

Visually impaired team featured in film

Eye of the Dragon was the first disabled group to take part in the competition

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Vancouver residents and visitors may want to turn their attention from the ice to the water this weekend.

If so, they'll be joining more than 100,000 fans and nearly 5,000 paddlers for the 23rd annual Rio Tinto Alcan Dragon Boat Festival on False Creek Saturday and Sunday.

While all of the teams will be sweating and pulling with equal effort, two groups of paddlers are chasing victory minus a particular sense: the ability to see.

One team, Eye of the Dragon, established in 1994, was the first disabled team to compete at the festival.

"Since then, lots of other teams with disabilities have formed," said head coach Dan Hebert.

This year they're joined by a second visually impaired team known as Vision Impossible.

Hebert said Eye of the Dragon -which tends to beat 70-80 per cent of able-bodied teams -depends on rhythm and feeling to achieve victory. The visually impaired paddlers are matched with sighted teammates for tasks such as getting in and out of the boat, but "once you're in the boat, you don't need to see," said Hebert.

Success in a dragon boat is all about hard work, he said.

Eye of the Dragon's story will unfold on the water this weekend, but also on screen.

Adding to this year's free races and live music entertainment will be the first Dragon Boat Film Festival, giving viewers deeper insight into the captivating sport and its participants.

One of the films, We Can't See You Beating Us, takes viewers into the lives of four of the paddlers from Eye of the Dragon as they face everyday challenges and the heat of competition while their eyesight deteriorated.

Filmmaker Adelina Suvagau said the story is about adaptation and the "spirit of competition," of which Eye of the Dragon has boatloads.

None of the four paddlers featured in the film were born blind, but all suffered varying loss of sight during early adulthood. Equipped with video cameras, the paddlers told their individual stories.

From bitterly cold early morning training sessions in February to the routines of day-to-day life, the film and its characters show that losing a sense does not temper the will to win.

Dragon boating is a unique sport, said Yvonne Stewart, one of the paddlers featured in the film. She also shot some of the footage.

"Dragon boating doesn't require vision at all," she said.

"It's about pulling hard." Stewart, a team member for seven years, said her team may even benefit in the races from their disability. Eye of the Dragon is less likely to be distracted during the races, she said.

The festival -based around the Olympic athletes' village at the foot of Ontario Street -welcomes 180 teams and pushes off Friday afternoon with a traditional blessing of the race course by members of the Evergreen Taoist Church that includes the mounting of the dragon heads.

The races begin Saturday at 8 a.m. with the championship races on Sunday afternoon.

Live music will play throughout the weekend and the films can be viewed at the Creekside Community Centre on a rotating basis.

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AT A GLANCE

Rio Tinto Alcan Dragon Boat Festival

Where: False Creek, near Science World, and Creekside Community Centre

When: Saturday and Sunday; Races at 8 a.m., site activities from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m.

Info: www.dragonboatbc.ca

Admission: Free