

LAKE LURE DRAGON BOAT RACING



DRAGON BOAT MANUAL FOR NOVICE TEAMS

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Introduction

As the sport of Dragon Boat racing grows, more and more information is available. This booklet is designed to give someone new to the sport an overview of dragon boat racing. This is far from all inclusive and is only one of many different ways to introduce someone to the sport. I have tried to capture the spirit of the different methods into one quick reference guide.

Dragon boat racing is one of the most popular sports in the world. There is organized racing in 59 different countries on every continent except Antarctica. (We are working on it, but we can't keep the course thawed!) Although the sport is most popular in the Asian countries, the rest of the world is catching on quickly. The most recent World Dragon Boat championships attracted teams from around the world and were broadcast to a world-wide audience of millions. In China, it is not uncommon for a dragon boat festival to attract 250,000 people. 50,000 will turn up just to watch the teams practice before the races!

In the United States there are three regions with organized racing. The east coast has competitive races in Boston, New York, Washington D.C. and Philadelphia. The strongest East Coast growth is further south in Florida and the Carolinas. The Midwest has many good teams in Iowa and Texas and a large race in Denver. In the West, races occur in Portland, Seattle/Tacoma, San Francisco and Los Angeles! It's not all large communities with races; it is just as popular in smaller communities such as Lake Lure! Of course this is not all of the races, these are primarily where the most competitive and larger races are located. During the spring and summer there is a dragon boat race occurring nearly every weekend somewhere in the U.S. Each year adds a few more events and hundreds of more paddlers. The season begins in now in March and runs through October and even later with Miami hosting a race in early December.

Serious international teams train year round. They travel to races in China, Hong Kong, Canada, Australia, England, Germany, Italy, South Africa, Japan, The Netherlands, as well as many local races. You can tell the serious teams by their tight uniforms, customized paddles, impeccable timing and intense focus. These teams usually race in their own competitive division where races are won and lost by split seconds.

Novice and Corporate teams make up the vast majority of dragon boat teams in the world. These teams are formed to try dragon boat racing for many reasons. The biggest reason is because it looks like a lot of fun! The problem is the teams find out that the sport is not only fun, it's addictive! When the short season ends and the race is over many novice teams go through withdrawal. Of course, paddling is not for everyone. It is a team sport in the truest sense of the word. Trying to get 10 to 20 people to do the same thing at the same time is challenging without putting them in a boat with a stick in their hands! There is a lot of friendship and camaraderie generated by a team. I have seen husbands and wives, brothers and sisters, fathers and sons, mothers and daughters, mothers and sons, fathers and daughters and more than a few grandparents all out on the water together. The sport brings people with different backgrounds and beliefs together in pursuit of a common objective – finishing! (OK, winning.)

I am pleased you are going to at least give the sport a try. If you like it and want to do more, there is a list at the end of the manual with groups and organizations you can contact for more information. I urge you to just have fun with this. As I transitioned from a novice to a competitive paddler and then into the world-class level I found that I missed the fun that I had when my group was not as serious. So I encourage you to have fun. Take it seriously enough to know you did the best you can and always strive to improve, but there is plenty of time to take the sport seriously later and plenty of teams that can help you get to a World Championships if that is your goal. So, give your team a dragon-related name, wear funny hats, make up team cheers and chants, paint your face and have a great time!

See you on the water!

Jeff Campbell
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Legend of Chu Yuan (Qu Yuan, 332 – 296 B.C.)

Dragon boat racing is a unique sport because of its origin. There may be origin legends for other sports, but none as celebrated and revered as the legend of Chu Yuan. When you take to the water you are not just having fun and being competitive, you are helping to keep alive a tradition that dates back over two thousand years!

There are many versions of the legend of the dragon boat races, but the one most frequently heard is the tale of Chu Yuan, a faithful and honest servant of a Chinese emperor who reigned four centuries before Christ.

