

PADDLING FOR PINK: STRENGTH IN COMMUNITY AND SURVIVORSHIP



Paddles up! The Mammoglam Dragon Boat Racing Team practices paddling technique near Jacksonville Beach, Florida.

BREAST CANCER SURVIVORS FIND KINSHIP, SUPPORT AND THERAPY THROUGH DRAGON BOAT RACING

By Lauren Carpenter, PharmD, Shawny Eugene, PharmD, MS, MBA, & Ginger Blackmon, PharmD

The Mammoglam story begins with one simple but powerful idea: Survivorship does not end when treatment does.

Founded in 2011 by two-time cancer survivor Jeri Millard, the Mammoglam were born from a desire to create a space where breast cancer survivors could reclaim strength, confidence and community through movement. What started as an effort to bring a dragon boat team to Jacksonville, Florida, quickly grew into



Lauren Carpenter

something much larger.

Today, the Mammoglam are part of the Jacksonville Dragon Boat Club, a thriving organization with teams for cancer survivors, women, men and mixed paddlers. With more than 15 years of dragon boat racing experience, the Mammoglam have grown



Shawny Eugene

exponentially, not just by team member size, but community involvement.

Yet at their core, the Mammoglam remain exactly what they sought out to be, a floating support group that encourages anyone affected by breast cancer to gather, share stories, and educate the community.

AN ATHLETE RECONNECTING

Millard's vision was shaped by experience. The cancer survivor, who lives with long-term physical limitations following prior injury and surgery, understood firsthand that not everybody recovers the same way. Dragon boating was one of the few forms of exercise that allowed her to reconnect with her identity as an athlete.

Sitting low in the boat, paddling forward, using the full body in rhythm with others, she found something that

CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE



Ginger Blackmon

DRAGON BOAT

CONTINUED FROM PREVIOUS PAGE

felt both physically possible and emotionally freeing. That experience became the foundation of the Mammoglam.

Alongside this work, Millard also leads In the Pink, a nonprofit boutique based in Jacksonville Beach, Florida, that is grounded in an inspirational business model, serving men, women and children with all types of cancer. In the Pink not only supports cancer patients after they leave the clinic, but during their treatment journey.

In the Pink's services include wig fittings, prosthetics, compression garments for lymphedema, and other essential activities under one "pink" roof. Notably, the organization accepts various insurance payers and ensures that patients without coverage still receive what they need at no cost.

Together, In the Pink and the Mammoglam represent a continuum of survivorship support that extends far beyond traditional medical treatment.

STRONGER TOGETHER

Pam Reckner, an analyst with University of Florida Health, joined the Mammoglam as a paddler and now serves as a team captain and leader within the club.

In addition to training and racing, Reckner helps coordinate the organizational backbone of the team, from race planning and fundraising to communications, recruitment and social support.

Like many Mammoglam, Reckner balances this role alongside a full-time career, volunteering countless hours to ensure that no paddler is ever left behind.

Dragon boating is a team-based recreational sport that demands coordination, trust and collective effort. Each 12-meter boat carries 10 to 20 paddlers seated side by side, working in perfect synchronization as coordinated upper-body strokes drive the boat forward through the water. A drummer sits at



The Mammoglam Dragon Boat Racing Team prepares to compete at the International Breast Cancer Paddlers Commission Dragon Boat Festival in Sarasota, Florida.

Dragon boating is a team-based recreational sport that demands coordination, trust and collective effort.

the front of the boat, calling cadence and race strategy, while a steersperson or helm guides the boat from the back and ensures safety remains at the forefront of this activity.

Traditionally made from teak wood, the dragon boat design originated in Southern China and is commonly referred to as the Chinese Dragon Boat due to its long-bodied, dragon-like appearance when decorated for races.

With roots in China dating back more than 2,000 years, the sport has evolved into one of the world's fastest-growing water sports. Its international rise began with the first global race in Hong Kong in the 1970s.

