

[FIRST PERSON]



STANDUP PADDLING RIDES **WAVE** OF POPULARITY

Story & Opening Photograph / KATE CARTER Photographs / GLENN CALLAHAN

Peace on the reservoir. *From left:* Nicki Houghton, with Luce, and Carla Hesler, with Chloe, all of Burlington, venture across Waterbury Reservoir with Craig Richardson of Umiak Outfitters, and Kate Stralmeyer of Burlington.

Craig Richardson of Umiak Outfitters of Stowe briefs his students on the basics as they get ready to launch their standup paddleboards.



Every once in a while my 25-year love affair with Vermont is rekindled when least expected—coming up my driveway just in time to see the alpenglow dissolve across the Worcester Range; cross-country skiing under a light snow when the sun makes a sudden appearance; sitting in a canoe watching a loon swim away with chicks clinging to her back. These brief glimpses of Vermont's astonishing beauty bring me to a standstill; yes, they really do, and in those frozen moments I realize how much I love this place. In those pure and perfect moments, nothing else matters.

Last summer I had one of those frozen-moment experiences in a most unusual location, doing a most unusual activity—for Vermont, that is. That overwhelming sensation of falling in love with Vermont all over again hit me as I balanced atop a standup paddleboard in the middle of Waterbury Reservoir.

We've all heard about the new sport of standup paddling, seen the ads, and read the stories—how it's the latest and greatest sport of the 21st century and all that overly effusive hype. But I refused to take the bait. As far as I was concerned, standup paddling was just an excuse to create a buzz, manufacture new products, sell, sell, sell, blah, blah, blah. I did not need a new sport—who does!—and it was just one more piece of equipment for which I did not have room in my garage. ►



Nicki Houghton, of Burlington, puts some power in her stroke, while Chloe goes along for the ride.



Kate Strotmeyer.

A Brief History

Standup paddling (SUP) has its roots in the ancient Polynesian sport of surfing. Back in the '50s, Hawaiian surf instructors would paddle out into the ocean using canoe paddles while standing on their surfboards so they could take pictures of their tourist students. In the early '90s, the famous surfer Laird Hamilton used that same technique—standing up on a surfboard and paddling with a long-handled paddle—to stay in shape during the off season. He revolutionized the sport and is now the name most associated with it.

Standup paddleboarding (*hoē he'e nalu* in Hawaiian) started to catch on in the early 2000s, and more recently has exploded onto the international scene. It now supports four consumer magazines, including the gorgeous photo-driven *Standup Journal*.

The sport incorporates three disciplines: surfing, which makes up about 75 percent of the participants; flatwater, which is what we do in Vermont; and whitewater, or river paddling, which only a few truly adventurous athletes attempt. These three disciplines all share the same two objectives: fun and fitness.

Then, last August, the opportunity presented itself to take a free standup paddling lesson at Waterbury Reservoir. Not one to turn down a freebie, I relented and took the bait, but on one condition: I could bring along a few friends.

Go SUP-ing

Umiak Outfitters offers lessons, rentals, and demos on Waterbury Reservoir throughout the summer. To find out more, call 253-2317 or visit umiak.com.

inventory of paddleboards, canoes, and kayaks at the park, which they rent out to anyone who wants to spend some time messing around on the water.

We convened well before the park opened for the day so that we could have a truly private lesson. I was not eager to have an audience view me from behind while I attempted to stand up on one of those boards. In fact, I rather doubted I would actually achieve the standing-up part of standup

paddling. I didn't want to be a wet rag, so for the sake of my friends, who were incredibly excited about the prospect of trying this new sport, I put on my game face.

Turns out there's not much to it. You choose a board and a paddle that is long enough for the blade to reach into the water, strap a personal flotation device onto the board in case something dreadful happens in the middle of the pond, and head out. The boards come in different styles: super wide, thick, and stable for beginners like me; not so wide and thick for those with some experience; and long and sleek for skilled athletes who want to cover some distance.

Figuring I could use all the help I could get, I chose the biggest and most stable board. My friends took whatever Craig thought they could handle, and after a brief demonstration of paddling technique, we waded out from the beach into knee-deep water, pushing our boards ahead of us.

Carefully, I crawled onto my board. Maybe I could just stay on my knees and not bother with the standing-up part. But I knew my knees were only good for about 30 seconds in this position, so slowly, very slowly, while gripping the sides of the board, I rose up to a sprinter's starting stance, then slowly, very slowly, I relaxed my grip and stood up.

All was well, except for one thing. The paddle. It was lying across the board. It was down there, and I was up here. Rats! Cautiously, I bent down, picked it up, and started paddling. Just like that.

I paddled tentatively across the cove. When I reached the other side, I maneuvered my board 180 degrees so I could look back to the beach. All I could see in the dense fog were the silhouettes of my friends standing on the water in the distance. No wonder the neighbors call these things "Jesus boards!"

I stroked my way back and together we all headed out to the main part of the reservoir. The water's surface was smooth, with only the ripples from our paddle strokes to give it texture. As the

fog began to lift, we could just make out the distant shoreline. The sun attempted to peak through in a couple of places and that's when it hit me. My surroundings were so drop-dead gorgeous I could hardly breathe. I love this place, I thought. I love Vermont. The feeling was so powerful it nearly brought me to my knees, and then I remembered where I was and what I was doing, so I just stood there, taking it all in, frozen in the moment.

So that's how I happened to experience one of those fleeting instances that recharges my soul and reminds me how happy I am to live here. Hard to believe it happened on a standup paddleboard, but it did, and I would stand up on one of those things again in a heartbeat if there was any chance of having that intense feeling of falling in love with Vermont, all over again. ■

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