

# Sports Beat Dragon Boat

# Eyes of the Dragon

By Bob Mina, Triathlete,  
Author, and Juggler

It's not every day you're handed a blindfold and told, "Here. Put this on, and don't move." Thankfully, I knew this was a pretty low-risk request – I wasn't in a bank lobby or U.S. Embassy, but rather standing at the back of Lloyd Hall, looking down towards the Dragon Boat Susanna Foo. As part of my previous seasons practicing and racing with the Wyeth Wyverns, I'd paddled this boat at least 20 times, so she was familiar to me. However, that familiarity was certainly about to become a distant memory.

This would be my first practice with the "Eyes of the Dragon" team, a second-year group preparing for the 2006 Philadelphia Dragon Boat Festival. I had been invited to join them by their founder (and festival organizer) Carol Lee Lindner, and despite my experience in paddling, I was a little bit nervous. Now that I had the blindfold on, that little bit nervous was rapidly approaching "I've showed up naked during a final exam" levels. I was trying to remember just how many steps it was down to the dock. Then I remembered the 3-foot drop from the rock wall onto the dock. Adding to that, I realized I'd put my blindfold on before getting a paddle, and figuring out just how I was going to get TO the boat.

"All sighted paddlers have to be blindfolded..." Carol Lee explained to me via email. "That's the only way to really understand what the experience is really like." I'd only been an honorary blind person for 45 seconds, and already I'd broken a sweat. At least since it was close to 90 degrees; I could hide that part.

Then I realized how stupid I was being; hide what? The teammates here would be the last ones to tell me anything about how I looked. As the only blind Dragon Boat Team racing in Philadelphia (and probably the East Coast), I was just "Bob." I just hoped I sounded good to them.

"Ready to go?" Someone took my hand – Carol Lee had asked the Siemens Team to assist us in getting down to the boat. I said, "Sure, but I need a paddle..." THWACK. A paddle instantly landed in my left hand. That was fast. "I need a blonde." Nothing. I tried again. "I need a beer?" Nope. Dang. It was worth a shot. At least I had a blade. My guide, somewhat amused, started leading me down the steps.

It took me 3 times as long as usual, and I ended up just sitting down on the stone wall and dropping onto the dock, but I settled

into Stroke Left on Susanna Foo. Seated next to me was Mike, a first-year paddler. We would be the 'stroke pair' for the practice, which meant we would be responsible for setting the tempo for the entire boat.

Of course, I had never paddled stroke before, but I knew that it would be okay. The coach at Wyeth had been telling me for years, "When you're in the boat, you're a mindless moron. Don't look – don't think, just paddle." I would just listen to Carol Lee, the drummer, and the boat. And again, I reminded myself, if my stroke looked like a complete mess...well, Carol Lee and I would be the only ones to know it.

As we pushed off the dock and Carol Lee commanded, "PAD-DLE!" I listened to the drumbeat. I had wondered just how one could teach a sightless team something as complicated as a Dragon Boat stroke. This isn't just paddling a canoe; the Dragon Boat stroke is a complex dance-step of core strength, power, and timing. Each component of the stroke has its own mechanics: The straight arms and twisted torso of the reach; the downward drive and power of the catch; the un-rushed (but hurried) twist of the drive; finally you get the smooth (but fast) recovery without wasted effort to start the cycle once more. Within the first 10 seconds, I understood.

**"Reach!"**

**"Kiss the water!"**

**"Check the deodorant!"**

**"Sit up!"**

**"Reach!"**

**"Kiss the water!"**

**"Check the deodorant!"**

**"Sit up!"**

**"Reach!"**

I could feel what the boat was doing right away. I could tell when the timing was off port-to-starboard, as we'd rock just a bit each way. I could feel when the power was good and together, as the boat surged on each stroke. While I'd never felt it before, now I knew that the boat was always talking back, and we would listen as Carol Lee worked to keep us all together.

I thought that the one-hour practice would be spent mostly on technique – refining the stroke, polishing the timing. Mistake number one: Underestimating just how hard the Eyes of the Dragon would work. “Pyramid time!” Sang Carol Lee. We worked a pyramid drill (10 hard, 10 easy, 20 hard, 20 easy), up to 50. Then we did some practice starts. I think about 5 or 6, and not easy starts: Honest to goodness, gut busting starts.

