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Chapter **1**

What'SUP? Paddling While Standing up through History

Stand up paddleboarding (SUP) may seem to many like a modern invention, but the roots of this sport stretch far back to ancient civilizations. In its current form, SUP has only been around since the early 2000s, when Laird Hamilton and Dave Kalama picked up paddles during a 2004 photoshoot and realized how practical and fun standing and paddling on a big surfboard with a long paddle was. Since then, modern SUP has become a global phenomenon and undergone rapid growth.

I was fortunate enough to learn how to SUP back in 2007 from some of the early pioneers of the sport. Ever since, I've been passionate not only about participating in the sport myself but also about sharing the sport and stoke with others — which I hope to do in this chapter.

Paddling in a Standing Position: Ancient History

Humans have long been drawn to the water and paddling while standing up has been a natural evolution for many societies throughout history. So many early records of paddling while standing exist that it seems to be deeply rooted in human nature. In some places, the technique was born from necessity for fishing and transportation, while in others it became a cultural practice.

One of the earliest examples of standing up while paddling dates back as far as 3,000 years ago along the Peruvian coast, where fishermen used crafts called *caballitos de totora* (reed horses; see Figure 1-1) to navigate through the surf to fish in coastal waters. Paddlers could use a long paddle to steer these rafts, made from bundled reeds, from a kneeling or standing position. Paddling on the knees was more stable because of the lower center of gravity, but standing up on their reed crafts allowed the fishermen to stretch their legs, get a better view of the fish, and have more leverage on their paddles.



FIGURE 1-1:
A *caballito*
de *totora*.

LuisAlexanderMJ/Adobe Stock Photos

In Israel, a similar style of paddling emerged with the *hasake* — large, wide-bodied boats propelled by a standing rider with a long, two-sided paddle as shown in Figure 1-2. Early records of

these crafts date back to the Roman Empire, and they're still being used in the Mediterranean Sea today (mostly by skilled lifeguards as a rescue tool, but also for fishing and recreation). In many ways, the *hasake* is a precursor to the modern stand up paddleboard; wide and stable, it's designed for utility and allows the paddler to stand up comfortably while navigating ocean waves and turbulent waters.



FIGURE 1-2:
A modern
hasake off
the Israeli
coast.

Rafael Ben-Ari/Adobe Stock Photos

Indigenous communities across the world have long engaged in stand up paddling. People in Polynesia, North America, South-east Asia, Africa (see Figure 1-3), and New Zealand have all stood and paddled canoes and boats for a variety of reasons: fishing, transportation, navigation, and cultural ceremonies. These practices show that standing up while paddling has played an integral role in human survival and culture over millennia.



REMEMBER

You can find countless other examples of paddling while standing up, including the gondoliers of Venice, loggers navigating rivers and rapids on wooden logs, and canoeists.

FIGURE 1-3:
African
woman
paddling a
dugout
canoe.



bandanar/Adobe Stock Photos

Surveying the Rise of SUP Surfing in Hawaii

While Polynesian canoes were mostly paddled in a sitting position, it was not uncommon for ancient Polynesians to paddle standing up, allowing a better vantage point of the reef below, making it easier to spot fish, and to get a better view of the horizon, weather, and other things in the distance.

The modern version of stand up paddling on a big surfboard began to evolve in the early 20th century, specifically in Waikiki, Hawaii. When the first hotels opened there in the early 1900s, the local surfers began to make a living as surf instructors, life-guards, and entertainers. These locals were known as *beach boys* and would paddle out on large surf boards and *outrigger canoes* (canoes with side float attachments) to introduce tourists to riding waves. Taking a canoe paddle on a surfboard allowed them to paddle faster as they gave lessons. Paddling on a large surfboard with a paddle became known as *beach boy surfing*; the Hawaiian name for it is *Hoe he'e nalu* (stand, paddle, surf a wave).

Allow me to introduce you to some of the main beach boy surfers of yesteryear:

» Duke Kahanamoku was born in 1890 to parents from prominent Hawaiian *ohana* (families). He grew up in Waikiki, close to Queen's Beach, where his statue, shown in Figure 1-4, stands today. Duke spent much of his youth at the beach, where he developed his surfing and swimming skills. He was a powerful swimmer and started breaking world records at local swim meets. He went on to win the gold medal in the 100-meter freestyle at the 1912 Stockholm Olympics, followed by several other Olympic medals. He is also credited with introducing surfing to Australia, during a visit in 1914, and later to California, where he performed as an actor in Hollywood.

Australian lifeguards that Duke trained gave him an early *surf ski*, a big wooden board with a long two-sided paddle, as a gift. Duke Kahanamoku paddled this board and caught waves standing up with the long paddle.

To find out more about Duke Kahanamoku's legacy, check out the 2021 documentary *Waterman*.



TIP

FIGURE 1-4:
Duke
Kahanamoku
statue.



Torval Mork/Adobe Stock Photos

SUPSURFIN' USA

In California, a standout pioneer of stand up paddleboard surfing was Ron “Canoe” Drummond, who famously surfed waves in a canoe while standing up in Dana Point. Drummond was a wild man, known for his eccentric style and creativity, combining the elements of canoeing and surfing to create something new and different.

- » In 1940, John “Zap” Zapotocky moved from Pennsylvania to Waikiki and was inspired by watching Duke Kahanamoku. He ordered a custom-made long wooden paddle and started using it with his large longboard to ride the waves in Waikiki. Zap went on to be one of the sport’s most enduring figures, SUP surfing in Waikiki until he was in his 90s. He witnessed the sport becoming a global phenomenon before he passed away in 2013.
- » Well-known Waikiki Beach Boy John “Pops” Ah Choy used a large wooden surfboard and long paddle to teach surfing and take photos of tourists. His sons Bobby and Leroy Ah Choy carry on the legacy and host an annual Pops Ah Choy Surf Fest in Waikiki.

