



THE BEGINNING – From an Ancient Tradition to a Modern Sport

“From small acorns mighty oak trees grow”

In 1980 the Hong Kong Tourist Association (HKTA) now the Tourist Board, sent three wooden teak Dragon Boats to the London Chinese Festival on the River Thames, in order to promote Chinese Culture and tourism. Paddlers from the canoe clubs on the Thames raced them and told me about the colourful but funny looking boats !



At that time I was the Chairman of the British Canoe Union's (BCU) Racing Committee and responsible for organizing the 1981 International Canoe Federation's (ICF) World Canoe & Kayak Racing Championships, in Nottingham. I had only seen a picture of the dragon boats, which looked great fun and when the Canoe Clubs who had paddled them in London, said the same thing I decided to get the 40ft long; 2 ton vessels, transported to Nottingham to display them at the World Champs and once they were there, why not race them too ?

To find crews of 20 people to race the boats I sent a press-release to the local newspapers and to my surprise, some 16 or 17 people, without any knowledge of the tradition and culture of dragon boating, responded, formed crews and turned up to race. They didn't know what to do (and nor did I) so I told them "just get in a boat, grab a paddle, hit the drum and go" As a result races took place during the World Champs lunch breaks and everyone had a great time.

The media also responded to the press-release. TV broadcasters, who had heard about the new and strange boats contacted me and wanted to see the boats being raced. I asked them not to forget the Canoe World Champs - packed full of Olympic Champions, because an earlier press-release about them went unrewarded. In short the media showed more interest in the Dragon Boats, than the Canoe Champs ! I could see that there was something very different about Dragon Boating. Simply put it was easy to do, very social and certainly attractive to the media !

1981. After the Championships, in a report to the ICF, I suggested that Dragon Boat Racing was something worth looking at and developing as a new discipline of Canoe Sport. My report was politely ignored and so I arranged for the boats to go to the Exeter Maritime Museum, who were looking for traditional boats to exhibit.

In 1982, I went to Germany for two years to continue my career in the British Army and when I came back to the UK, I decided to follow up on the Dragon Boats. Having heard nothing more from the ICF, for almost three years, I asked again if there was any interest in developing Dragon Boat Racing, as an ICF discipline.

The answer was "No," as the ICF President, at the time (Sergio Orsi) said that whilst Dragon Boating was obviously a water craft, paddled in the style of a Canoe, it was not Canoe Sport and in the opinion of the ICF Board, could never be considered as a competitive discipline of the ICF. However, the ICF President told me that if I wanted to develop Dragon Boat Racing, as its own sport, then the ICF would give advice and a helping hand if requested to do so.

1985. As the Hong Kong Tourist Association (HKTA) owned the wooden boats, I contacted the HKTA's European Director, Kent Hayden-Sadler, in London, with a view to getting the wooden boats back from Exeter, to see what could be done to develop dragon boating in the UK, with the support of the HKTA.

During 1985, with the wooden boats back in Nottingham and with some crews racing the dragons and having fun, at Canoe Racing Regattas at the National Water Sports Centre, I formed the Dragon Boat Racing Club of Great Britain, affiliated it to the British Canoe Union (BCU) and started to develop Dragon Boat Sport in the UK. Around 1986, the boats were moved back to London, when Mike Thomas (who took over in from me as the IDBF President, in 2016) asked if he could use them in a development programme for under-privileged kids, in the London Docklands area.

In 1987, with the backing of the BCU, I founded the British Dragon Boat Racing Association (BDA) from the three or four crews that had raced regularly in Nottingham and registered the BDA with the UK sporting authorities. That year, a friend of mine, Olympic Medallist Chris Ballieu, from the British Amateur Rowing Association (ARA) told me that he had a problem with the attractiveness of his rowing events, since Rowing is not really visually spectacular or a spectator sport (just like Canoe Racing). Chris asked me if I could do something with the dragon boats.

As a result Mike Thomas moved the Dragons' to London's Serpentine Lake in Hyde Park, where they were raced in the Westminster Serpentine Regatta, as the first BDA National Championships. The ARA had close ties with the Rowing Association of Hong Kong and had been sending crews to the annual Hong Kong Races for about 5 years.

I made a deal with the ARA that the winners of the 1st BDA National Championships at the Serpentine Regatta would receive the invitation to the Hong Kong Races from 1988 onwards and so the first BDA Championships were a contest between crews from Rowing Clubs and Canoe Clubs with a few novice Dragon Boat crews thrown in. Not surprisingly, a crew from the Elmbridge Canoe Club. won that first Championship and the trip to Hong Kong.



