wielding warriors in charge of making the beast move, things are bound to get hot.

Have you got what it takes to race a dragon boat? The answer: probably.

Tom Crowder is the director of Portland's Dragon Boat Races and a member of the sister city association between Portland and Kaohsiung, Taiwan, which brought the races around. And as Crowder puts it, just about anyone can get behind the paddle of a dragon boat.

"A lot of times you have people who haven't ever paddled before," when practice starts in March, Crowder said. Teams competing this year include a team of deaf paddlers, two teams of blind paddlers and a senior team called The Golden Dragons.

Some teams are self-organized, such as corporate teams from Kaiser Permanente and other organizations. But plenty include their share of free agents who just want to give the races a try - and who, Crowder said, are likely to stick around.

Crowder said a few teams have been racing since 1989, when Kaohsiung gifted Portland a few dragon boats and the races began. Since then, the fleet and the sport have grown in town, becoming a significant attraction of the Rose Festival, falling this year on June 11 and 12.

On race day, teams of 20 paddlers (not rowers, a distinction Crowder is quick to make) race toward flags floating 535 yards ahead. They're joined in the boat by a drummer to keep pace, a person who steers and a flag catcher who leans off the front of the boat. Whichever team catches their flag first, wins.

Most teams paddle somewhere between 60 and 66 strokes per minute while in pursuit of their flag. The high school girls Crowder coaches can go up to 80-90 strokes per minute, he said.



"Obviously, fitness is one thing," Crowder said, but dragon boat racing can be a good source of camaraderie and teamwork. And, of course, "A lot of people just enjoy being out on the river," Crowder said.

And when that enjoyment is happening in sync with 20 other paddlers in a bright boat that looks like a mythical beast, it's even visible from atop a bridge.

2016 DRAGON BOAT RACES

Where: Tom McCall Waterfront Park

When: 9 a.m.-5 p.m. June 11-12

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