

Racing With the Dragon

A team of enthusiastic paddlers from Headquarters practises an ancient Chinese sport to have fun, bond with other employees and raise money for charity.

For three years, a good two dozen DFAIT employees have been finding that there's nothing better after a hard day of work than to suit up and spend an hour on the water training for the Ottawa Dragon Boat Race.

They call themselves Team BOB—Bureaucrats on Board—and they begin weekly practices at the Rideau Canoe Club in early June, leading up to the races late in the month at Mooney's Bay. These are serious practices, with the team paying for a professional coach who teaches paddling technique and best strategies for starting and finishing a race.

"Our coach last year was the best kind of drill sergeant," recalls Rupert Cao, a junior departmental advisor in the office of the Minister for International Trade. "He was very firm, very direct, but with a lot of humour, too."

By the qualifying races on June 19, the team was in fine fettle.

"We had to be," Cao says. "A race is two minutes of pure grunt force. Before the starter's pistol, your

heart is pounding. You push off with full strength, and then there's two minutes of screaming muscles, water flying in your face—and great fun."

Each team has 20 paddlers and a couple of spares, a drummer who keeps the paddlers in rhythm, and a steerperson who stands in the back of the 12.5 m boat "like a gondolier in Venice—not so physical, but attentive to keeping the boat straight," says Francois Paradis-Caron, a political and economic advocacy officer who did steering honours last June.

The Dragon Boat Festival is sponsored by the Ottawa Dragon Boat Foundation. The 15 dragon boats come from Great White North, a Toronto-based company that promotes races all over North America.

An ancient tradition in China, dragon boat races are becoming very popular in North America. Every major Canadian city has a festival, and there are more than two dozen in Ontario alone. Ottawa's is one of Canada's largest, attracting 190 teams, 5,000 paddlers and 60,000 spectators.

The team is doing better each year. In last June's race, they came within a hair's breadth of qualifying for the race finals. "We were so close," says team captain Marie-Pier Brunelle, a trade commissioner in North America Commercial Programs. "If we had been only seven one-hundredths of a second faster, we would have made it—so stay tuned for this year's race."

Besides the fun and the exercise, the team also has the satisfaction of knowing that their efforts support charities chosen by the foundation. Through pledges, chocolate bar sales and a bake sale, Team B.O.B. raised \$600 in 2010, according to pledge captain Véronique Houle.

Registration for this year's B.O.B. Team started at the beginning of March. If you would like to join, send an email to marie-pier.brunelle@international.gc.ca.



DFAIT's dragon boat team returns to the dock after their race.