

Dragon Boat Race Festivals

The purpose of this document is to give you, an aspiring racer, some information about dragon boat races and a general idea of what to expect at a festival. Please note that this information comes from my experience and there are lots of races and festivals out there, each with its own unique traditions, race course, venue, etc.

The Festival

One of your first questions may be, "I thought we were going to a race. Why is it called a festival?" The answer comes from Wikipedia, the encyclopedia of all things as we know them today (said in jest).

The Dragon Boat Festival (Duanwu Festival, Duānwǔ Jié, Double Fifth, Tuen Ng Jit) is a traditional holiday that commemorates the life and death of the famous Chinese scholar Qu Yuan (Chu Yuan). The festival occurs on the fifth day of the fifth month on the Chinese lunisolar calendar. Not understanding the significance of Duanwu, 19th-century European observers of the racing ritual referred to the spectacle as a "dragon boat festival". This is the term that has become known in the West.

Dragon boat festivals are generally multi-day affairs filled with not only races but also rituals, entertainment, dragon or lion dances, and vendors. Generally there is an opening ceremony. This may include an 'awakening the dragon' ceremony. In this ceremony, the eyes on the dragon boat heads are dotted with a brush dipped in red paint. Doing so symbolizes the dragon ending its slumber and re-energizing its spirit. There may also be a dragon or lion dance, accompanied by drummers as well as other entertainment throughout the day. There are also vendors selling food, paddles, butt pads, sunglasses, t-shirts, paddle clothes, junk, etc. Most festivals have commemorative t-shirts for sale.

If you can, take in the opening ceremony of the festival. And before the racing starts for the day, head to the marshalling area to check out the boats. It never disappoints to see them all lined up ready to race with their heads, tails, and drums.



The boats ready to race

The Venue

The venues are quite large. Besides the race course, a venue typically has an area set aside for the teams, a race viewing area, a vendor area, and at some venues a stage for entertainment. Some venues are permanent racing facilities with grandstands.

If a venue has a covered area for teams, each team is allocated a share of space. If the venue does not have a covered area, teams bring their own easy-up tents. Each paddler is responsible for bringing his/her own chair or towel on which to sit.

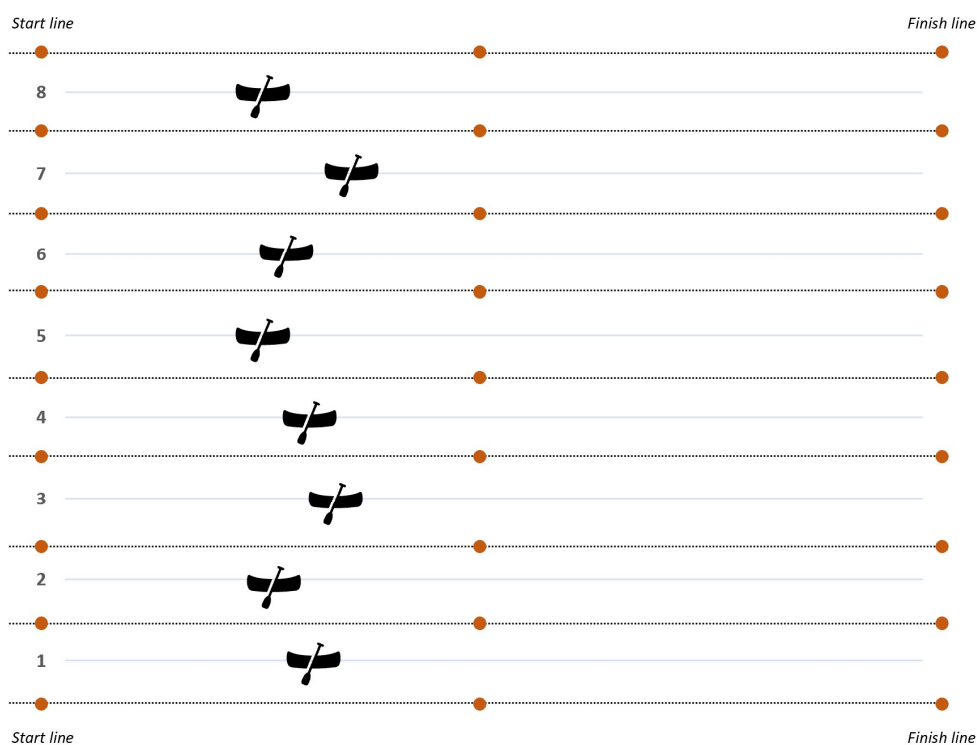
While food is generally sold at the venue, teams typically bring in their own food and drinks. We bring a variety of food, mostly lunch items, and water. Each paddler is asked to pay a small fee to help with the cost. If you have special dietary needs you may need to make arrangements to bring your own food/drink for the weekend.