Today, dragon boat racing is practiced worldwide, with competitions held at the state, regional, national and international levels each year.¹

CONNECTIONS WITH BREAST CANCER

So how does dragon boat racing relate to breast cancer? The two are more interconnected than it may appear. Survivors of cancer are at an increased

risk of such mental health issues as anxiety, depression, distress and fear of recurrence. These can persist long after diagnosis and treatment. For many years, there were no standardized guidelines for the management of survivorship of breast cancer.

Dragon boat racing's connection to breast cancer survivorship began in the late 1990s, when Don McKenzie, MD, PhD, a sports medicine physician in Canada, challenged long-standing assumptions that breast cancer survivors should avoid strenuous upper-body activity. His research demonstrated that repetitive, progressive upper-body exercise could be safe and beneficial, even for those at high risk for lymphedema.²

His brainstorm: Begin a breast cancer dragon boat team. The first, named Abreast in a Boat, launched in 1996 in Vancouver, British Columbia. The 24 women proved that the cancer survivors could not only participate in upper-body exercises but thrive physically and mentally.² Today, Abreast in a Boat has celebrated more than 30 years of dragon boating racing and is actively recruiting more members by the day.

PHYSICAL AND EMOTIONAL BENEFITS

For the Mammoglam, the benefits are both physical and emotional. Dragon boating engages the entire body, including the arms, core, legs and cardiovascular system. Dragon boating has been associated with improvements in health-related quality of life and

CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE



The Mammoglam Dragon Boat Racing Team poses at Windward Beach Marine in Jacksonville Beach.

DRAGON BOAT

CONTINUED FROM PREVIOUS PAGE

psychosocial well-being among breast cancer survivors.³ The repetitive motion supports lymphatic flow, helps maintain or improve range of motion and builds strength over time. Each paddler hinges their hips toward the person in front of them, at the same angle the paddle is held. Each paddler takes a deep breath as they drive the paddle into the water, syncing with each teammate's move.

Reckner speaks openly about her own recovery, describing how dragon boating helped her regain full arm mobility after treatment-related complications. Though years have passed, she still credits paddling to her mobility in oncology follow-up visits.

Millard sees new paddlers arrive guarded, hesitant, unsure of their bodies and themselves. Internal perceptions of cancer vary by individuals, some expressing their feelings and emotions outwards, while others internalize this experience, keeping their feelings private. Over time, as members paddle together, something shifts. Confidence returns, laughter becomes easier. Recent research has demonstrated that participation in dragon boat racing may improve body image and reduce traumatic stress symptoms among breast cancer survivors.⁴

Head coach Marty Millard compares the transformation to butterflies undergoing metamorphosis, a metaphor deeply

meaningful to the team.

A COMMON BOND

While dragon boat racing is often seen as a fun and competitive sport, what makes Mammoglam truly unique is that every member shares a common bond: a breast cancer diagnosis. The team emphasizes positivity, mutual support and respect for each individual's journey.

On the water, the steersperson is responsible for making sure the paddlers are safe, paddling in a rhythm, counting breaths and calling out reminders about technique.

For the paddlers, communication is critical. The drive through the water relies heavily on synchronous paddling. When one member is down, the team must work together to encourage each other and provide extra support or power where needed.

At the end of the day, it is not about winning but rather showing support for one another, and the Mammoglam illustrate this exceptionally. Once practice or the race ends, team members huddle together, discussing their highs and lows, strengths and weaknesses, and action plans on how they can improve.

TOGETHER THROUGH IT ALL

Off the water, the team is more than a group of individuals who practice a few times a week together. Members rally around one another during surgeries, losses, milestones and celebrations. They organize food trains for the community,

attend appointments with one another (for good updates or bad), celebrate birthdays or exciting life changes, and even grieve together when a teammate passes.

One of the most meaningful moments shared by the team was honoring a beloved paddler by spreading her ashes on the water where she trained. Teammates — who had become family — surrounded the scene in boats.

For healthcare professionals, the Mammoglam offer a reminder that survivorship is about more than remission. If or when treatment ends, many patients are left asking, "What comes next?" Are they free from chemotherapy, office appointments, blood draws?

