The Fire Man

Who is Len Minty?

Get this. He sits up there in the bow of the boat facing astern in his hot pink baseball cap and dark sun glasses merrily thumping a drum while 20 women, jaws clenched, upper body muscles straining, paddle as if their lives depended on it—to his beat.

No, he's not the Male Chauvinist of the Year. He's Len Minty, coach of Peterborough's Survivors Abreast Dragon Boat Club team—26 local women who have survived breast cancer.

Minty, one of Canada's first professional dragon boat coaches, an accomplished dragon boat competitor himself who has competed internationally with one of Canada's best teams, is also a world-class masters swimmer.

He has held a couple of world records in men's Masters swimming and, this summer, won the gold medal in the 50-metre swim sprint at Actifest 2000, the Ontario Senior Games held in Ottawa.

Not bad for a guy who eight months ago technically *died* every time he fell asleep—so say the specialists. Even though he looks like a U.S. Marine who runs marathons, his heartbeat was highly irregular.

It turns out Len, who volunteered to teach people who had survived breast cancer, wound up surviving his own kind of chest problem. He now has a pacemaker.

So Len is back—and back in his hometown of Peterborough after 30 years teaching high school in North York and spending summers at his Stoney Lake cottage, where he relaxed by swimming, paddling, sailing and reading.

Len Minty comes by his love of water sports honestly. When he swims at the YMCA, he's swimming in a pool named after his father, Gordon Minty.

The Father of Swimming

Minty's father was actually afraid of the water. He didn't learn to swim until he was 22. Then you couldn't keep him away from it. He plunged into swimming education and water safety and was one of the founding members of the Canadian Red Cross Water Safety in Toronto.

Posted to Peterborough with Sun Life Insurance of Canada, Gordon Minty got into the swimming program at the YMCA. Which wasn't hard to do, seeing he'd moved his family into a house on Murray Street, about a minute away from the end of the Y's diving board.

"It was the perfect place to live—one minute from Peterborough Collegiate and one minute from the Y," said Len.

Len's father was swimming director at the Y for 27 years and didn't accept a cent for it. His employer didn't allow employees to moonlight. Gordon Minty was responsible for teaching thousands of people to swim and probably helped scores avoid drowning because he roamed the county setting up new programs.

"You name any little town around Peterborough, and if there was water nearby, I can guarantee you he would have started a swimming program there," said Len.
In 1962, Gordon Minty was named Peterborough's Sportsman of the Year. In 1981, he was inaugurated into the Peterborough Sports Hall of Fame. In 1994, he was inducted into the Ontario Swimming Hall of Fame.

The Path to Dragon Boating
Len, born in 1945, grew up at the Y. After Peterborough Collegiate, he attended Queens University majoring in math and physics—and picking up an armful of trophies along the way. He won the Jarvis Trophy as the Queens outstanding athlete of the year in an individual sport—swimming. He won the Clark Trophy as the outstanding swimmer for three years in a row. He was also the first winner of the Adams Trophy for coordinating athletics at the intermural level at Queens.

In 1969, after completing education training at MacArthur College, Len began teaching in North York. He spent 16 years teaching at George Vanier and 14 years teaching at George S. Henry. Not surprisingly, during that time Len also did a lot of coaching: swimming (every year), water polo, softball and track and field.

Len's paddling days began in Toronto at the Mississauga Canoe Club. He had become friends with fellow teacher Jim Farintosh, who happened to be Canada's junior champion paddler. Jim became Len's coach. Then Len bought a cottage on Stoney Lake in 1973 and began years of canoe racing in the Kawarthas.

In the 1990s, Farintosh got Len interested in dragon boating. Jim had been to Hong Kong, the Mecca of dragon boating a number of times on various national teams. Because of his experience dragon boating and teaching he was asked in 1996 to coach a Canadian team. Farintosh called on the best Canadian Canoe Association (CCA) paddlers he knew across Canada, set up tests in regional centres, assessed results and chose team members and invited everyone to Toronto to train.

The team trained for one week. Then it went to Hong Kong and cleaned up. In a major upset, Jim's team won the Hong Kong International Dragon Boat Regatta—the first occidentals ever to accomplish that. The win made the news around the world. His 1997 team repeated the feat.

Of course, the Canadian team members weren't exactly strangers to competition. At least half were ex-Olympians flat-water racers.

Meanwhile in Toronto, major companies, business organizations and dragon boat teams—including Chinese-Canadian teams—were screaming for more dragon boat coaches.

"In 1994, because dragon boating had been growing steadily for 12 years, these companies were saying, 'We need coaching, where can we get coaching?'" said Len. "Because of that, Jim Farintosh was asked to put together a cadre of coaches—and they were looking for people who were a little older. They didn't want young hotshot paddlers trying to tell 35- and 40-year-olds how to paddle."

Len, a teacher and experienced paddler, was tapped to coach. Still, he felt uneasy.

From Coach to Competitor

"I knew what was involved, I knew how to make the boat go, but I felt I had to go another step. I had to get in the boat and race myself."