Chu Yuan was an elder statesman and born into nobility. He was a trusted advisor to the emperor, but fell out of favor when the emperor failed to heed his advice. Chu Yuan was banished to another province where he continued to write poetry. (He is still today one of China's best loved poets) Because he was incapable of persuading the emperor to mend his ways Chu Yuan tied an enormous rock around himself and threw himself into the waters of Tung Tin Lake in Hunan Province in an act of protest.

Chu Yuan was so beloved by the people that they raced to the spot of his suicide in their fishing boats and beat the water with their paddles to keep the fish and the dragons from eating his body. They threw in rice dumplings in an attempt to keep Chu Yuan's body whole.

Although many attempts were made, his body was never found. Much later, his ghost was seen in the spot where he drowned, moaning that Chu Yuan had been devoured by monstrous water creatures.

Traditionally, dragon boat races are held on the fifth day of the fifth month of the Chinese Lunar Calendar (June 15 in 2002).



The Basics

Boats – Dragon Boats, like the people paddling them, come in many different shapes and sizes. There are small boats, like the ones here in Lake Lure seating as few as 10 paddler and large boats that seat 40 or more. For international competitive races most organizations have settled on a style of boat out of Hong Kong. This Hong Kong style of boat is very low to the water and seats 20. The original boats were made of teak and were very narrow. As the sport has evolved, the boats have been modified to fit a slightly larger European frame. Although the boats raced in the U.S., Canada and Europe are wider, they are still very cozy. Teamwork and coordination are required to keep from hitting your neighbor. In Lake Lure, the organizers are supplying boats out of China from Swift Racing. The Swift Racing boats are sleek, fast and well loved amongst the competitive teams. Although the boat may seem tippy and unstable at first, they are actually very stable and rarely capsize or swamp.

Another style of boat that you may see is the Taiwanese ceremonial boat. This style is raced in Portland at the Rose Festival dragon boat races. They are big, heavy boats with wide seats. The dragon head and tail are incorporated into the boat. Taiwan style races use a flag catch to signal the end of the race. A flag catcher lies on the head of the dragon and snatches a flag out of holder at the finish line.

Traditional dragon boat terms

Port – *Left*

Starboard – *Right*

Bow – *Front*

Stern – *Back*

Gunwales – *Sides of the boat*

Freeboard – *Distance from the gunnels to the water*

Centerboard – *stabilizing board that runs the length of some dragon boats*

Dressing – *Attaching the dragon head and tail for racing (boats without them are undressed)*

Positions – Just like other teams, dragon boats have positions. Starting from the bow and working back:

Caller/Drummer – Typically a smaller, lighter person with a big voice. This position is responsible for calling the race for the team. He/she beats the drum in time to the paddle strokes and shouts out encouragement to the team. The caller works together with the tiller to make sure the team runs a good race.

Lead Strokes – The first pair of paddlers in the boat are called the lead stroke (or lead strokes.) This position is critical since they set the pace for the rest of the team to follow. They are typically smaller, lighter paddlers with great timing and teamwork. They work together to set the pace and must make sure that they stay in time with each other.

Crew – Collectively all the paddlers on the boat are the crew. Paddlers are typically divided into two groups; those with good timing and those with power. Paddlers with great timing are usually seated toward the front of the boat. Timing is such a critical element that many teams like to keep the people with the best timing up front the rest of the team can see them. Power paddlers are usually seated toward the back of the boat. The water is faster in the back and it takes a little more effort to add to the power of the boat.

Tiller/Helm/Steersperson – The steersperson is 100% responsible for the safety of the crew. The steersperson has the best view of any obstructions on the water and must make the required commands to the crew to maneuver the boat. In race situations the steersperson must also be able to read wind and be knowledgeable of how the boat reacts in certain conditions. It is not good enough that the steersperson can just keep the boat straight, he or she must be able to bring the boat to the line in whatever wind conditions and make the maneuvers or commands to hold the boat on the line. The tiller works with the caller during a race by echoing the calls so that the whole team hears the commands. At Lake Lure the helm's are provided and are very experienced.

