

## Paddlers take a stand

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One after another, a pack of paddlers weaves through one of Lake Minnetonka's hidden canals, overgrown with football-field lengths of lily pads, reeds and cattails. It's mid-morning, but the sun is already uncomfortably hot and a weeping willow leans over the water, seemingly pulling a paddler into its shady embrace.

The group enters the open waters of Cooks Bay, where a boater slows to watch the unusual sight: men, women, even children paddling standing up. The boater hollers to the group: "Is this some kind of club?"

Stand-up paddleboarding is no club. It's one of the world's fastest-growing water sports. Local enthusiasts tout the sport for its motor-free serenity that puts them close to nature while providing a core workout. In just a year, new businesses, clubs, competitive races and even yoga, fitness and therapy classes have cropped up statewide -- all devoted to stand-up paddleboarding.

"It mystifies me that it's taken so long to get here, because we have all this flat water," said Larry Freeman, owner of the Scuba Center in Minneapolis, which rents and sells paddleboards. "Now it's exploding and it's going to get huge."

For years, stand-up paddleboards, commonly called SUPs, have dotted the waters of Hawaii and California, with celebrities like Matt Damon and Jennifer Aniston making the sport look chic. But this summer, they've taken off in Minnesota, where the boards can easily be rented and wannabe paddlers can sign up for classes on dozens of lakes.

### Surfing, Minnesota-style

A West Coast transplant, Adam Newton, 38, has always wanted to surf. Admiring celebrities and pro surfers on the covers of glossy magazines, the Excelsior landscape architect thought: "That is so cool -- you can actually get that waterman surfer feel here in Minnesota."

Newton has been paddling the shores of Lake Minnetonka this summer and often brings along his sons, Finn, 4, and August, 5, who sit or stand on the board in front of him.

"It's just surreal. You can just put the paddle in, one light stroke and all of a sudden you're off gliding and you can hear the board ... the cohesion of the water as it grabs the edges of the board and rolls off," he said. "Then there's the fish. You can get right over them. It's crazy they don't even care."

Although a natural extension of fringe sports like wind and kite surfing, paddleboarding is attractive to anyone who enjoys being on the water. Leaders credit the sport's accessibility for its recent growth.

"You can go anywhere with them," Freeman said. "The neat thing about it is anyone can do it."

The boards, which vary in length from 9 to 14 feet, are lightweight and a submerged fin makes them track easily. Some have a rubbery surface for a grippy foothold. Original paddleboards resembled oversized surfboards, but board manufacturers are exploring new designs to make the boards faster and more suitable for flat water.

Experienced paddleboarders often say that if you can stand on a sidewalk, you can balance on a paddleboard. But you don't even have to stand -- you can sit or kneel, too.



Stand-up paddleboarding involves standing on a 9-foot board while paddling quiet lake or pond waters. A group headed out on Lake Minnetonka in Mound.

## Workout on water

Water runs in the blood of some paddleboarders. At 64, Dave DeFontaine of Golden Valley might be the oldest and most experienced Twin Cities paddleboarder. The soon-to-be retired IT director is the ultimate Minnesota "waterman," participating in windsurfing, paddleboard races and extreme cold-weather paddling. In terms of a workout, however, he says nothing feels better than standing upright on his board. He calls it "hydrotherapy" for the body and mind.

"It engages every muscle in your body with every paddle stroke, from the tips of your toes all the way up," he said. "I've had tendon and joint issues with my shoulder, and the more I paddle the better I feel."

Stand-up paddleboarding can burn 600 to 1,000 calories per hour while strengthening the body's core, arms and legs. As people realize its health benefits, yoga and fitness classes are popping up locally.

It's also being used as a new form of therapy. At Lake Nokomis in south Minneapolis, paddleboarding trumped horseback riding and fishing for kids with limb deficiencies who were participating in Shriners Hospital's Camp Achieve. Twin Cities Paddleboard, a new sales and rental business, supplied the boards and instruction for the kids, most of whom were missing an arm.

"Once they got out there and started moving, they didn't have a care in the world," said Maureen Johnston, director of the hospital's Child Life department. "You could see it in their eyes."

## A competitive, spiritual sport

For the first time locally, paddleboarders can compete, too. The new Midwest Stand Up Paddleboard Championship Series offers eight races, including an Aug. 6 competition in Duluth. Top competitors qualify for the SUP and Paddleboard World Championship in San Diego.

Hannah Hill, 11, is looking forward to her third race this summer, and hopes more kids get involved with the sport. The outgoing Orono student is the only kid on the local race circuit, but she hopes to help change that.

"I'm trying to get my friends into it," Hill said. "They fall in love with it instantly. ... It's a fun sport and great exercise, too."

For others, paddleboarding provides a sense of well-being and a connection to the water. That's the message from three local women who started a business this summer aimed at sharing their passion for the sport.

Wai Nani, Hawaiian for "beautiful water," is an eco-friendly "tribe" of local paddleboarders of all ages and experience levels. The company offers rentals, yoga classes and guided eco-excursions to explore local waterways.

Co-founder Stachia Fey, 40, said she became hooked on the sport a few years ago while paddleboarding with her family in Florida. Since then, she's become the Midwest's top female paddleboard racer.

During a recent Sunday excursion, Fey led a group of 20 men, women and children, including her husband, Mike, and 4-year-old son, Cruz. While some hopped off their boards to cool themselves in Lake Minnetonka, Fey propped her paddle behind her shoulders, tilted her head back and looked toward the sun. She slowly lowered herself into downward facing dog, a popular yoga pose.

Her mission? "To take people on adventures and let them slow down, find their balance and escape from their busy lives in an exploratory, eco-friendly way conscious of health, mind and body," she said.

"It's my passion and vision to help people on paddleboards so that they can create a special connection with the world on water."

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