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## Rose Festival Dragon Boat Race builds camaraderie, fuels competition among paddlers

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1/4





Dragon Boat Race at 2012 Portland Rose Festival



By [Rebecca Woolington](#) | [The Oregonian/OregonLive](#)

At Saturday's

[Rose Festival Dragon Boat Race](#)

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0:16 / 0:30

, the high-schoolers lined up first. They were pumped. And they let everyone know it.

Members of the

[Wilson High School](#)

Amazon Dragon Boat team turned up tunes on a boombox. They danced, jumped and slapped each other high fives as they waited to kick off the day's first race.

Meanwhile, their competitors chest-bumped and chanted cheers. But the competition didn't phase Wilson. They arrived with handprints painted on their faces.

"It adds more intensity -- it gets us into it," said 17-year-old Wilson junior Carmen Alzaga after the race, showing off the large, green handprint that encompassed most of the left side of her face. Her team came in third during the first race of the weekend-long competition.

Wilson's team was one of about 75 teams -- from the

[Portland](#)

area and beyond -- competing in the 24th annual races, which include three groups: high school, women-only, and men and women, said Roberta Weinstein, a race director. Races pick back up

[Sunday at 8 a.m](#)

., and the top four teams will win trophies and medals.

Rose Festival

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, who waved a large black-and-white skull-and-crossbones flag, won the first race with a time of about 2 minutes, 36 seconds.

"It's like a party all weekend," said 17-year-old Kali Woodard, a three-year dragon-boat paddler who just graduated from Grant.

Woodard and the team's captain, Raisa Ebner, 18, enjoyed -- yes, enjoyed -- their 6 a.m. practices before school. They liked watching the sleepy city awake from the water.

"It's dedication," Ebner said.

"It's beautiful and quiet," Woodard said, painting a relaxed scene that was a far cry from Saturday's vocal crowd.

About every nine minutes, three to four teams begin a new battle that takes them along the Willamette River between the

[Marquam and Hawthorne bridges](#)

-- a 536-meter sprint. Spectators, many bundled in coats and sweat shirts, scattered the soggy grass at

[Tom McCall Waterfront Park](#)

.

The colorful, 1,700-plus-pound boats are hand-painted in

[Portland's sister city of Kaohsiung, Taiwan](#)

, Weinstein said. Kaohsiung Mayor Chu Chen and Portland Mayor Sam Adams welcomed participants during the race's opening ceremony, which included music and dancing.

Teams generally consist of 16 paddlers; a caller, who directs the members' paddling; a tiller, who steers the boat; and a flag catcher, who snatches a flag to mark the end of a race while strapped to the dragon's head at the front of the boat. Teams are diverse, such as members who are hearing and visually impaired, and breast cancer survivors, Weinstein said.

Each team has their own way to prep: The Dumbles, led by 35-year-old captain Chelsea McCann of Portland, do the Hokey Pokey. Each year, the team, McCann said, picks a new theme for their attire. This year's threads? French-Navy-inspired blue-and-white striped shirts, red scarves, berets with red pom-poms and light-blue socks with red anchors. Each member also paints their little-finger nails red -- a symbol of a dragon claw.

"It intimidates the other teams," laughed McCann, whose team won its race.

Will Arrowsmith, 21, of Portland jumped and shouted in celebration after his team placed second in a race he described as having a "photo finish." He kicked his leg up and shouted, "Yes!" as he entered Waterfront Park.

Arrowsmith, a member of the

Zen Dragons, started attending the races 15 years ago with his mother, who also competes. He, like many other competitors, enjoys the camaraderie of the team, being in sync with other people.

"It creates a bond," he said. "It's something that only a competitive sport can foster."

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