

ASU Dragon Boat Club combines camaraderie, tradition

Coming off a Team USA win for the coach, the club welcomes all — no paddling experience needed

By Mary Beth Faller, ASU News
September 18, 2025

A deep drumbeat throbbed over and over as two long boats slid across the surface of Tempe Town Lake at sunset.

Nearly two dozen paddlers strained and sweated to keep up with the drumbeat, which started out slow and steadily picked up speed until the paddles were thrashing the lake water.

The paddlers, members of the [ASU Dragon Boat Club](#), were sharing an activity that has ancient roots, but to them, is also a fun outdoor workout that's created a welcoming social community.

The club, open to all Arizona State University students and alumni, is a low-cost group activity that can range from recreational fun to internationally competitive.

"I like the community part and hanging out with your friends on the boat," said Chloe Gorgue, a second-year student at Arizona State University who's majoring in media arts and sciences. She joined the ASU Dragon Boat Club last year.

"Also, I like the adrenaline of racing — just paddling in the water is really fun."

The club meets twice a week, on Monday nights and Saturday mornings, to take the boats onto Tempe Town Lake. No experience is needed, and all the equipment, including personal flotation devices and paddles, is provided.

An ancient ritual

Dragon boat racing has its roots in a southern Chinese folk ritual dating back 2000 years, according to the International Dragon Boat Federation.

The ASU Dragon Boat Club is under the umbrella of the Asian/Asian Pacific American Students' Coalition and it's also part of the Arizona Dragon Boat Association, which provides the boats the club uses.

Traditional dragon boats are about 38 feet long and hold up 22 people — 20 paddlers, a drummer and a steerer. The ASU club typically practices on smaller, 10-person boats. The boats have dragon scales painted on the side, but the carved dragon head and tail are attached only for competitions and festivals.

The drummer, who sits facing the paddlers, beats out a rhythm. The steerer, who controls the stern, calls out pace and direction commands to the paddlers.

Jeremy Levitt, an ASU alumnus, is the assistant coach of the club and has been a member since 2019, when he was a student. He was drawn by the idea of teamwork.

"Being out in the water in my one-man canoe, it's a sense of just me and the water and nothing else in the world matters," he said.

"When I get into the dragon boat, it's that competitiveness that brings me back. I played hockey as a goalie since I was 4 years old and I'm a very big competitor. Working together as a team is what keeps me coming back."

The club welcomes people with no paddling experience, and skills build quickly, he said.

"I've coached other sports, and this is probably one of the few sports where you see night and day improvement from the very first time they touch the water with their paddle to the end of practice," Levitt said. "And everyone's so nice and welcoming and encouraging of each other."

(Video: {<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rd5M-l72vPI&feature=youtu.be>})

The ASU club collaborates with other local clubs, providing paddlers when needed. The Arizona Dragon Boat Association has clubs for youths, adults, breast cancer survivors and people with disabilities.

Zachary Butler, the head coach of the ASU club, said there's an opportunity to go far in the sport.

In July, he and ASU alumna Micayla Corker represented the university on Team USA at the World Dragon Boat Racing Championships in Germany. Butler's group, men age 24 and younger, won a gold medal in the 1,000-meter race — a first for the U.S.

"Everyone's looking at you, and everyone's telling you all these little minute things that you could be doing better," he said.

According to legend, the sport commemorates a man named Qu Yuan, who, when falsely accused of treason by the Kingdom of Chu, threw himself into the Mi Lo River and drowned. Nearby fishermen raced their boats to recover his body before it could be devoured — beating drums and throwing rice dumplings into the river to distract the fish.

The modern era of dragon boat racing dates to 1976, when the Hong Kong Tourist Association staged a dragon boat festival to promote the city.

“So it's my goal as a coach here to learn from that and bring it back here. Not only to ASU, but to the other dragon boat teams as well.”

The ASU club president is Jonathan Hardy, a second-year accounting major.

Like Gorgue, he found the club at the student organization fair last year, where some members were tabling.

“One thing that really stuck with me is that they had people who were casual all the way to people that have competed with Team USA — representing your nation. That's crazy,” he said.

So he went to a practice and was impressed.

“It's a full-body workout. You're doing your stroke, you need to be using your arms, your abs, your legs and your core to quickly push back.

“What I hope people see with our club is that if you didn't have opportunities growing up to compete in sports, this is a great opportunity to do that,” said Hardy, who enjoyed competing in several out-of-state races against other universities last year.

The club raises money throughout the year to fund travel to the races, raising nearly \$2,000 in its paddle-a-thon last spring.

Getting out onto the water, along with the rhythmic padding, is calming, and the group activity creates a mindfulness.

“There's a lot of time you'll feel as an individual where you're just going through the motions. And then you hear that call, ‘power 10 now,’ and it's like, ‘OK, now I'm coming back as a team.’

“And you hear the drum. You're focused, you're looking forward, you're seeing everyone move together.

“And it brings everyone back together and keeps us going.”

The ASU Dragon Boat Club will participate in the [San Diego International Dragon Boat Race](#) at Mission Bay on Sept. 27–28.

This story originally appeared on [ASU News](#).

Want to join?

ASU students or alumni interested in joining the ASU Dragon Boat Club should visit the club's instagram at [dragonboat_asu](#).

Main image



Members of the ASU Dragon Boat Club, which welcomes members of all abilities, prepare to launch the boats into the water during practice. The boats have dragon scales painted on the side, but the carved dragon head and tail are attached only for competitions and festivals — and visits from ASU News. Photo by EJ Hernandez/ASU News

Text image(s)



The dragon boat used by the ASU Dragon Boat Club has a dragon head with a ball in its mouth, which, according to Chinese mythology, represents wisdom and power.

Gallery



The Dragon Boat Club crew preps a boat at Tempe Town Lake for practice.



About 10 people fit on the smaller boats that the ASU club uses for practicing.



Assistant Coach Jeremy Levitt preps a boat for practice on the Tempe Town Lake. The traditional drums on the boats help the paddlers keep rhythm.



The ASU Dragon Boat Club practices regularly at Tempe Town Lake on Monday nights and Saturday mornings.