Len joined the Sing Fai (Bright Star) Athletic Club in Toronto. It was reputedly the best team in the Toronto area at the time. For three years, Len was the only non-oriental on the team, a fact that delighted team members who christened him "Guai Lo."

"They thought that was really funny," said Len. "It means 'dishonorable white person' but it was used as a term of endearment. Actually, the literal translation is 'ghost man,' the term Chinese used to describe the first Caucasians ever seen in China."
"I asked them to tell me their phrase for '*honorable'* white person,'" said Len, laughing. "They said there wasn't one."

"I paddled with Sing Fai for three years and had many terrific races. We came second in the Toronto Regatta and second to the national team," said Len. In 1997, Sing Fai beat teams from New York, New Jersey and Philadelphia. In 1998, the team raced in San Francisco and won the Northern California men's championship and, later that year, raced in Japan.

Sing Fai club members certainly haven't forgotten Len. On a sunny day last spring, Len's former coach and his team members drove up from Toronto with a drum, dragon dance costume, and a dragon boat head and tail to make sure the new Survivors Abreast boat was launched according to a centuries-old Chinese good luck ceremony called "waking the dragon."

Timing, Timing, Timing

There's no doubt dragon boating is becoming popular worldwide.
"The attraction for paddlers is the challenge of working as a team," said Len. "Most paddlers paddle by themselves—or maybe tandem. And there are the odd fours, but they rarely get together and do it. Well, when you put 20 paddlers in a boat, the teamwork and the timing have got to be just absolutely right on."

"As I say to the team, there are five things in dragon boating: timing, timing, timing, stroke and power. That's the order. You've got to have the timing. The paddles are going in almost perfect unison, the boat goes. If they're not . . . it doesn't matter how strong the paddlers are."

Style in dragon boating is also critical. "You want a team with the same style because it promotes the same timing," said Len. "You look for an aggressive, powerful style and you try to get everybody to do the same thing."

Len said this can be a problem for Olympians who have developed their own style. Sometimes they can't make the adjustment to a team style.

"But Survivors Abreast is not at that level. We have to learn a style," said Len.

The spread of dragon boating around the world is also bringing changes to the sport. Traditionally, paddlers' weights were kept down to 75 kilograms (165 pounds) to get the right balance between weight and muscle power. German teams are now pushing the weight limits—using paddlers who are pushing 80 kilograms (175 pounds). They compensate for the extra weight in the boat by going from a 112-centimetre (44-inch) paddle to a 122-centimetre (48-inch) paddle, the maximum allowed. There's also rumors about new bigger boats that may be introduced, which may become the Olympic standard.

"I'd hate to see that," said Len. "It would favor great big paddlers and kill the Chinese teams."

Len and Jim believe the biggest change will come when the middle Europeans—the Romanians and Hungarians—decide to take up dragon boating racing.
"Canadians think of themselves as paddlers,"said Len. "In fact, the 1,000-metre C-1 canoe race in the Olympics is called 'the Canadian.' But the top competition is elsewhere."

Get Involved
What does Len say to the woman who has survived breast cancer, wants to join the team but was never athletic and doesn't think she should really even bother?

"I would say look at the 26 women who have already done this," he said.

"Really, there may be one or two persons on the Survivors Abreast team who has a true athletic background and, because of that, superior power. Our women range in age from 34 to 74 and we have a fair number in their 60s. But look what the team has done.
"Last year, the team only had four months to train for their first race ever. It was in Pickering and then they went to Toronto to the biggest dragon boat regatta in Canada and raced against younger breast cancer survivor teams with 70 or more paddlers each to draw on—from big cities like Halifax, Montreal and Toronto. Teams with experience.

"And what did the smaller, older, less experienced team from Peterborough do?" said Len with a smile. "In our best race our time was 3:06—10 seconds behind the winner. Terrific! They were racing against women whose average age was probably 40-something."

"I'm really proud of them," Len said.

The connection between breast cancer survivor and dragon boats began in Vancouver about 10 years ago. At the time, medical experts were convinced that women who had had chest and underarm lymph node surgery shouldn't strain their upper bodies. It would create other problems and cause damage, said the experts.

"A doctor out in Vancouver, Don McKenzie, said, 'This is nuts'—and he challenged that," said Len. "He got some breast cancer survivors together, told them to exercise and he monitored them very carefully to make sure they weren't hurting themselves—and they weren't."

"The doctor then said, how can we showcase these findings. Well, dragon boating involves a lot of upper body strength, you're holding onto a paddle, you're using your arms, and there's a lot of movement. He decided dragon boating would be a good way to make a statement," said Len.

"So he got together with the dragon boat association and got a team going. And he tested the women every week to make sure they were all right. What he found was that every women's overall health improved, just as he thought it would."

"After that, the word got out and other teams began forming and dragon boating just seems to be the sport in which breast cancer survivors choose to express themselves. As Dr. McKenzie says, dragon boats are floating support groups."

"I've discovered there's a tendency on the part of women with breast cancer to think 'I'm the only one,'" said Len. "They're not. The population of Peterborough County is about 101,000. Of that number I've been told that there are more than 1,000 women with breast cancer."

