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Teamwork is key for dragon boat racers

By [Michael Agostino](#)

TRIBUNE-REVIEW

Friday, September 16, 2005

On a recent day at the Three Rivers Rowing Association's Millvale boathouse, at least 30 people crowded the dock, eager to get into the bellies of two 44-foot-long dragons.

Dragon boats, that is.

They're members of the Pittsburgh Paddlefish, the association's dragon boat team. The team was practicing for the Pittsburgh Dragon Boat Festival races, scheduled for Saturday at Riverfront Park on the South Side. The group is one of more than 15 local teams -- in addition to teams from Washington, D.C., Cleveland and Philadelphia -- that will race on the Monongahela River.

The festival, which began in Pittsburgh in 2002, brings together people to celebrate Asian culture. Traditional Chinese dancing and Asian games will be part of the festivities.



Dragon boat racing is one of the earliest forms of boat racing, originating 2,400 years ago in China.

The boats are 44 feet long, 600 pounds and designed to resemble Chinese dragons. Each boat holds 20 paddlers, a steersperson and a drummer. The paddlers sit lined up in 10 pairs of two, with each person paddling on his side to the rhythm of the

drummer.

The 30-member Paddlefish team tried to get 20 paddles into and out of the water more than 65 times per minute in sync -- making 22 people function as one to send their 1.5-metric-ton dragon gliding down the river.

"This is one of the few sports in which everyone does the same thing together in order to succeed," says Jack Johnston, 60, of Friendship. "It's a great feeling when you are moving together."

Johnston and his partner, Stefanie Danes, 53, are just two of the Paddlefish, who range in age from 16 to 66.

"Very few of us got on the team to be competitive," Johnston says. "The

Photo Gallery

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[Pittsburgh Paddlefish members](#)

Joe Appel/Tribune-Review

[click to enlarge](#)



[Dragon boat](#)

Joe Appel/Tribune-Review

Details

Pittsburgh Dragon Boat Festival

When: 11 a.m. to 7 p.m.

Where: Riverfront Park, bottom of South 18th Street, South Side

Admission: Free

Details: Festival [Web](#)

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focus isn't winning, but being good at moving the boat."

And to do that takes teamwork -- something Glenna Wilson and her team, the Peace Paddlers, use to their advantage.

"We're trying to get people to work with, not against, each other," says Wilson, coordinator of behavioral health services for the Safe Start program, Downtown, and a member of Communities in Action for Peace at the University of Pittsburgh.

The Peace Paddlers consist of about 50 kids ages 12 to 18 from communities all over Allegheny County. Wilson hopes to get two full dragon boats to race on Saturday.

Michael Agostino can be reached at magostino@tribweb.com or 412-320-7837.

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