Equipment

The race organizers provide the all of the boats for the races. That's a lot of boats. They also have paddles and life jackets (PFDs) available for use. The paddles are wood and the PFDs can be a bit bulky. The loaner paddles and PFDs are not yours for the festival. You use it for your race and then return them to the piles once you finish your heat. The PFDs are pretty wet by the end of the day. It is always best to bring your own equipment if possible.

The Race Course

The festivals in which we compete generally have a race course comprised of lanes. The number of race lanes depends on the size of the festival as well as the size of the waterway. Each boat is required to stay in its lane. The lanes are demarcated by a string of small buoys, with larger buoys used as distance markers.



When competing in multiple heats for the same race division, teams are assigned a different lane for each subsequent heat. This is to account for the advantages one lane may have over another. Items that may make a lane more advantageous are depth of the water, current, wind, etc. In the championship rounds, the lanes are assigned based on the standings.

Some festivals have divisions that are not conducted in lanes.



A dragon boat race in a river. No lane lines.

The Start and Finish Lines

A line of buoys is used to mark the start and finish lines.

The start line may have baskets or platforms (or nothing) to align the boats. If it has baskets, each steersperson has to get his/her dragon's head into the basket. Once the horn sounds the baskets disappear into the water. If there is a platform, a race volunteer stands on the platform and holds onto the dragon tail until the horn sounds. If there is nothing, the steerspersons really have their work cut out for them lining up the boats and keeping them in place.



A start line with baskets.



A start line with a platform.

The Parts of the Race

Once the starting horn sounds, there are three parts to the race. These are the **start**, the **body**, and the **finish**. Each team will have a strategy it follows through each of these parts.

The Start

The steerspersons bring the boats to the start line. Once boats are aligned, the **start** may come quickly or not so quickly. You never know until the starter says he/she has alignment. The actual calls from the starter vary festival to festival. The organizer tells the teams the calls in the pre-meeting. (The calls go something like: Paddlers, we have alignment! Are you ready?! Attention please! Start horn sounds.)

In the **start** you want to get the boat up out of the water and moving (that is, break the surface tension of the water). Some teams start out with slow strokes followed by a series of faster strokes, some start out with fast strokes. The start can make or break how a team finishes.

The Body

The **body** of the race is generally slower strokes. Again, every team has its strategy. During the **body**, the drummer may ask for power sets or for the stokers to adjust the rate. You have to be listening to the drummer and watching the stokers. You may hear the term, “keep your eyes in the boat.” This means that the only thing you should be looking at from start to finish is the stokers (or if you are in the back half of the boat the paddler that you are following). Even a peek at the competition can throw the timing off, and in this sport timing is everything.