FROM NATIONAL TO GLOBAL - *The Dragon Awakes and the Politics Arrive.*

Internationally things had begun to develop rapidly during the period 1987 to 1991, with Independent Dragon Boat Associations being formed across Europe from Sweden in the North to Italy in the South. Boats made in England, by Chris Hare, were sent to Denmark, Italy, Germany and the Netherlands, with the help and finance from the HKTA. Dragon Boat Associations and international festival races were also established in Canada, the USA, Singapore, Penang and in New Zealand and Australia. During this period too, I organised Dragon Boat Races in Europe and founded the European Dragon Boat Federation (EDBF) with five Founding Member Countries.

1988. Still not knowing very much about the Dragon Boat traditions, culture, racing rules or any other background to Dragon Boating, I went, with the help of a very supportive HKTA, to the Hong Kong International Races, with the BDA Crew. There I met Mason Hung, who later became the IDBF Secretary-General and then an IDBF Vice President. Mason was the HKTA Manager in charge of promoting Dragon Boating to overseas countries, as part of a Marketing Campaign. I also met Robert Wilson from the HK Rowing Association, who became the first IDBF President and Philip Lai, Chairman of the HK Fishermen Association, who became the IDBF's first President of Honour.

Having now learned about the history and culture of Dragon Boat Racing and realizing that Hong Kong was a City actually spending money on a sport as part of a worldwide effort to promote tourism and providing wall to wall TV coverage in Hong Kong, with spectators numbering over 100,000 watching the racing,

Whilst in Hong Kong a meeting of crews at the International Races was held, to discuss the formation of an International Dragon Boat Federation (IDBF) and a further meeting agreed for the following year. I returned to the UK deep in thought and inspired by what I had seen in Hong Kong. I knew that the sport couldn't be developed with only the three wooden boats available in the UK and even worse, the teak boats were tremendously heavy, long and difficult to transport and difficult to get in and out of the water too.

My thoughts turned to making fibre-glass Dragon Boats in the UK but building them as a 'split boat' like they do in Rowing, by producing the hull into two halves, so that they can fit onto a small trailer for ease of transportation and then be put together again before racing them. This meant finding a boat maker who could make a mould, which involves quite some cost, and who then could make the actual boat.

1989. In response to an article I had written about the developing sport, a boat builder friend of mine, Chris Hare, responded that he would be willing to make the boat if I could find the finance. I spoke to HKTA's Kent Hayden-Sadler in London and he raised the funds for the project from Hong Kong and helped obtain HKTA's permission to copy one of the original wooden boats already in the UK. The intention was to preserve the spectacular and colourful design of the boat and the ancient traditions of Dragon Boating.

Thus it was that the Hong Kong style of wooden dragon boat became the 'parent' of the first UK fibre-glass boats and subsequently the base specification for the IDBF Standard Racing Dragon Boat used today worldwide. The step of making fibre-glass boats wasn't a significant technical change, **as** there were also fibre-glass boats existing with the Fishermen in Hong Kong, at that time but the technical development of the IDBF Spec Dragon Boat since then, has always ensured that the traditional hull design of the Hong Kong Boat, as been maintained.

At the Hong Kong Races that year, a Steering Committee was set up to take the idea of an IDBF forward, under the guidance of Bob Wilson, with his Rowing background and experience and myself with a background and experience in Canoeing.

1991. In June 1991, following the foundation of the European Federation (EDBF) in 1990, the IDBF was founded in Hong Kong by 12 Dragon Boat Associations including China. A further 4 Countries attended as observers. *The ICF was advised of the IDBF's formation and received the support of the then ICF President, Sergio Orsi.* Following the lead of the IDBF and EDBF, in 1992 the Asian Dragon Boat Federation (ADBF) was founded.





During the next few years, as the EDBF Chairman and IDBF Secretary-General, I was instrumental in formulating and publishing the EDBF & IDBF Statutes and Bye-Laws; Competition Regulations and Rules of Racing, for use at all levels within the Sport. I also instigated the development and adoption, by the Sport, of IDBF Technical Specifications for Dragon Boats and Paddles. *In 1993 the EDBF organised Dragon Boating as an invitation Sport in the World Games, held in the Hague, the Netherlands that year.*

1995. This development work culminated in the **1st World Dragon Boat Racing Championships being held in Yue Yang China**, by which time IDBF Membership had expanded to 30 members on 5 Continents. During the period 1996 to 1998 the IDBF first applies for recognition from the IOC and formal inclusion in the World Games and continues to organise, develop, promote and administer the sport. Continental Championships are held in Europe and Asia and World Championships, for both Nations and Clubs, are held in Vancouver, Hong Kong and Wellington.