Captain – Each team needs to have someone in charge for the races. The captain is usually selected by the team to represent them for the races. The captain attends all meetings and passes on the important information. In the event of a dispute, the captain (and ONLY the captain) approaches the race officials to get a resolution. The captain is a member of the crew.

Coach – Although not a required position, all teams should have someone organizing the practices and making decisions. The coach sets the workout for the practice, seats the boat (seating the boat is telling everyone where to sit) sets the race strategy and motivates the crew. The coach should be well organized and respected by the crew. Some coaches are paddlers on their own teams while other coaches only go out with the team during practice.

Manager – If a team travels or if the coach and captain are on the boat then the team will need a manager. This person is like the team Mom. The manager can attend meetings, gather information, make arrangements and help keep track of the team. They also are the head cheerleader.

Safety

Dragon boat racing, like any water sport, is an inherently dangerous sport and must be treated as such. Like nearly every sport, people get hurt and die while participating. Dragon boats are capable of capsizing and the waters in May are still cold. Additionally, dragon boats must share the water with other watercraft. Pleasure boaters, commercial ships and other boats all present a hazard. The helm has the ultimate authority and responsibility on boat regarding safety.

DO NOT GO OUT IF CONDITIONS ARE UNSAFE

Make it a team rule, that anyone can pull the plug on a practice if they feel conditions are not safe. Unsafe conditions include:

- High or fast water, unless the crew is very experienced (Rivers)
- Thunder storms (wind and lightning)
- Excessive debris in water, especially after flooding
- Too few paddlers (minimum of 6 EXPERIENCED)
- Darkness if boat is not lighted properly
- Congestion on water, especially during summer
- Pollution and raw sewage spills
- Too many paddlers (10 is max)

Life jackets are mandatory

None of the dragon boat fatalities were wearing a life jacket (personal flotation device, PFD), even though all were in good physical condition. PFD's should be worn OUTSIDE any clothing. They must be fully secured with all buckles fastened and cinched tight. The PFD must be USCG approved.

Boat Traffic

Dragon boats are low to the water and difficult to spot. Always be on the lookout and stay aware of other boats around you. Never assume anything! If you practice in a commercial area be aware of the traffic channels. Do not stop in the middle of any channel unless it is all clear. If you hear three horn blasts it means you are about to be run over – DANGER! Yield to everyone; never assume that someone will yield to you. Although the least maneuverable craft has the right of way, it is best to yield unless the other boat CLEARLY communicates its intentions.

Clothing

Dragon boat racing is a water sport and you will get wet. Dress accordingly. During spring practices the water is cold and it frequently rains. Here is what I suggest from the bottom up: Shoes – old sneakers work great. They should be comfortable and grip well when wet. They WILL get wet so leave the \$200 Nikes at home. Teva type sandals and other shoes for water sports also work well. Bare feet also work fine, but not only during the warmer months. Shorts – Nylon shorts or swim trunks work great. (no Speedos or thongs please!) Many experienced paddlers prefer bike shorts with padded seats. If Lycra is not for you, wear another pair of loose shorts over the top. Shirts – most novice teams wear cotton t-shirts as their race uniforms. Save them for racing. Cotton is a poor choice if you are going to get wet. Wear a synthetic shirt if possible (running singlets or a nylon jersey work well.) There are many choices of fabrics that breathe and dry quickly. I like cool max personally. If you have to wear a t-shirt, bring a dry one to change into after practice. Outerwear – Gore Tex is the best (and most expensive). If you have to wear a jacket or pants during practice breathable is better than water resistance. Nylon jackets work well. Avoid rubber lined rain slickers, you will end up wetter inside than if you had worn nothing. Hat – if it is cold wear one. You lose an incredible amount of body heat through your head. Gloves can help keep your hands warm and help provide grip to the paddle.