Mike was working hard next to me, calling off the stroke count on each one. I did that for a while, but then I realized I could count or paddle – not both. Not enough oxygen in Bob to make that happen. After our last start Carol Lee called out, “Let it run!” Magic words to a boat – that means you can stop paddling and just let the boat glide.

Everyone was breathing hard, and there was a slight breeze coming off the water – some relief for a muggy July night. I tried to figure out where we were – I just listened. I thought I could hear a bridge nearby – ahead. Maybe Falls Bridge? Maybe Strawberry Mansion? I asked Carol Lee, “Are we headed upstream, or down?”

Mike answered instantly, “We’re headed back towards Lloyd Hall. You can hear the Schuylkill Expressway on the right. It has a different sound than Kelly Drive. You’re hearing the twin bridges.” He was right – I hadn’t picked that up. There was a bagpiper, too. I asked Mike, “Bagpipes? Or am I that tired?”

“No, those are real.” He said.

As we made our way back towards Lloyd Hall, Carol Lee said, “Guys, it’s a perfect night out here. The sunset is just fantastic.” From the back of the boat someone asked, “Carol Lee, what’s it like? Can you describe what you’re seeing?”

Carol Lee paused, and then described everything she could see. The warmth of the skies, the greens of the trees on Kelly Drive. The lights sparkling on the Cira Center and Center City. It was a picture I’d seen before, but now it was more alive – more vivid. I didn’t cheat – I didn’t lift the blindfold. I didn’t need to.

There was one more thing to do this practice – a full 500-meter race simulation. The previous week the team had done its first of the season, but that one wasn’t planned. That’s what happens when you’re on the river and a severe thunderstorm starts chasing your boat.

“Never saw whitecaps on the river before...” said Carol Lee, “...and I was never so proud of this team. They never moved the boat so well!”

As we got ready to start, I reached forward and buried my paddle in the water. Suddenly I felt a set of arms stretching me even farther; Carol Lee said, “If I was your coach, I’d tell you to reach more.” The whole practice I thought she was right in front of me (she wasn’t); I was being tentative so I wouldn’t hit her. I had so much to learn about where I was...

Carol Lee called off the start sequence, and the entire team buried itself into the last 500 meters of the day. The early side-to-side rocking from practice was gone – I could feel the pulls coming together. I also remembered just how long 2 minutes could be when you’re at race pace (nearly eternal). That meant to me that this boat had it together – this boat was moving. Any thoughts I had that this would be an ‘easy’ paddle were sweated out, panted away, and left behind in the wake fanning out behind Susanna Foo.

As we approached the dock, Carol Lee told me, “This team isn’t going to be left behind this year.” Even with my blindfold on, I didn’t need to look up to know just how proud she was, and to know how true that statement really was.

On October 7, 2006, I can’t wait to feel how we do. On invitation from Carol Lee I’ll be joining the team for their races, blindfolded all the way, and hopefully remembering to reach far enough to not get in trouble from the coach again.

In one practice, I learned that this isn’t a boat of blind paddlers. This isn’t a team without sight – this is a team with total vision and focus. This is a team that doesn’t need to see.

They know exactly where they’re going, and what they’re going to do.



## The 5th Annual Philadelphia International Dragon Boat Festival Saturday, October 7, 2006 [www.philadragonboatfestival.com](http://www.philadragonboatfestival.com)

1. First race goes off at 7:00 AM.
2. Festival will end at 5:30 PM.
3. The time of the first race for every team will be posted on website one week prior to the event. The 2nd and 3rd races will be posted on a race results board, which will be at Gillen’s Boat House (St. Joseph’s Boat House)
4. Spectators will be directed to Fairmount Park for parking. The fee for parking is \$7.00.
5. Six shuttle buses will be running throughout the day to take spectators from the parking area to the race course.
6. Vendors – food, reflexologist, booksigning and sale of books with Dr. Nicholas A. DiNubile’s author of FrameWork.
7. Music throughout the day by DJ Howard.
8. Handicapped parking will be available.
9. The event will take place rain or shine.