

# The Sydney Morning Herald

Good Weekend

## ‘Go us! Look at what we can do!’ The water sport empowering breast cancer survivors

The ancient sport of dragon boat racing is breathing a new spirit of joy and camaraderie into these rowers’ lives.

By Sue Williams

JULY 11, 2025



Fiona Dews (at left) and Rose Glassock: after surviving breast cancer, “the dragon boats brought us together”, says Dews. BRENT LEWIN

This story is part of the July 12 edition of Good Weekend. [See all 13 stories.](#)



Listen to this article

10 min

It was her first dragon boat race that broke her. As Rose Glassock slipped her paddle into the water, bent forward and pulled it through the swell, in perfect time with the 19 other women of the crew and the thunderous beat of the drummer at the front, she suddenly felt her face wet. Then she realised she was sobbing out loud, and she couldn't stop – both crying and paddling.

She finished the race a mess, but she finished. Her close friend and teammate Fiona Dews put an arm around her as soon as they crossed the line. The other women reassured her. All breast cancer survivors, reclaiming their health, fitness and, yes, often their sanity through the team sport of dragon boating, many of them had done exactly the same thing.

“My body was just processing all the trauma of what I'd been through, the surgery, radiation and drama,” says Glassock, recalling the moment with Dews in a hushed corner of a cafe in a bustling Westfield in Penrith, western Sydney, close to the lakes where they practise.

A neat, well-dressed woman, with not a hair out of place in her glossy brunette bob, Glassock exudes an air of control, of competence, of being able to deal with anything life throws at her. It's hard to imagine her disintegrating. “But my body just reacted to that repetitive, rhythmic action and the drumbeat, and my emotions just broke through,” she continues. “I was reading the book *The Body Keeps the Score* at the time, about the effects of psychological trauma on the mind and body, and I was just letting it all go. It was kind of relief-crying, in a way. But I still can't quite believe I did that.”

Glassock and Dews are just two Australian women who've fallen in love with the sport of dragon boat racing – a Chinese sport dating back more than 2000 years – after breast cancer diagnoses and treatment. There are now 30 groups around the country affiliated to the not-for-profit charity Dragons Abreast Australia, a number that's been growing steadily since the first club began here in 1998.

With just under 400 breast cancer survivor teams globally, this year sees the start of celebrations for next year's 30th anniversary of the movement. It was founded in Canada in 1996 after University of British Columbia sports medicine physician and exercise physiologist Dr Don McKenzie discovered it was a great activity for breast cancer survivors to take up, and they responded with enthusiasm.

“In the old days, you'd be diagnosed with breast cancer, then go home and wrap yourself up in cotton wool,” says Michelle Hanton, 66, a semi-retired business strategist who started the first Dragons Abreast Australia group in Darwin after attending a conference on cancer – she had a mastectomy and chemotherapy in 1997 – and hearing a Canadian speaker talk about the registered charitable society Abreast In A Boat [the original group]. “Back then, you were told not to do so much. There was a lot of fear around exercise and worries it could lead to lymphoedema (potentially dangerous swelling due to a build-up of lymph fluid). But when Dr McKenzie did trials and found there were no adverse effects on women with breast cancer, and talked about the benefits, that was a turning point.



Paddlers from Dragons Abreast Penrith in training in western Sydney. BRENT LEWIN

“When I got home, I went to see the Chinese community because I knew they did dragon boating,” continues Hanton. “Then I put the word out among breast cancer survivors to come and have a go. There was so much negativity around cancer, it was great to be able to grab something positive. That first time, we paddled 250 metres out, then we looked around and asked, ‘How the hell are we going to get back again?’ But as time went on, we improved.”

## Smiling the whole day

On a chilly midwinter morning at Sydney International Regatta Centre, part of the Penrith Lakes, Glasscock, 56, and Dews, 53, both dressed in their pink uniforms, are here early to help pull the tarps off the boats and ready everything for the morning practice. They’re among the most enthusiastic members of Dragons Abreast Penrith, and are today welcoming a few new prospective initiates who thought they were merely coming to watch before being immediately assigned a boat, a position and a paddle.

Glasscock, a psychologist, support and inter-agency co-ordinator at the NSW Department of Education and mother of two sons, remembers a similar introduction to dragon boats. She was diagnosed at Christmas 2018 and had a lumpectomy in January 2019, followed by more surgery the next month to increase the margin and radiation. When she contacted The McGrath Foundation about breast nurses, they mentioned dragon boat racing but she dismissed it. “I couldn’t even walk



up the stairs in my house, let alone do something like that,” she says. “But then in July, I went to watch and they put me straight in a boat, and it was bloody amazing. I smiled the whole day.

---

***‘There was so much negativity about cancer, it was great to be able to grab something positive.’***

Michelle Hanton

“I loved the novelty and fun of it, but it was also the camaraderie of the boat. We all had that shared experience of breast cancer and we all encouraged each other and found it enormously empowering. It’s kind of active mindfulness as well as great exercise, and you’re out in the fresh air on the water and with people who understand the fear of having a sore hip or a bad knee and worrying if it’s cancer back again. You all support each other.”