Summoning Help

Each body of water has a responsible law enforcement agency. Find out which agency is in charge of the water where you practice. Keep both the emergency and non-emergency numbers handy. If you get into trouble, see someone else in trouble or are being harassed by pleasure craft, call for help. I suggest each team carry a cellular phone in a sealed “dry bag” (available at REI or most sporting goods stores) during each practice. At least two paddlers should attach whistles to the outside of their life jackets. Sound carries over water and a whistle can quickly bring help to your location.

Rules of the Road

Sail and manually propelled boats have right of way over power boats. The exception is large vessels and ships that are difficult to steer and stop. However, while in a dragon boat - NEVER assume someone will yield the right of way. Dragon boats are quick to stop and can be turned in a short radius. You can actually turn one around very easily while stopped. Generally, boats that are less maneuverable have the right of way, so YEILD! Meeting head on – When two boats meet coming head on neither has the right of way. Alter your course to the right (starboard) so

you pass on the left (port.) Crossing: If you need to cross the normal lanes of traffic be very careful! Don't start to cross if you are getting ready to stop paddling. Overtaking: The boat being overtaken has the right of way. It must hold course and speed. The passing boat must keep out of the way of the overtaken boat. Remember this when a power boat is passing you – Don't alter your course until they pass! Stay at least on boat length away from all boats. Departure from these rules is allowed to avoid immediate danger. WHEN IN DOUBT, HOLD! HOLD! HOLD! Get your boat stopped and under control.

Operator inattention is primary cause of accidents. Never assume another boat is paying attention. Maintain a proper lookout ahead, to the sides and behind at all times. Always look before turning. Keep a reasonable distance between yourself and other boats and objects.

Capsizing

Dragon boats DO FLIP OVER. Always know how many people are on board. I suggest each team use the buddy system with your seat mates as your buddy. Lead strokes buddy up with the drummer, last row paddlers buddy up with helm. Should the boat capsize do the following:

1. REMAIN CALM the helm or drummer or captain should take charge.
2. Identify injuries and implement buddy system. Account for everyone.
3. Grab as much gear as SAFELY possible. Bailers, paddles and dry bags.
4. If help is nearby, hang on to boat and wait for assistance. Get up on the boat and out of the water as much as possible. Do not "swim for it". Signal for help with whistle or horn (3 short, 3 long, 3 short – pause, repeat)
5. If no help is nearby have crew swim the boat to the nearest shore. Right the boat and bail if possible.
6. Get help as soon as possible. Call 911 for injuries. Get dry as soon as possible.

Most capsizes occur due to either someone standing up when the crew was not prepared or by an improperly loaded boat. There are several ways to minimize chances of capsizing. First, keep the boat balanced. Too many paddlers positioned on one side is both uncomfortable and dangerous. If you have two extra port side paddlers have one sit on starboard for balance. Have the paddlers trade places periodically to keep the boat balanced and to give everyone a chance to participate. Use the tiller and caller to keep boat balanced. Some crews are just heavier on one side. The tiller and caller can shift their weight to keep the boat even. If you have to make seating changes during the practice have the paddlers move one bench at a time (not all at once) starting in the front and working to the back. Stay seated, especially if the boat is moving. It is very exciting to win your first race and equally embarrassing to stand up and capsize the boat in front of the crowd. No sudden movements.



Stroke technique

No one subject will cause more discussion amongst dragon boat paddlers as technique. About the only two parts of a dragon boat stroke that everyone will agree on is that your inside hand goes on the top and your outside hand goes on the bottom... the rest is up for interpretation. The stroke that is presented in this booklet is based on the current practice of the top U.S. and Canadian crews.

Prior to starting you need to position yourself in the boat. First, sit comfortably on the front edge of the seat. Your hip should be firmly pinned to the gunwale (side of the boat). Your back is straight and you are leaning slightly forward and slightly outward. Your head should be over the water. You will find a foothold on the floor of the boat in front of you. Your outboard foot should be braced against the foot hold. Your other foot should either be braced next to the front or beneath you. Foot position is critical as you improve and can use your whole body to paddle, learn it early. Grasp the paddle lightly with your inside hand on the handle and your outside hand as far down the shaft as comfortable. Most paddlers keep their outside hand within one hand width of the blade. Grip should be comfortable and relaxed. The paddle is your friend and you don't choke your friends.

