This is Saint Martin’s University’s Annual Dragon Boat Festival.

Paddlers stroke to the pulsating heartbeat of the drum.

Fierce-looking dragons skim across Budd Inlet.

Water splashes. Sun dazzles.

More Than Just a Race

by Mary Boone

Dragon boating dates back to fourth century China and began as a way to honor Qu Yuan, a warrior poet, who threw himself into the Mi Lo River as a protest against the political turmoil and suffering of the time. Over time, dragon boating has become a festive event that unites communities for fun and celebration.

Brother Ramon Newell, one of the monks at Saint Martin’s Abbey, responded to a flier recruiting paddlers for Saint Martin’s first dragon boat festival and he’s been hooked ever since. “Dragon boating is a lot different from other sports. It’s a team sport and you have to work together as a group, but it’s not a sport that’s built on strength or brute force. It’s more about timing, technique, synchronization, and people working to-
gather.” Even experienced canoeists and kayakers have no real advantage when it comes to dragon boating. “It’s a whole different kind of paddling,” he explained.

Now a member of the Washington Dragon Boat Association, which partners with Saint Martin’s to run the festival, and the Olympia Sea Otters, a local group of dragon boaters, Brother Ramon also serves on the festival’s planning committee and helps at the training sessions for new boaters. “I love being on the water, but most of all, I enjoy how the sports brings people together.”

This year’s teams came from different sectors. Students, staff, and parents from Griffin School District built camaraderie as they participated in their first-ever race. The City of Olympia looked to outpace rival Team Tumwater. And bus drivers cheered and jeered their Intercity Transit colleagues each time the Stroking Orcas took to the water. As one team climbed out of a boat and onto the dock, participants were greeted with words of congratulations from the next group of paddlers. Battles were hard fought, laughter was plentiful, and racers exhibited only the most sportsman-like behavior.

Some teams were entered in the “competitive” division, meaning they routinely paddle and race together. Others were new to the sport of dragon boating. The recreational teams got two practices prior to the event to familiarize themselves with safety procedures and paddling technique. The Washington Dragon Boat Association provided boats, life jackets, paddles, and paddling technique. The Washington Dragon Boat Association, organized by a group of students from mainland China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan. In addition to dragon boating, the student group organizes annual New Year and Mid-Autumn festivals to help educate the community about Chinese culture. This was the second year David Villand ’13, an engineering student from Tacoma, paddled for Saint Martin’s Abbot Neal Roth and Chris Grabowski of the Gingko Grove Daoist Center.

A third Saint Martin’s team, Chinese Dragons, was organized by a group of students from mainland China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan. In addition to dragon boating, the student group organizes annual New Year and Mid-Autumn festivals to help educate the community about Chinese culture. This was the second year David Villand ’13, an engineering student from Tacoma, paddled for Saint Martin’s Abbot Neal Roth and Chris Grabowski of the Gingko Grove Daoist Center.

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For criminal justice major Lindsey Miller ’11, who paddled for Saint George’s Dragons, the experience was a fun combination of sport and culture. “Learning to do the strokes was interesting, plus I liked hearing about the history of it all.”

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Adjunct business and marketing faculty member Paul Hirsh, who has twice taught in Shanghai, also paddled on Saint George’s Dragons: “Our team has faculty, monks, staff and students on it,” he said. “I appreciate our diversity and I’ve enjoyed getting to know people from so many facets of the University.”

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“The event builds community—not only at Saint Martin’s, but throughout the city and region,” said Haley Thompson, Saint Martin’s director of international programs. This year’s event showcased both Asian and Native American cultures of the Pacific Northwest. The eyes of the dragons on each boat were painted during an official “Dotting of the Ceremony.” A traditional Lion Dance was performed by the Olympia Kung Fu and Tai Chi Club. Celebration songs and dances were performed by the combined Chehalis, Squaxin, and Nisqually tribes. Boats were blessed by both Saint Martin’s Abbot Neal Roth and Chris Grabowski of the Gingko Grove Daoist Center.

“Dragon boating is obviously part of the event, but we want people to learn and enjoy and experience the cultural aspects of the festival, too,” Brother Ramon said. “I always head into an event like this hoping people who attend and participate will find themselves enriched by the experience.”

While racing and trophies are terrific, Yung said her favorite thing about the festival is seeing participants and spectators having a good time. “I see families bringing their children and enjoying watching the races and having fun at the face-painting, the culture performances, and the arts and crafts booths,” said Yung. “I see teams competing and challenging each other, all in good spirit. I see volunteers totally devoted to making sure the festival is a great success. I can’t tell you how rewarding the feeling is. It is something bigger than ourselves.”

New Dragon on the Block

Saint Martin’s recently received an official handcrafted wooden dragon racing boat from the Port of Seattle, which was in the process of deaccessioning its maritime museum collection. The 46-foot long vessel, crafted in China, weighs about 550 pounds. It has a five-foot-tail dragon head with horns, whiskers, and teeth, as well as a four-foot tail, a gong and drum, and paddles for 22 to 24 people. Traditional boats have 12 benches with two paddlers per bench, plus steer person and caller, for a total of 26. The boat currently resides next to the Charneski Recreation Center.