“The Political Road Map” In 1998, Ulrich Feldhoff, from Germany, is elected as the new ICF President. As the then IDBF Executive President, I wrote to him suggesting that the IDBF & ICF should meet to discuss ways of working together as partner paddle sports. *Feldhoff agreed but in April 1999, the ICF Board unilaterally announces that dragon boating is now a discipline of ICF Canoeing.*

In January 2000, following earlier correspondence in 1999, the IDBF applied for Membership of the General Association of International Sports Federations (GAISF). *The ICF objects to the IDBF Membership Application on the grounds that dragon boating was canoeing and that therefore the IDBF was interfering in ICF affairs.*

I make the point to GAISF that the ICF has never been interested in Dragon Boating and I arrange for a meeting between the ICF and IDBF. At the meeting, the ICF suggests that the IDBF should disband and become the ICF Committee for Dragon Boat Racing. This is not acceptable to the IDBF and so I propose Mediation on the matter through the Court of Arbitration for Sport (CAS) in Lausanne. *The ICF Board agreed to CAS Mediation but meanwhile tables a motion to the ICF Congress, to formally adopt dragon boat racing as a discipline of canoeing.*

The next seven years sees intense political activity, over the governance of the Sport, as the ICF attempts to become the only recognised world governing body for Dragon Boating, as a ‘discipline’ of Canoeing. The ICF develops its own Dragon Boat Championships, which it promotes as the World Championships for the Sport, without any reference to the IDBF as the organisation that developed and is already the acknowledged world authority for Dragon Boating.

2002. The IDBF and ICF meet in Mediation at the CAS, on 25th April 2002 but the mediation process is not successful. In August, that year, as the IDBF EP, I invited the ICF to sign a CAS Arbitration Agreement, as the preferred way of resolving the ongoing situation but *the ICF is against this and in September adopts ICF Dragon Boat Racing Competition Rules for its own Members (copied from the IDBF Rules and Regulations) and the Asian Canoe Confederation (ACC) announces that the first ACC Dragon Boat Championships will be held in 2003.*

The IDBF continues with its application for GAISF Membership and IOC recognition for the sport and then, surprisingly, in December 2002, the ICF suggests, that as an alternative to CAS Arbitration, that representatives from both IFs, should meet once again to discuss the issues between them. The IDBF, without prejudice to future CAS Arbitration or litigation, agrees and a Joint Meeting is arranged for 22 February 2003, in Amsterdam.

“Joint Agreement”. The Meeting in Amsterdam results in a draft Joint Agreement of understanding and co-operation being formulated for further discussion by a Joint Working Committee (JWC) which would look at ways of bringing together the Structure and Administration of the two International Federations.

The first meeting of the JWC, held in Madrid, in May 2003, finalizes the Joint Agreement and agrees further points of mutual co-operation to be discussed and progressed during the period ending December 2004. The 2nd meeting of the JWC is held in Stansted UK, in October and many areas of interest and co-operation are discussed. *Subsequently the ICF side refuse to accept the meeting minutes and withdraws from the JWC. No further meetings are held, until 2018, when the ICF again suggests that the two Federations’ should meet to discuss the issues between them.*





In April 2005, the IDBF Application for GAISF Membership is finally put before the GAISF Annual General Assembly, having been held back for 2 years due to the ICF's influence within the GAISF Secretariat but the IDBF does not gain the required number of votes. *The ICF organises the self titled 1st ICF 'World Champs' in Germany, in opposition to the actual IDBF World Champs held in Berlin.*



responsible for Dragon Boating in Asia. Dragon Boating is also included in both the East Asian Games and South East Asian Games under IDBF Rules and Regulations.

“ Formal Recognition of the IDBF “ In early 2006, the GAISF Council re-confirms the IDBF as the World Governing Body for Dragon Boating, but despite fulfilling the Membership criteria, the IDBF again fails, by 3 votes, to gain Membership at the GAISF Annual General Assembly. *In Oct 2006 under IDBF patronage the 1st Breast Cancer Paddlers Championships are held in Singapore.*

2007. In April 2007 at the GAISF Annual Assembly held in Beijing, **the GAISF Members ratify the GAISF Council ruling that Dragon Boating and Canoeing are two different sports** and reject a claim by the ICF that they are already de facto, the GAISF Member for Dragon Boating. **The IDBF is voted into Membership by the GAISF Annual General Assembly.** *The IOC acknowledges and accepts the GAISF decisions concerning the IDBF.*

2008. **The IOC Sports Department state in a letter** to the Philippines National Olympic Committee that the only IOC Olympic International Federation engaged in Dragon Boating is the ICF. The PNOC interprets this letter to mean that the ICF is recognised by the IOC as the world governing body for Dragon Boating, which is clearly not the case,

In December that year, a Court of Arbitration for Sport (CAS) Opinion given to the ICF, confirmed that, as a GAISF Member, the IDBF was the only World Governing Body for Dragon Boating and that equipment made to IDBF Specifications and IDBF Regulations are used by all organisations, including the ICF. *The ICF does not make the CAS opinion public and does not inform the IDBF of this ruling.*

2009. **Despite the CAS Opinion, the World Games Association** allows the ICF to organise Dragon Boating as a demonstration Sport at the 2009 World Games in Taiwan. *The ICF fails to get the 12 Nations required for the Dragon Boat Races. 9 ICF Members with 250 competitors attend, despite holding an ICF Club Champs in Japan the week beforehand, which was also sparsely attended.*

“IOC Application” At this time, despite all the attempts by the ICF to subsume Dragon Boating as a ‘Canoeing’ discipline, a letter from the IOC Sports Department, to the IDBF acknowledges the 2007 GAISF ruling and invites the IDBF to submit an application for recognition as an IOC International Federation. As a result, the 1st IDBF application for recognition as an IOC International Federation is submitted during that year.