There are six basic elements to the dragon boat stroke. They are done in order and properly executed present a smooth and comfortable motion. The six elements are: reach, catch, drive, pull, recovery and rotation.

Reach

The reach position is an extended position with the paddle a few inches above the water before driving it into the water. This is sometimes called the "paddles up" position. This reach position determines the length of a stroke and a long stroke means more water is pulled. The position of the outside paddling arm is equivalent to pulling a bow and arrow. The outside shoulder should be dropped slightly and also extended forward. The torso leans forward and outward slightly for additional extension. The outside arm is straight, like throwing a punch in karate.

The reach position determines the rotation of the torso. If the torso is twisted forward upon the paddle entering the water (think of a wound up spring), the torso will naturally want to "unwind" back to the normal upright seated position. You may actually lift up off your seat on one side while reaching.

As mentioned previously, the lower arm position is similar to drawing a bow and arrow. The bottom arm is extended straight forward parallel to the water. The lower arm is fully extended and is almost locked at the elbow. The top hand is about forehead high and outside the boat so that your paddle is completely outside the boat. Your top arm should be bent slightly with your upper elbow kept low. The lower hand grip should be relaxed and not grip the paddle too hard.

Catch

The catch phase is the most critical to the speed of the boat. The catch is the moment the paddle blade first bites into the water. During the stroke there is a very slight (almost un-noticeable) pause before the catch. This pause helps set up the timing in the boat. All paddle blades should be entering and exiting the water at the same time. It is this work in unison that gives the boat maximum speed with minimum effort. No other sport asks 20 people to do the same thing at the same time. Timing is everything! At the catch your blade should be fully extended at about a 45 degree angle. Your outside hand should be under the arm of the person in front of you.

Drive

The drive is a powerful motion that sets your blade into the water. Using both hands you will drive the paddle about 18 inches into the water until the blade is fully buried. Additional power is released from the top hand during the drive, like a hammer. Imagine you are setting your paddle into concrete. You drive it into the water and anchor it into position so you can pull. When you complete the drive the paddle should be straight up and anchored in the water. The blade should be perpendicular to the side of the boat for maximum bite. The paddle should be just behind the seat in front of you or near your knee.

Pull

Once the paddle is fully submerged or "buried", the next step is to move some water. This is called the pull. The paddles should pull back directly parallel with the boat. The top hand stabilizes the paddle as the bottom arm and back muscles pull back. To use the back muscles effectively, the paddler sits up while pulling and continues to drive the paddle downward with the top hand. Maximum power and endurance will come from using the larger muscles of the back, shoulder and trunk rather than relying on the smaller arm muscles. It is important to keep the paddle straight up and down. Resist the temptation to pull back too far or to push over the top with your top hand. The length of the pull phase is only about 18 inches. That's it.

Recovery/Exit

At the end of the stroke the paddle should exit the water at the hip. Allowing the stroke to go past the hip results in the paddling blade being at an angle that would slow down the boat. The outside arm blends slightly and the lower wrist twists in slightly to allow the paddle to clear the water. At the same time you pull up and in with your top hand. Once the paddle is out of the water it is ready to be pushed or snapped forward. Recovery is important because it is part of the rest phase for your muscles.

Rotate

Imagine that there is a steel rod running through your head, down the length of the spine, through your tailbone and into the dragon boat seat. This is the axis on which you rotate. You can simulate rotation by sitting back in your office chair and reaching forward and across your body

with your arm toward your computer monitor. Your hips and torso twist but your head stays still. Rotation is one of the key components of the stroke and the easiest to forget. Rotation allows the paddler to get an extra 2 to 4 inches on the stroke. This may not seem like much, but if 20 people all rotate they are adding 80 inches or almost 7 feet to the stroke. Rotation allows for maximum reach/extension.