In reality, physical limitations, emotional isolation and loss of purpose are common responses after going through a grueling experience. Those real, raw, feelings and questions are sometimes difficult for healthcare professionals to answer.

No one can attest to the story, other than someone who has lived through it. Social communities like the Mammoglam provide a tangible answer. With organized exercises, peer support and group collaboration, members ultimately get what they were searching for all along, which is a sense of belonging.

MORE THAN JUST RECREATION

Ultimately, dragon boat racing offers far more than a recreational

CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE

DRAGON BOAT

CONTINUED FROM PREVIOUS PAGE

activity. It creates opportunities for connection, healing and shared purpose, and remains accessible to individuals in communities around the world. Participation is open to all, with no requirement to be a patient, athlete, cancer survivor or have a personal connection to cancer.

The Mammoglamms welcome everyone, inviting individuals from all walks of life to paddle with intention and community. For those seeking education, belonging, or support, the team offers free ride-along opportunities to anyone curious about stepping into the boat, emotionally or physically. The Mammoglamms exemplify how movement, teamwork and community can play a meaningful role in survivorship and beyond.

▲ **Lauren Carpenter**, PharmD, RPh, is a Postdoctoral Associate and Fellow in the Department of Pharmacy Education and Practice at the University of Florida College of Pharmacy, and a pharmacist at Cancer Specialists of North Florida, LLC. She lives in Jacksonville, Florida. **Shawny R. Eugene**, PharmD, MBA, MS, is an Oncology, Advocacy, Health Policy and Equity Fellow at NCODA. She lives in Davie, Florida. **Ginger Blackmon**, PharmD, is Associate Director of Clinical Excellence for NCODA. She lives in Jacksonville Beach, Florida.

REFERENCES

1. International Dragon Boat Federation. History and culture. Accessed February 19, 2026 <https://www.idbf.org>.
2. McKenzie DC. Abreast in a boat a race against breast cancer. *CMAJ*. 1998;159(4):376-378.
3. Ray HA, Verhoef MJ. Dragon boat racing and health related quality of life of breast cancer survivors: a mixed methods evaluation. *BMC Complement Altern Med*. 2013;13:205. Published August 5, 2013. doi:10.1186/1472-6882-13-205.
4. Fioretti C, Coppola S, Boscaino S, Celia G, Vastola R, Cozzolino M. The effectiveness of Dragon Boat racing on body image and traumatic symptoms of breast cancer patients. *Health Psychol Res*. 2024;12:120055. Published June 22, 2024. doi:10.52965/001c.120055.



Lauren Carpenter (left) and Ginger Blackmon take their seats aboard the Mammoglamms Dragon Boat.

TIME TO FACE THE DRAGON: FUN, FITNESS & LOTS OF NEW FRIENDS

We experienced that sense of belonging firsthand during a slightly chilly Florida morning paddle with the Mammoglamms.

What began as curiosity quickly became something much more meaningful. Fitted with personal flotation devices and paddles, team members gathered indoors first, mingling and sharing stories before walking together toward the boat.

Once seated, the coaches carefully reviewed proper form and technique. The start was intentionally slow, with frequent pauses to refine positioning and movement.

As the boat pushed off, the team was greeted by birds winging over the intracoastal waters. The peaceful stillness made the early hour feel almost sacred.

It quickly became clear that dragon boating is demanding work, requiring significant core strength and coordination.

“Do not wear out your arms, use your core,” the coaches reminded paddlers again and again. Gradually, confidence grew and the pace intensified. On the return, paddling against the tide, strokes became faster and more powerful. By the time the boat reached shore, everyone was worn out, but in the best possible way.

The morning ended with a vibrant fruit platter, easy conversation and plans for brunch at a local diner. What remained most striking was not the physical exertion, but the unmistakable encouragement that filled the boat.

The Mammoglamms are motivating, welcoming, and strong, offering a powerful reminder that survivorship is not simply about moving forward, but about moving forward together.

Their message is simple: “We’ve won the battle, now let’s paddle!”

— Lauren Carpenter & Ginger Blackmon