

Dragonheart Vermont chooses Mission over Medals, dropping out of championship races for the safety of its members

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After 2 years of focused preparation and training, Dragonheart Vermont's participants overwhelmingly voted to withdraw from the highly anticipated qualifying National races taking place in Sarasota, Florida this October 1-3, thus potentially eliminating their chance to compete at the Club Crew World Championship races slated for July, 2022.

Preparation for the world championship races began in 2018 as the competitive crews of Dragonheart Vermont (DHVT) trained both on land and on the water. Their hard work and dedication paid off in 2019, with 8 crews qualifying for the bi-annual Club Crew World Championship in Aix-les-Bains, France. Sadly but wisely, the 2020 event was canceled due to COVID.

The next World Championship races are taking place in July 2022, requiring all US teams to re-qualify at the Club Crew National Championship races next month in Sarasota, FL. Dragonheart Vermont (DHVT), a nonprofit breast cancer support organization, empowers survivors and supporters with dragon boat paddling programs, promoting fitness, teamwork and community giving. Known in New England as the hosts of the Lake Champlain Dragon Boat Festival, a community event and fundraiser for local cancer-related nonprofits, DHVT is also highly respected in the world-wide dragon boat community as solid athletes, sportsmen/women and devoted supporters of community health and wellness.

"Having success at the national and international level in the world of dragon boating is an incredible accomplishment for us," says Head Coach, Brett Haug. "However, defending our National titles is secondary to the safety and wellness of our members. Our athletes come from diverse backgrounds, ages, professions and approximately one third of us are cancer survivors. Given the growing number of positive COVID cases in Sarasota and limited hospital capacity, we've chosen to put our medal quest on hold. We asked our paddlers what was important and without a doubt, our choice was to minimize the spread of COVID. Everyone in our community has sacrificed so much to make Vermont safe and we choose not to put that safety at risk."

Foregoing the opportunity to compete at Nationals has its price. "We've asked the USDBF (United States Dragon Boat Federation) to adopt safer COVID protocols, including postponing the races until COVID cases dropped and hospital capacity returned to manageable levels, but unfortunately, the new safety protocols couldn't guarantee that one of us wouldn't be carrying COVID or its variants back to Vermont, where we are teachers, caregivers, physicians and family members." Says John Dyer, coach for two crews in the age bracket of 60 years and over. "As much as we love competing, we just can't take that risk." DHVT will lose the opportunity to race against some of the best teams in the US as well forfeiting their registration fees and prepaid travel expenses. "Our greatest loss, however, is the thrill being on the water and racing our friends from other teams. We also recognize that our chance to win a bid to the upcoming world championship races is in jeopardy."

Given DHVT's withdrawal, the contending field of teams continues to get thinner, as other dragon boat teams consider the safety and wellness of their crews. "We can't wait to be back on the water and compete against the many teams from around the United States," says Haug. "Until then, we are just thankful we've been able to practice safely this summer on Lake Champlain."

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