The stroke is a smooth, elastic motion. You are winding up with the recovery, reach and rotation and you are explosively unwinding in the catch, drive and pull. Some people like to think of it as a spring coiling and uncoiling and others think of it as a rubber band, stretching and contracting. Whatever analogy works for you is fine; just keep it smooth and fluid.

Things to avoid

There is a natural tendency to ‘arm’ the stroke. Arming it (or choo-chooing) is using your biceps and triceps to move the paddle through the water. Most people get more power by keeping the outside arm straight and using the bigger back and torso muscles to transfer energy to the paddle. Keeping your outside arm straight allows maximum transfer of energy.

Dragon boat paddling is different than canoeing. People who canoe typically use a “J” stroke that helps compensate for the tendency of the boat to turn during each stroke. Since a dragon boat is steered and there are an equal number of people on each side, the boat wants to go straight and adding an outward element to your stroke will only slow the boat down.

PADDLING COMMANDS

Sit Ready Paddles in the relaxed position, parallel over the water pointed at 90 degrees to the side of the boat.

Paddles Up Paddles above the water ready to take a stroke. Commonly used for starting the movement of the boat in a non-race situation.

Take it Away Command to start paddling.

Let it Run Paddling stops and boat coasts to a stop on its own.

Hold the Boat Bringing the boat to a full stop with the use of the paddles. Drag your paddle in the water to create resistance and stop the boat

Back it Down Paddle backwards slowly

Draw (left or right) Used to move the boat sideways. Reach out sideways and pull water toward the boat

Brace the Boat Stabilize the boat by putting your paddle out to the side with the blade resting on top of the water

Push off Used to move the boat away from an object, usually the dock. Don’t push off with your paddle.

COMMON INCORRECT DRAGON BOAT TERMINOLOGY

ROWING - You do not row a dragon boat! Dragon boats are paddled and the people who participate in the sport are called paddlers.

COXSWAIN (koxsn) Person who steers a rowboat, often incorrectly referred to as the Cox man. In this area commonly called the "Cox". Dragon boats have a caller or drummer in front and a steersperson or helm in the rear.

Steering

One of the most important jobs and the most frequently overlooked positions is the steersperson. Good helms are very valuable and worth their weight in gold. If you don't believe me, just remember this next time your crew is standing on the dock before practice looking at the boat wishing that someone besides Joe (or Sue or whomever your helm is) knew how to steer one of these things! The helm is a critical part of the crew and plays an important role in practice and races. The amount of stress is high. It takes a whole team to win, but the only single person who can cost a team a race is the helm. It takes a special type of person willing to take on the duties of the helm and I urge everyone to thank your steersperson after every practice and race. If it was not for them, you would not leave the dock.

One thing that helps is for everyone to understand how a dragon boat is controlled. The most important part is the responsiveness of the boat. Dragon boats tend to respond quickly to motion and they want to keep going in the direction they are steered. In other words, if they are lined up straight and there is no rudder action, the boat will want to continue to go straight. If the boat starts to turn, it wants to keep turning. That is the problem during a race. If the helm loses control, the boat will start to turn and it is difficult to regain control. Next thing you know, you are sideways on the race course and hopefully you have not hit anything. One cause of boat turning during a race is a paddler shifting his or her weight. All paddlers need to be comfortable prior to the start and then need to stay in one position for the entire race.

Dragon boats are controlled with a steering oar in the back left side of the boat. The steering arm is in an oar lock that sticks out on the left. The oar is about 8 feet long and although heavy, it balances nicely on the steering arm. When you steer the boat think backwards. Move rudder right to go left and vice versa. The till is designed for small course corrections while underway. Dragon boats are designed to run straight sprint races. They cannot do slaloms or tight turns. The paddlers may need to assist the helm when making big course corrections, like turning around. Use draw strokes for maneuvering. To pivot the boat to the right us the first four paddlers on the front right and last four paddlers on the back left. By using draw strokes, the boat pivots on the center axis.

