

PhysicallyFIT



I sit on the wooden seat in the front of the boat, hip to hip with my partner, and watch the horizon as we dip and bob. It is 6:30pm, and it is still hot and humid. Sweat beads behind my sunglasses, and drips onto my lifejacket. My left hand grips the shaft of the paddle, right above the blade. I have waxed it so the river water does not cause my hand to slide off. My right hand holds the top of the paddle. My partner shifts in her seat, and the boat tilts slightly. I extend my right foot, and bend my left knee, bracing my foot under me. I hear the steersman call, his voice booming, "SIT READY!" My partner and I lean forward, chest to knees, extending our paddles flat. The eighteen women behind us are doing the same thing, though we can't see. "Attention!" My right hand swings up, and I jut my left arm further forward. My paddle is now upright outside of the boat, hovering an inch above the water. "Easy paddle."



Swoosh, my partner and I plunge our paddles into the river in sync. Within one stroke, the drummer picks up our pace, and begins to pound out our rhythm, a foot from our heads. With each stroke, I dig my blade into the water, pushing down with my right arm, like spearing fish. I pull the paddle back with my left arm, then pull it up and out of the water, making a satisfying splash as the water flings off my blade. I extend my arm again, leaning forward toward my knees, stretching my back as far as it will go, then pull back once again, using my legs to push me into an upright position. When I extend my arm, the paddle of the person behind me is inches from my elbow. If one of us loses time, it's gonna hurt. Settling into the pace my partner and I have set, we feel the rhythm of the boat. The drum reverberates through the evening air, punctuated by periodic yells to correct our form.

All warmed up now, we are approaching the 500m mark. Our coach has found another team to challenge, and our boats are heading toward the start line together. "Eyes inside the boat," coach yells, and "Focus!" The chat around me begins to subside. I see our opponents' boat from the corner of my eye, and have to scold myself - eyes inside the boat, now focus! The coach booms, "Hold the water!" By the intensity in his voice, we are at the right spot. This race will begin now.

"Sit ready!" I hear a similar cry from the boat near us. "Attention! Go!" My partner and I plunge our blades into the

water with all our might, to get this massive boat moving from a dead stop. Our teammates do the same, and we are into our race start. The drummer is hammering our rhythm out to help all keep time, and I already have to remind myself- breathe. I tilt my face toward my partner to watch her time, and I breathe deep with each stroke. The drummer is hollering, "Reach it out!" and I do. I stretch far forward, leaning from my waist and stretching my arm out to pull the most water. Hit, swoosh, hit, swoosh, hit, swoosh. We've found a rhythm. I can tell that the team is in sync; we are surging, cutting through the water smoothly. Each stroke sprays water up at me. My left arm is soaked from wrist to shoulder. Out of the corner of my eye I see the other boat, and their drummer's shrill cries are distracting me. 'Focus' I tell myself. "We must be almost done," I think, but I can't look. Must keep paddling. "Up five in two, one...two!" The coach calls, and my partner and I would groan if we had enough breath to do so. We increase the rate, making further demands on our already-taxed muscles. My breath is ragged, and losing rhythm. I begin to exhale out of my mouth. "Reach. Don't die!" The call inspires me to push harder. My right shoulder is burning now; each plunge of the blade is greeted by a warm jolt through my delts. "Power twenty in two, one...two!" and I have no time to think about that warm pain, because we are into more power strokes. I am breathing all mouth now, and once again rushing the stroke. Falling back into place with my partner, my breath is not coming easily. I am blowing each exhalation hard, and making small animal noises with each



hit on the water. Water splashes up from my paddle, from the boat, from the paddles of our opponents, and we are soaked. The powers come to an end, and I extend my reach. My back is hurting, spasming, warm and pulled, beyond taffy. We are in the final meters of the race, and now it is an all-out effort. Using all my remaining energy, we go, fast and furious, splashing through the wake of the boat near us. My partner is grunting now too, and I hear pants, sighs and grumbles coming from behind me. My teammates are animals. Hit, swoosh, hit, swoosh, hit, swoosh, dump it, it's almost done and I find strength and energy I never knew I had.

"Let it ride!" I rest my paddle on the gunnel, and drop my head to recover my breath. The boat is silent. No commands. No 'swoosh'. No grunts. No chitchat. Quiet. I hear my breath, raspy at first, but full and hearty after a few moments. "Ladies," the coach calls, "That was an excellent race!" While too tired to smile, I'm beaming inside.

Moments later, my breath has returned to normal. Chatter resumes on the boat as it is time to start paddling home. The dock is rapidly approaching, while our beautiful boat glides parallel to the dock. One by one we file out of the boat, all dripping. My hair is soaked of sweat, and plastered to my face and neck in wisps. My clothes are soaked of river water and my rear hurts, the bone grinding into the seat has bruised my flesh. The blisters on my palms have bubbled again, and in just weeks I will have protective calluses. But these are my battle scars, and I wear them proudly. They mean that I am persistent. They mean that when I am faced with a challenge, I can dig deep and see what I'm made of. They mean I am strong and an athlete. I am a Tsunami Dragon.



Angela Marchesani is the founder of Vitality Health Counseling, which provides dietary and lifestyle counseling to clients as well as hosts workshops and group programs as a certified health counselor. She practices at Havertown Health and Fitness in Havertown, PA. She is also co-founder of the Philadelphia Area Health Counselors organization. Ms. Marchesani is in her third season with Tsunami Dragons, a women's dragon boat team in Philadelphia. Visit Tsunami Dragons online at www.tsunamidragons.com Contact her at marchesani@phillyfitmagazine.com.