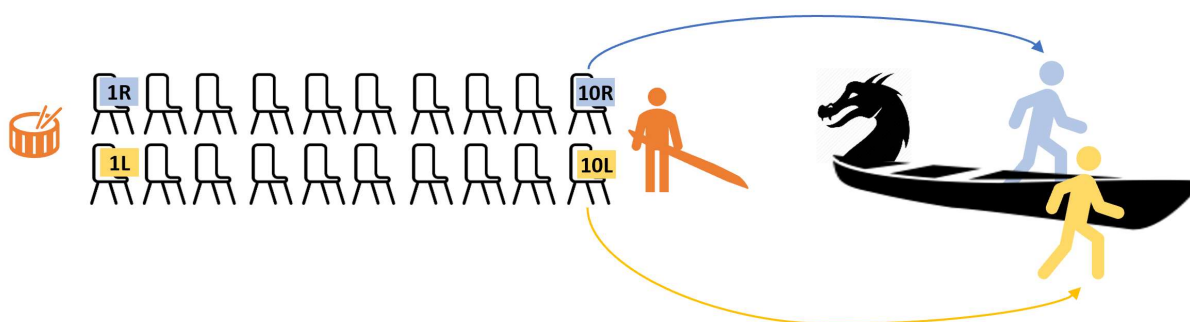
The Finish

In the **finish** part of the race, the drummer will yell “finish it now!” This means to increase the stroke rate until the boat has crossed the finish line. You need to make sure that you continue to apply power at the higher rate or you’ll just be spinning your wheels. In a close race, the **finish** can be long if the boats are neck-and-neck. Give it your all until the drummer tells you otherwise. Races can be decided by 100ths of a second!

Marshalling

Marshalling means to assemble in order. In dragon boat racing, it means lining up to load the boats for racing. To keep the heats moving along and the races somewhat on schedule (because let’s face it, the schedule always gets tweaked) the marshalling area will have a set of chairs for each lane. You advance from the chairs to the boats. Marshalling is generally two-heats deep, meaning that the next two heats are ready to go.

In the marshalling area you sit in the chairs in mirror image of where you are in the boat so that when you actually load you are in your seat. For example, if you are in seat 10 on the right in the boat, you will sit in the front left chair in the marshalling area so that you are the first to load the boat. It seems confusing until you get into your chair. And don’t sweat the details, you’ll have plenty of people telling you where to go.