Commands – Here are the standard commands that you will here from the helm:

To stop paddling – “Let it run”

To stop the boat – “Let it run. Hold the boat.”

Crash or emergency stop – “HOLD! HOLD! HOLD!” or “HOLD THE BOAT! HOLD THE BOAT! HOLD THE BOAT!” Use three commands and make it loud!

To start paddling – “Paddles up...take it away”

To slow down – Alternate “Let it run.” And “Hold”

To speed up – use a “power” call. “POWER, NOW!” (your team may have a different power call)

To move boat left or right – “Draw left” or “Draw right”

To move up or back slowly – “Back three benches only, give me three strokes up (or back)”

The crew needs to be ready for any call from the tiller at any time. Callers need to echo these commands when made and the helm needs to echo them if the caller makes them. Do not question a call made by the helm. The helm is responsible for the safety of the crew and that takes precedence over any training run or race.

Common Rules and Regulations

Dragon boat races can be simple, fun races or they can be very complicated and formal. Sport racing is the more formal of the two and is governed by the International Dragon Boat Federation (IDBF). The IDBF sets the rules for international competition. The governing body for sport racing in the United States is the USDBF. Regionally, Lake Lure is part of the Eastern Region Dragon Boat Association (ERDBA) who regulates the rules used by its members. Festival racing is the simple type of race. Festivals are not required to use the official rules and therefore vary greatly in what is and what is not allowed at the race. Although every effort is being made to standardize the rules and regulations in the sport you will still run into some variance. Always ask for a set of rules before entering a race. Find out how the race rules vary from the IDBF rules or your customary rules. Here are some basics that everyone should know and that most races follow: **(Note, these are not the official race rules of your event! These are COMMON rules that MOST dragon boat races follow!)**

Waivers and Fees - Waivers are standard for all events. Waivers protect the people putting on the event and are required for insurance purposes. Read them and make sure that every person signs before going out on the water. Race fees vary from a few hundred dollars to a few thousand per event. Some races charge entry fees of over \$3,000.00.

Marshalling – Teams get lined up and counted prior to the race. The marshalling area is usually near the dock. Only team members who are going out in the boat and a team manager are allowed in the marshalling area. Follow the direction of the marshalling official.

Dock Control – All races have someone in charge of the dock. They make sure the boats come in and go out correctly and ensure that the boats are loaded and unloaded quickly.

Equipment – Every person must have on a life jacket. Most races will let you wear your own as long as it is USCG approved. Some international races will allow paddlers to forego the PFD, but they have enough chase boats to rescue an entire crew in less than 10 minutes. Most races don't have this support so plan on wearing the PFD. Each paddler will have a paddle and the

boat can carry two spares. Paddlers can usually use their own paddles, but some races require you to use theirs. The drum will be attached to the front of the boat and the drummer will sit in a high seat behind the drum. The drum must be actively beaten during the race. The boat may have a bailer on board, but the use of any type of pump to remove water from the boat during the race is forbidden.

Boats – Boats and race lanes are pre-selected, usually randomly. The crews have to use the boat provided. Any defects in the boat or equipment must be noted and corrected prior to leaving the dock. Make sure the drum and seat are attached firmly and the steering oar works properly. Boats are usually weighed in advance to make sure they are all as evenly matched as possible.

Etiquette – When paddling out to the race start, stay off the race course as much as possible. Smooth water makes for a much better race. If there is another race going on while you are paddling out, stop and hold your boat until the race passes. Be courteous to the other teams and keep your comments in your own boat. Trash talking or putting down other crews is not tolerated.