A Survivor Himself

There are probably another 1,000 people with pacemakers—which interests Len a lot. A tall, lean man who looks to be in perfect health and who has been super-active all his life, he now depends on a pacemaker himself.

"That was the shock of my world this past January," said Len. The holder of several national records in masters (over-25) swimming, Len decided to finally get a regular doctor for convenience, now that he had moved back to his hometown.

"I really wanted a family doctor for the ailments I expected to get 20 years from now," said Len.

His new doctor listened to his heart and sent him to a specialist immediately. Len's heart was skipping one out of three beats, but was steady when he exercised. Len knew about it but didn't think it was important. The doctor disagreed. Len's was given a monitor to wear.

"It turns out that at night my heartbeat was getting as low as—are you ready?—15 beats. One-five. It should have been up about 72 beats. I was flatlining 4 beats in a row. I was technically dead. If I hadn't been in good shape, I *would* have died, like my father did at my age—of heart failure. We always wondered why."

"That brought me closer to the team because now I was a survivor, too, just like the girls," said Len.

Len believes women who've survived breast cancer should give dragon boating serious consideration.

"One of the attractions of this sport is the learning curve is very steep—you can learn fast," said Len. "As my mentor Jim Farintosh said, it is not rocket science. Paddling in a dragon boat is not a really, really difficult skill. You learn very quickly—even if you've never paddled before—and half the women in the Survivors Abreast boat have never paddled before. But some of them look *very* good. I'm amazed how good they are."
"Second, all the women you race against are just like you. It's not like some boat has 20 ex-Olympic competitor breast cancer survivors. No, no, no. It's whoever comes out in an area gets on the team," said Len. "The teams we competed against were good not because the girls were unbelievably athletic. It's because they were well-coached, well-organized and a lot of them were younger."

"But there's something way more important. A lot of breast cancer survivors are people who've never had an athletic experience—one that's safe, easy-to-learn, and vigorous. A race is only three-minutes, but it's a hard three minutes. You get an experience you've never had before that you can only get through athletics, where you just go a lot deeper than you ever thought you could, and you become very proud of that.

"As I like to say, as a coach I took these women places they've never been—but it was places *within*," said Len.

"There were very few women on that team who had ever—*willingly*—put that much pain upon themselves. And that takes discipline, and that takes courage—both wonderful things."

"And the lasting part of all this is, if you can dig that hard and find this within you, well you just don't have to do it in a boat. I mean, this thing transcends, it goes far beyond the lake and the boat. You carry those qualities and new strengths into the rest of your life where you can dig extra hard and be extra tenacious if you need to be. If you can do it in a dragon boat, you can do it other places. That's what it's really all about."

"What I'm very proud of is how hard they worked. I mean we didn't have a very talented team to begin with, but, boy, you really wouldn't have known it at the end of the year," said Len.

"They looked darn good. I have to say that—without any doubt in my mind—they gave it everything they had. In Toronto, they were 10 seconds behind the winner—and that winning team beat all the other womens teams even the ones without breast cancer survivors."

Len maintains that dragon boating for most people is enjoyable, but for breast cancer and other survivors, it's special.

"With the breast cancer group, it's different. It's their way of getting to know other survivors and that is probably the most important part. You're with people who truly understand what you've been through or are going through. I know about that, now that I've become a survivor, too. In fact, I'm thinking the next dragon boat team here should be people with pacemakers."

Len's not only the coach. The team has left it up to him to choose who goes in the boat and where. That can be tricky.

"You've got 25 people on the team and everyone wants to paddle in the final," said Len. "How do you decide who is going in the boat in any particular race. There are all kinds of valid ways to choose. Who has been on the team the longest? Who has been the best fundraiser? Attendance, that's always a good one. You could also pick names out of a hat."

"But if it's left up to me, to pick the paddlers in a boat, I'm going to pick the fastest team I can. I choose on the basis of performance—but it can be done any number of ways." "It's up to the team how they want to do it. I'm just there to encourage them, to help them become the best paddlers they can, to suggest what position they should take in the boat and to offer strategies," said Len.

Len said Survivors Abreast may have to rethink race participation and a number of other things next year because he expects the team will grow to about 40 or more members. "Growth—the team will have to deal with that," said Len. "It's the kind of problem you welcome."

And what does Len Minty get out of all that coaching—aside from the lively, sometimes raucous company of his impressive paddlers.

"I just get a good feeling—it's as simple as that," he said. "I love competition and training and that whole athletic experience, but I also feel good about doing something for Peterborough and Peterborough people. I just love this town."

Of course, Len Minty may not be telling the whole story. Sure, he's getting a kick out of helping his hometown, out of the challenge, giving non-athletes a taste of what athlete's are addicted to.

But if you think he's just teaching people how to paddle a skinny boat faster, you're not seeing what kind of a strategist he really is.

He's really teaching 26 women who have survived breast cancer something special about competing hard, fighting tooth and nail. He's getting them really fired up.

Breathing fire. It's the kind of weapon every brave dragon should have.