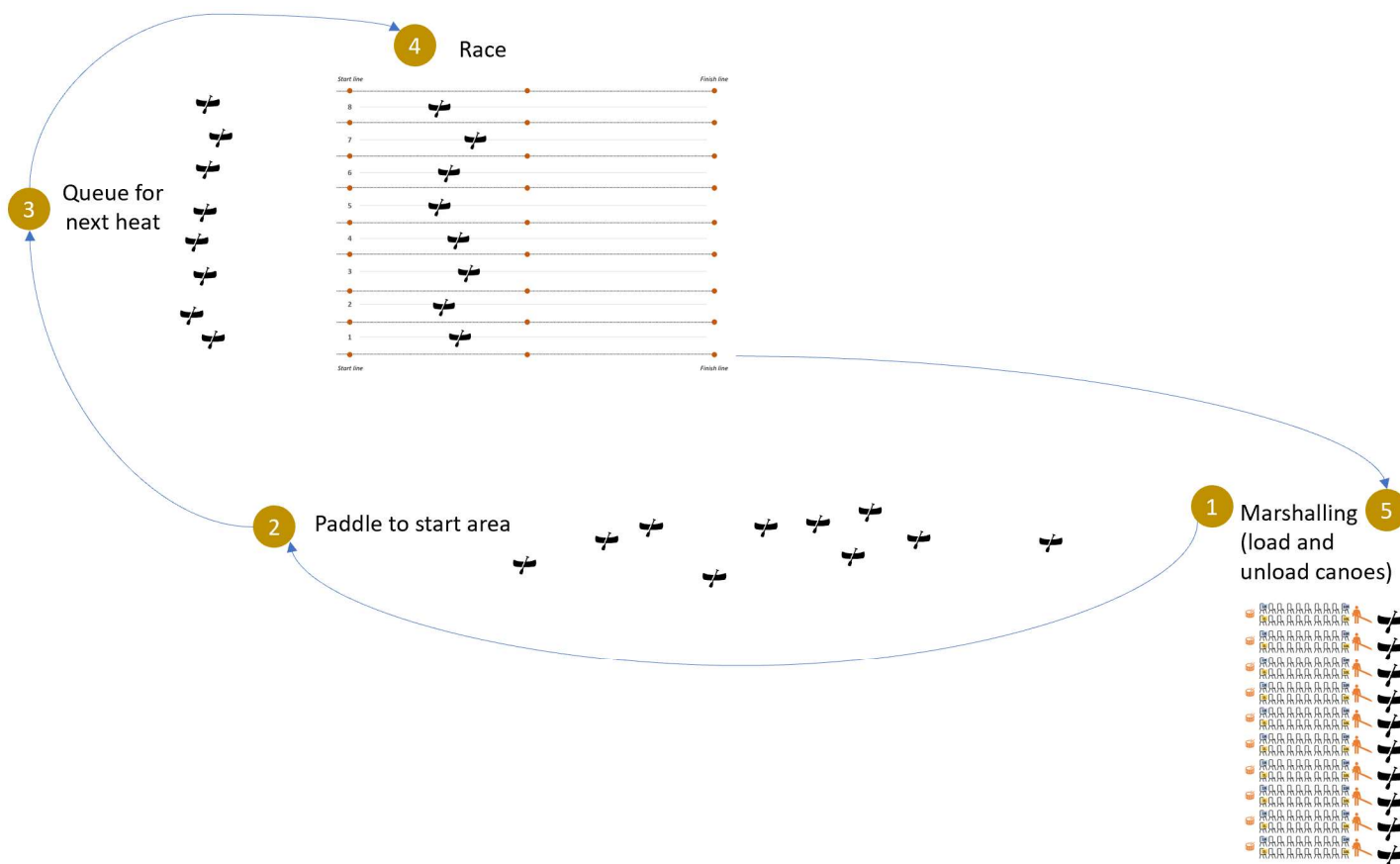


Teams are called into marshalling based on the heat number. This means that you have to be in the marshalling area well in advance of your scheduled heat time. We use this time to talk strategy, warm-up, and start focusing on the race.

The marshalling area can be fun. You get to meet paddlers from other teams, hear their team cheers, sing along to music and maybe bust out a few dance moves.

Marshalling to Racing

Once you load the boat in the marshalling area, your full focus and attention needs to be in the boat. The only talk should be the steersperson and drummer giving commands. If you are given a command do it without hesitation. This is particularly critical when lining up for the start. If there is wind or current the task of getting the boat lined up for the start can be tricky.



Race Division, Class, and Distance

Race divisions, classes, and distances depend upon the festival.

Age Division

Age division defines the age limits of competitors.

- Premier - the primary class of racing. There are no restrictions on competitor's age.
- Senior A, B, C – these divisions are restricted based on the competitor's age. Senior A is over 40. Senior B is over 50. Senior C is over 60. You can race up in the divisions but you cannot race down. For example, if you are 61-years-old you can compete in Senior A, B, or C. But if you are 43-years-old you can only compete in Senior A.
- Children/Youth – The children's division is about one of the cutest things you'll see. Sometimes their paddles barely reach the water. The festival may label these division based on age restriction. For example, Under 12 or Under 18.

Special Divisions

Festivals may also have special divisions. Examples are:

- High school
- College
- Corporate

Class

Racing class determines crew composition.

- Open – no restriction on crew composition (gender). Generally the crews are completely male, but you do see boats with women in the crew (and not just as the steersperson or drummer)
- Mixed – requires a minimum number of women in the crew.
- Women – crew is restricted to women only.

Distances

Standard race distances are listed below. Other distances may be offered at a festival.

- 500 meters – the most common racing distance.
- 200 meters – an all-out sprint.
- 1000 meters – if a festival is offering a 1000 meter distance, it is usually a straight shot of 1000 meters.
- 2000 meters – this race is normally held on a 500-meter course, requiring teams to do two loops. Teams start and end at the same end of the course, and complete three 180-degree turns. Because of the turn, this race is a staggered start. Each team starts 10-15 seconds after the previous team. There are no lanes. The winner is determined once all teams have completed the course.

