

The festival blends sport with cultural celebration. Spectators are treated not only to the spectacle of the races but also to traditional Chinese lion and dragon dances, fan performances, and authentic Chinese cuisine from pop-up restaurants. The event has also been memorably staged in Tobago, in 2019 when it hosted the Pan American Dragon Boat Championships. "That was the largest sport tourism event ever in Tobago," Dalip said proudly. "Hotels, villas, caterers, taxi drivers - everybody benefitted."

Yet, like many sports, dragon boating has struggled in the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic. Teams dwindled, and numbers have not yet returned to pre-pandemic levels. For 2025, Dalip expects around half of the usual teams to compete. Still, he remains optimistic. "We're trying to re-attract the public, get new people involved, and rebuild," he said.

THE DISCIPLINE OF THE SPORT

Dragon boat racing is more than an afternoon pastime. It demands rigorous training and teamwork. While a novice can paddle on their first outing, Dalip notes that it can take a year or more to become a proficient paddler, developing both technique and muscle memory. Training is continuous, as teams must remain synchronised and physically prepared.

Equally critical is the drummer, often underestimated in the early years of the sport. "The drummer is one of the most critical roles on the boat," Dalip emphasised. "They set the pace, coordinate with the helmsperson, and keep the team moving." He recalled watching a young Taiwanese drummer at a world championship who inspired him to see the role in a new light. "She was the one pulling the team. It's not just ceremonial-it's vital."

Races in Trinidad typically range from 200 metres to 2,000 metres, with sprint distances drawing the most teams and spectators. Dalip notes that local times have reached as low as 50 seconds for 200 metres, while international competitions, often held on lakes with more controlled conditions, see even faster finishes.

CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

Organising a festival of this scale is not without obstacles. Weather is the biggest uncertainty on race day, but other factors include securing suitable locations, ensuring accessibility and parking, and coordinating up to 40 officials and volunteers. "It takes a lot of moving parts," Dalip said, noting the importance of the Chaguaramas Development Authority as a long-term partner in hosting the event.