In 2010, Dragon Boat Racing under IDBF Rules & Regulations, is included in the Asian Games for the first time. **The Dragon Boat Races attract the highest television audience of all the Sports in the Games.** Over 3000 participants take part in the 7th IDBF Club Crew World Championships in Macau.

“ The Royal Dragon Boaters” In July 2011, HRH The Prince of Wales, Duke of Cambridge and the Duchess of Cambridge, both Dragon Boaters, especially ask to have a Dragon Boat Race organised for them during their tour of Canada.

IDBF Member, Dragon Boat Canada, organise the race, at which I officiate as the IDBF Executive President and start the ‘Royal Dash’ over 100m. The European Club Championships are held in the Ukraine with 1200 participants. *The European Canoe Association Dragon Boat Championships scheduled for Duisburg, in Germany, are cancelled due to a lack of entries.*

2012. **The 2nd IDBF application for recognition as an IOC International Federation is submitted. IDBF Membership reaches 72 Countries** and Hong Kong hosts the 8th IDBF Club Crews World Championships, 236 Clubs from 21 Countries compete with nearly 5000 participants.



"The Royal Paddle Pass"



In June 2012, fourteen Dragon Boats, organised by the British Dragon Boat Racing Association (BDA) take part in HM Queen Elizabeth's Jubilee Pageant, on the River Thames, in London.

Hong Kong hosts the 8th IDBF Club Crews World Championships, with nearly 5000 participants, the highest ever in World Championships, at that time. Asian and European Nations Championships are also held, that year, with a combined total of 3200 athletes

By 2013, IDBF Membership stands at 78 Countries & Territories, with 45 IDBF Affiliated Dragon Boat Festivals around the world and over 180 events on the 2013 IDBF Calendar. 16 Boat Builders and 36 Paddle Makers hold IDBF Licences to produce dragon boats and equipment to IDBF Specifications.

The 11th World Nations Championships are held in Szged, Hungary, with 3000 participants and the European Club Champs in Hamburg, Germany, attracts 1200 participants. *The ICF Championships scheduled for the Ukraine are cancelled due to a lack of entries.*

2014 The 1st IDBF World Cup is held in Fuzhou, China. The top 12 Nations from the 2013 IDBF World Nations Championships are invited to compete. Over 3 days of competition, **330,000 spectators at the event and 8 million viewers on China Central TV's Channel 5 – the Sports Channel, watch the races.** In September at the IDBF Club Crew World Championships, held in Ravenna, Italy, almost 6000 participants take part and IDBF Membership reaches 80 Countries and Territories.



2016. The 3rd IDBF application for recognition as an IOC International Federation is submitted and, as a Member of the Alliance of Independent Recognised Members of Sport (AIMS) within the GAISF, the IDBF is accepted by the IOC, as an International Federation, which as part of the 'Olympic Family' follows the ideals of and commitments to, the Olympic Charter. *New meetings are proposed with the ICF.*

2018. IDBF Club Crew World Championships take place in Hungary with over 6000 participants, the highest number ever for a Club Crew Championships. *The Asian Canoe Confederation (ACC) holds an Asian Dragon Boat Championships in China. In March 2018 at an ICF Board Meeting, ICF Vice-President, Thomas Konietzko, tells the Board that ICF had to position itself to be the body looking after all forms of sport involving a paddle and needed to embrace all sports involving a paddle facing forwards, He then outlined ways in which this should be achieved.*

2019. The EDBF Club Championships held in Seville, Spain, attract around 1500 participants, whilst the IDBF 14th World Nations Championships, held in Thailand, attracts nearly 4000 participants, from 30 Countries, the highest number ever for a World Dragon Boat Championships. The IOC postpones its recognition process for AIMS members.

At the IDBF Members Congress the delegates approve the IDBF formal complaint, laid before the GAISF and the IOC Ethics Committee against the ICF and the IDBF President states that in view of the ICF's continuing incursion into Dragon Boating, any further discussions concerning co-operation with the ICF, would not be in the IDBF's interest.

The ICF again copies the IDBF and holds its first World Cup in China. The ICF Club Crew Championships are held in Kiev with around 1200 participants, mainly coming from the Ukraine and Eastern European Countries