There are other distances including 5000 and 10000 meter races but these are not common at most festivals. Longer races may be conducted point-to-point down a water way. Point-to-point distance races do not have lane markers.

A festival may also have specialty races such as a "Guts & Glory" or a "Knockout" race. These offer a fun alternative to the traditional races. For example, a Guts & Glory race may be a 2500 meter race conducted on a 500 meter race course. This means the race has six turns!



A turn in a Guts & Glory race.

Cancer Race Classes

Dragon boating and breast cancer have a unique connection due to the benefits that paddling has for recovering from breast cancer surgery. Many festivals offer race classes specifically for Breast Cancer Survivors (BCS) and/or All Cancer Survivors (ACS). All paddlers must be survivors, and many festivals require all cancer survivors to be women. Some festivals make exceptions for the drummer and steersperson.

To go along with the BCS race, the festival may have a flower ceremony. During this ceremony, all of the BCS teams load into boats and paddle out to face the crowd. Each paddler is given a flower. Words are spoken to acknowledge the survivors and all those that have been affected by cancer. At the end of the ceremony, the flowers are tossed into the water and the boats return to the marshalling area. As the paddlers leave the dock area they are greeted and congratulated by their fellow competitors.



Flower ceremony in Sarasota

The Competition

The competition is a series of heats. There may be one or more rounds of preliminary heats to determine which teams move into which championship brackets. The festival may use finish time or finish place to determine how teams advance.

To illustrate how this works, let's say we are competing at a festival that has six racing lanes. One of our races is the 500 meters in the Mixed division and there are 17 teams in our division. The festival organizers have decided that each team will compete in two preliminary heats, with the combined times from both heats used to determine the seeding in the championship brackets. Because there are only six racing lanes and 17 teams, each preliminary round will require three heats (6+6+5=17 teams). That equates to six heats to determine the seeding. Our team has been assigned #13. Looking at the schedule our heats are Heat 3 and Heat 29.

500 meter Mixed First Preliminary Round	Heat 1	Teams 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6
	Heat 2	Teams 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12
	Heat 3	Teams 13, 14, 15, 16, 17
500 meter Mixed Second Preliminary Round	Heat 27	Teams 1, 8, 15, 4, 5, 16
	Heat 28	Teams 7, 14, 9, 10, 6, 12
	Heat 29	Teams 13, 2, 3, 11, 17

The combined times from the two heats are used to seed the championship rounds.

If our times were 2:30.02 in the first heat and 2:37.05 in the second heat, our combined time would be 5:07.05. In this example, our time is 8th overall which puts us into the B final.

Prelims Place	Final	Team	Combined Time
1	A	Team 12	4:30.04
2	A	Team 6	4:33.01
3	A	Team 17	4:39.77
4	A	Team 6	4:42.34
5	A	Team 5	4:58.37
6	A	Team 2	5:01.88
7	B	Team 15	5:06.19
8	B	Team 13	5:07.05
9	B	Team 9	5:07.26
10	B	Team 10	5:09.31
11	B	Team 16	5:09.76
12	B	Team 1	5:10.11
13	C	Team 4	5:12.53
14	C	Team 14	5:13.06
15	C	Team 7	5:13.99
16	C	Team 11	5:14.72
17	C	Team 3	5:18.03

Finals are one heat. If we have the fastest time in our final heat we are the 500 Mixed B Division champions. That's gold, baby!

A racer does not have to compete in all heats. A team is allowed to use any racer on its roster that meets the division requirements (age, gender, cancer). If, for a division, we had two preliminary heats and one final heat, you could race in all three, just one or both prelims, or just the final. That is the coach's decision. If we are competing in several divisions you could be racing in many heats per day. That's why fitness is important. Fitness helps prevent injury and gives the team the best chance of winning.