Breaking down the Modern SUP Revolution: Blame Laird

The modern era of SUP surfing started at an Oxbow photoshoot on the south shore of Maui in 2004. Laird Hamilton and Dave Kalama were surfing on big longboards in offshore winds. They noticed that they could just stay standing up on their boards after catching a wave while the offshore breeze would carry them back out to the lineup. Dave decided to get a couple of canoe paddles from his car, and he and Laird had a blast using them while standing on the boards.

They immediately ordered longer paddles from Malama Chun, a local paddle maker, and started designing specialized boards for

SUP surfing. Their experimentation and the influence they had as well-known watermen sparked the creation of modern stand up paddleboarding. That's why surfers like to "Blame Laird" for the popularity of SUP surfing.

Kindling the SUP flame

As the popularity of the sport began to grow, it quickly caught the attention of the global water sports community. On Oahu, Brian Keaulana picked up the sport and introduced a beach boy surfing division to the Buffalo Big Board Surfing Classic at Makaha in 2003, making it the first official SUP contest. The competition spurred rapid development of the sport, and both equipment and technique evolved quickly.

Keaulana, Dave Parmenter, and Todd Bradley started a company called C4 Waterman that was dedicated to developing SUP-specific boards, paddles, and equipment. Paddlesurf Hawaii and C4 Waterman were the first SUP-specific production boards available, and my business, Blue Planet Surf, was the distributor. Early adopters provided strong demand — so strong that it was impossible to keep up with in the early days of the sport. We held SUP clinics to introduce people to the sport, and I was fortunate enough to learn it from the best.

SUP quickly grew beyond its surfing roots into new disciplines, such as cruising, touring, racing, and downwinding, which accelerated growth. In 2006, the 32-mile Molokai to Oahu (M2O) Paddleboard World Championships introduced a SUP division. (Kevin Horgan won that race in 7 hours and 23 minutes.)

By 2008, several brands started producing SUP boards, which were sold and promoted mostly through surf and water sports retailers. My friends Jeff Chang and Doug Locke opened the first SUP-specific retail store, Wet Feet Hawaii, and were soon followed by many SUP-focused retail stores opening up around the world.

That same year, Gerry Lopez and Rainbow Sandals organized the first Battle of the Paddle in Dana Point with an unprecedented \$25,000 prize purse. Also unprecedented was the spectator-friendly configuration of the race, a format now

called “technical SUP race” (also see Chapter 16). It had a beach start, took competitors in and out through the surf, around buoys, and running through a series of tight turns on the beach and back out again for multiple rounds. The maximum board length allowed was 12 feet 6 inches, which created a whole new category of SUP boards. The excitement created through these events further solidified the sport’s place in the competitive paddling world.

Tracing the explosive growth of SUP

Early adopters of the “new” sport were often already water sports enthusiasts that were eager to try something new. Surfers — especially older surfers with stiff backs and shoulders who found it difficult to paddle in a prone position and then pop up quickly while catching a wave — felt like *groms* (young surfers) all over again. Windsurfers and kitesurfers discovered SUP as a great activity when the wind was light. Canoe and kayak paddlers crossed over into SUP racing and whitewater SUP as a novel way to paddle. The introduction of inflatable boards that are easy to transport and store also played an important role in the worldwide growth of the sport.

Catching the World Wide Wave

SUP was the first major water sport where almost all information was available online. Traditionally, water sports enthusiasts got their information from print-based material and glossy magazines. The World Wide Web accelerated the development of equipment, technique, and hype. The accessibility of the sport, both in terms of the ease of getting the latest information (anywhere with Internet) and where it could be done (anywhere with water), quickly spread it to a much wider audience and helped stand up paddleboarding become the world’s fastest growing water sport.

Making lemonade out of lemons

In Hawaii, the rapid growth of SUP had plateaued by 2019, but then the COVID-19 pandemic unexpectedly caused a renewed boom in popularity. During the global shutdowns of 2020 and

2021, when people were unable to go to the gym, travel, or go out with friends, SUP emerged as a perfect socially distanced activity. It offered people a way to stay active while being out on the water. SUP participation and sales of SUP equipment boomed during this period as more and more people from all walks of life discovered the versatility and appeal of the sport.



REMEMBER

According to the Outdoor Industry Association (OIA), by 2021, the global SUP market was valued at \$1.4 billion, with tens of millions of participants having taken up the sport around the world. In the United States alone, an estimated 3.5 million people participated in SUP annually. A compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of approximately 10 percent is projected for the next decade.

Looking to the future

SUP continues to grow as more ways of enjoying the sport emerge and draw in a more diverse group of paddlers, with more women and young paddlers taking up the sport each year.

The growth of SUP foiling (see Chapter 22) has further expanded SUP disciplines, led to increased innovation and specialization, revolutionized downwind racing, and drawn many new athletes to the sport. SUP rentals continue to grow in popularity, especially in beautiful destinations around the world.

As of this writing, SUP is set to become part of the Olympics. (For more on that topic, see Chapter 16.) When that happens, it will open the sport to increased youth participation with support from national sports associations and establish SUP as a serious athletic pursuit.



REMEMBER

Although I can't say for sure what's next for SUP, I do know that innovation will continue and that new trends will emerge to quickly be taken up by dedicated water athletes around the world ready to take the next step in the evolution of the sport.

