

STARTING FROM 'RUB-A-DUB-DUB AND THREE MEN IN A TUB'

By Sharon Ali Aziz



In October 2006, the waters of Williams Bay, Chaguaramas, came alive with the rhythmic beat of drums, the colourful sight of dragon-headed boats, and the energy of nearly 40 teams paddling through the waters during the day. It was the birth of dragon boat racing in Trinidad and Tobago, timed perfectly with the bicentennial celebration of Chinese arrival to the island. Nearly 20 years later, the festival has grown into one of the country's most unique cultural and sporting events. At its heart is Keith Dalip, long-serving president of the Trinidad and Tobago Dragon Boat Federation, whose personal journey with the sport is as inspiring as the festival itself.

A SERENDIPITOUS BEGINNING

Dalip's introduction to dragon boating came almost by chance. In 2006, he came across a newspaper article announcing the upcoming event. At first, he thought it was similar to the bathtub derbies once held at Williams Bay, in which he had previously taken part. Intrigued, he contacted the organisers to ask what was required to build a boat—only to be told that the boats would be provided. "I spoke to friends and family and cajoled and convinced them that this would be an exciting thing to try," he recalled. "It had culture, sport, and community all rolled into one."

That year, a few boats were shipped in from China with the support of prominent members of the Chinese business community, including Franco Siu Cheong, whose family ties to dragon boating in Canada helped inspire the initiative. The inaugural regatta drew corporate teams, community groups, and casual enthusiasts alike. "It was huge," Dalip said, remembering the energy of the first festival. "We had close to 40 teams, and the crowd was overwhelming."

Training with kayaks and building a movement with no local expertise in the sport, training in the early years was facilitated by the Kayak Centre at Williams Bay.



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