Race Course – Every effort is made to make sure the course is straight and the distance correct. Not every course is perfect. A big part of dragon boat racing is luck. Sometimes your team gets stuck in a “bad boat” or in the “worst” lane. If you feel the course is significantly off, mention it to a race official, but don’t expect instantaneous change. Running a dragon boat race is very complex and time consuming and most run behind schedule. Unless the course error is very bad, it may not be changed until the following year! Distances are one area that has not been standardized. International races are held at 200, 250, 500 and 1,000 meters. Festival races can be anything in between!

Starting Line – Lane 1 is usually closest to the race official’s area or tent. Starting line areas are not usually marked, so make sure you know what lane you are in before the race. Paddle out directly to the starting area and turn your boat so it is facing down course. Stay about 3 to 5 boat lengths behind the start line. Make sure your boat is in the right spot. If you are in boat 2, then you should be outside of boat one. There will be a starting boat at the line to assist in lining up. In some cases your boat number may not match the lane number, just go where they tell you and don’t worry about it. The race officials will get it all sorted out.

Race Start – Another area that varies greatly from race to race is the start. The start line may not be marked. There may be floating buoys on either side of the course and they may or may not actually mark the start line. Only the starter knows where the real line is drawn. Typically, boats slowly approach the imaginary start line and the starter will tell the boats to stop when they get close. It is important to keep the boat stopped. Getting two or more boats to line up is tough and rarely is it exact. Again, this is part of racing. As long as the boats are close to even the starter will run the race. If conditions are windy or there is a current (like in a river or a bay) then the race may use a running or rolling start. The boats are lined up behind the line and then paddled slowly toward the start. At any point close to (or over) the start line, the race can be started. Starters make every effort to make sure that all the boats are as even as possible at the start.

Race Commands – Most races start with a variation of “on your mark, get set, go”. International competitions start with – “Are you ready?” “Attention please.” “Go” (or some sort of noise signaling the start). Because it is hard to hear across the race course, most starters use different phrases for each part. Another common start is “Paddlers prepare to start” “Attention” “Go”.

Chase Boats – Most races have an umpire who rides in a boat following down the lanes. It is his or her job to make sure the boats stay in their lanes. They will use a megaphone to order boats to change course if they are getting too far out of their lanes. This is for the safety of the crews and the commands should be obeyed instantly. Lanes may or may not be marked. If they are not marked, try and stay at least a boat length away from the other boats.

Finish Line – The actual finish line is an imaginary line between the race officials and a point on the land across from them. It may or may not correspond to the finish line buoys. Make sure you know if the real finish line is before or after the buoys. It is a common mistake for a team to pass the buoys and stop paddling and get beat by a team that paddled all the way to the finish line.

End of race – Most races are sprints with the first boat across the line the winner. The race is over when the nose of the dragon touches the line. If the race is dead heat usually both teams advance or if the race is a final, both teams share the win. Rarely will a race be re-run.

Run out – The area past the finish line is the run out area. Do not turn your boat until all boats are in the run out area and have stopped. Some run outs are very short and if you turn early you may get run over by a boat that is just finishing.

Advancing – The method used to advance crews to the finals may differ from place to place. Most events will advance the winner of a heat automatically. Two methods can be used, time and place. Make sure you know if you are racing for time. A team can come sometimes come in second or third and still advance if their time was fast. A common mistake is for a team to coast into to second place thinking they are automatically advancing only to find out they had a slow time.

Number of heats – Most races will guarantee that your team will get a minimum number of races, usually two or three. Teams that win can race five or six times during an event.

Conduct of crews – It is always a rule (sometimes unwritten) that teams and individuals will conduct themselves in a sportsmanlike manner at all times. Rude, offensive or vulgar language is not appropriate at any time and can get your whole team disqualified from the event. Any violence or intimidation will also result in disqualification. Bribery is generally frowned upon, depending on what you are offering for a bribe! Alcohol or drug use is strictly forbidden during races. If you are still racing, do not drink. After the races, drink responsibly if alcohol is allowed at the venue. Please respect the venue rules regarding alcohol use. Remember, dragon boat racing is fun and is a family friendly event.