Dews, a teacher’s aide, was diagnosed soon after. She was completely shocked – she’d always been healthy, looked after herself, played a great deal of sport and thought she’d be safe. “The worst thing was trying to tell my kids,” she says. “My son didn’t worry much, and told me I’d be fine, but my daughter was a bit of a mess.” Dews also had a lumpectomy, with lymph nodes taken out, radiation and a hormone blocker. She started dragon boat racing a few weeks after Glassock.



Fiona Dews (at left) and Rose Glassock: “Our close friendship has been the best bonus of breast cancer, along with the dragon boats,” Dews says. BRENT LEWIN

“We were the newbies, so we sat together and got to know each other well,” says Dews, pushing back a few stray hairs from a mass of blonde curls tightly pulled back into a ponytail. “We’re polar opposites in so many ways, with very different life experiences, but the dragon boats brought us together. We both love it and we go to as many training sessions as we can.

“When you’re out on the water, it takes your mind off all the stresses, it’s so quiet it really relaxes you and you’re at peace. We sit side by side and our close friendship has been the best bonus of breast cancer, along with the dragon boats. It feels so empowering. It’s, ‘Go us! Look at what we can do!’ ”

## Vitamin D and laughter

In Melbourne, Andrea Seers is the co-ordinator of Dragons Abreast Melbourne Pink Phoenix. She’d been living in Canada, where she’d been working as a consultant to the World Bank, when she was diagnosed with bilateral breast cancer in 2003 with two tumours in each breast.

She returned to Australia the next year and in 2011 was reading a Breast Cancer Network Australia newsletter when she saw a photo of an older woman sitting in a dragon boat screaming at a bunch of women paddlers.

Intrigued, she went along to Melbourne’s Docklands to check the group out, as well as “the sweep”, the person at the back of the boat who steers and shouts commands, screaming or otherwise, to the paddlers.

“They immediately threw me in a boat and we went out for a paddle around Melbourne,” Seers says. “It was the most extraordinary experience. It was all about health and connection and support. Dragon boating is great strength and aerobic exercise and it’s incredibly empowering to be surrounded by people who’ve been through the same shit. We do expect our new ladies to be very emotional about the journey for the first couple of months as it can be hard to find a place to release that anger and stress and frustration. But there’s so much Vitamin D and laughter. It’s just brilliant.”

There are other serious sides, too, with Dragons Abreast clubs raising money for related organisations such as the National Breast Cancer Foundation, which funds cancer research. There are also regular regattas around the country and across the world, attended by local paddlers, some of whom have even represented Australia in general competitions. But the breast cancer boats, with drummers sitting at the front to keep the beat of the paddlers’ strike rate, all provide a potent, noisy, splashy and colourful symbol that there is most definitely life after breast cancer.

Cancer Council Queensland director of research and exercise psychologist Professor Sandi Hayes says the rise in the number of women – and men – who’ve been



through breast cancer joining dragon boating clubs is a very healthy trend. It's now known that low levels of physical activity present a higher risk of complications after cancer. Randomised controlled trials show, conversely, that regular exercise has a preventative effect.

Andrea Seers, from Melbourne's Dragons Abreast group, describes the dragon boat experience as "incredibly empowering".

"The reality is that any form of exercise that increases the heart rate and circulation makes the lymphatic system work well," Hayes says. "Dragon boating also offers resistance training for the upper body, so it's fantastic when it's done regularly for both strength and cardiovascular fitness. And being in a boat with others has good psycho-social benefits, and with all those social connections that come as a consequence."

## Stronger together

Those connections are at the very heart of Dragons Abreast Australia, believes Pearl Lee, the organisation's chair. She was extremely reluctant to join after her diagnosis in 2015 and a mastectomy, chemotherapy and radiation. While she wanted a peer group, she didn't like water and was a poor swimmer. "Oh, it's on a boat!" she recalls groaning. "Oh, I don't want to do that!"

Eventually, she tried and, much to her surprise, took to it immediately. "It gave me back my energy and stamina, and being outside with the sun on me in the company of other people who'd had breast cancer was wonderful," she says. Even when she was later diagnosed with secondary cancer – a leukaemia thought to have been caused by the chemotherapy – she remained committed.

"It's not just about surviving, but it's also about thriving," Lee says. "It's a sport and we are competitive with each other but, at the end of the day, we all have to paddle in the same direction with the same timing, as otherwise we won't get there. It's all about being stronger together. We're all warriors."

To read more from *Good Weekend* magazine, visit our page at [The Sydney Morning Herald](#), [The Age](#) and [Brisbane Times](#).

### CONTINUE THIS EDITION

GoodWeekend

The July 12 Edition

### UP NEXT

Two of Us

**'I'm with you, mate': Days after Rob's son drowned, so too did Adrian's daughter**

Last year, Rob Maniscalco lost his 15-year-old son, Lachie, in an accident. Days later, Adrian Chen's daughter Tegan, 10, died in similar circumstances.

---

#### Dicey Topics

### 'Not sexy enough': Pia Miranda on the negative feedback young actors face

The star of Looking for Alibrandi and Australian Survivor winner on the challenges of showbiz, ideas of heaven – and a teen question that still haunts her.

#### PREVIOUSLY

### History's booming in podcasts – but many of its academics are out of a job

We live in momentous times. History podcasts and books are more popular than ever. So why is academic history in crisis?

[See all stories >](#)



**Sue Williams** is a Sydney-based freelance travel writer, author and journalist who's filed for newspapers, magazines, radio and TV stations around the world.

---