

PITTSBURGH TRIBUNE-REVIEW

Stand-up paddleboarders take to lakes, rivers

By JoAnne Klimovich Harrop
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With only a board between you and a river, lake or ocean, it's a feeling unlike any other. And it's something more and more people in Western Pennsylvania are trying since there's plenty of water here.

It's called stand-up paddleboarding. Participants stand on a vessel that looks like a surfboard and balance as they use a paddle to push themselves across a body of water. One of their legs is attached to the board with a Velcro wrap.

Originally started in Hawaii, it is making its way across the country. It might look a little strange, at first, but it can be a great cardiovascular workout.

Stephanie Taylor, environmental-education specialist for Moraine State Park, says sometimes paddleboarders are mistaken for boaters who have tipped over their crafts and are trying to row toward shore.

"It is a great way to enjoy some fresh air and get out on the water," says Rob Hutchison, L.L. Bean inventory buyer, who also is a sea kayak and stand-up paddleboarding instructor. "You can see down to the bottom in shallow water, and it is really like walking on water. Once you try it you will be back for more."

Ty Musser is hooked.

The Sewickley resident gets out on the water with friends and family whenever he has a free minute. He also sells boards and paddles, and is more than willing to help you select the proper equipment, which is key to doing the sport properly.

"It is such a great workout, but you don't realize that when you are doing it," says Musser, who has been participating in stand-up paddleboarding for a year and a half. "It brings families together and they have fun because every member can enjoy it. Once you try it you will want to do it again. It is addicting."

The hardest part is standing up for the first time, because it feels like the board is going to tip, and you are going to fall. Falling can be an interesting part of the experience.

You will see people stand-up paddleboarding in places such as North Park Lake, Pittsburgh's three rivers, Moraine or the Youghiogheny River.

"I really like the core benefits and it really helps with my balance," says

orthopedic surgeon Dr. Josh Szabo from Gibsonia. "I think it's something that older people should do, too. It's a great stress reliever ... and is great for a cardiovascular workout. ... I have a better appreciation for how beautiful the city is we live in, and that this city has so much to offer."

Andy Smith, co-owner, buyer and instructor at Riversport in Confluence, Somerset County, sells and rents stand-up paddleboarding equipment. If you can stand and paddle and have some balance you can do it, Smith says, who has taught this sport to people of all ages.

"The world of stand-up paddleboarding has exploded all over the country," Smith says. "It has experienced the largest growth of any paddle sport. We have people come here, and once they try it, they are hooked."

The initial investment is steep. Prices range from \$399 to \$1,500 and more for a board. Sizes are based on the paddler's weight and experience. More experienced and lighter paddlers can choose narrower boards. Novice paddlers should choose wider, flatter boards, which offer more stability. Paddles start at \$180, and should be 6 to 8 inches taller than the person using them. There also are adjustable paddles available.

"The type of equipment you buy depends on how serious you want to be with this sport," Smith says. "Some of the boards are made so you can go really fast and race through rapids while others are for the individual who wants to glide along calm water."

"Until you have tried it, it probably looks more challenging than it really is," Hutchison says. "But if you have done board sports, you will be able to do this, especially in calm and protected water."

"The fitness aspect of stand-up paddleboarding is wonderful because it is such a great workout," Hutchison says. "You work your core and your legs and other muscles, as well."

Most people go barefoot or wear toe shoes. You stand in the middle or a little toward the back of the board versus the front. And you paddle on one side, and then, switch to the other to keep moving straight. If you get really good, you can race these boards and do stand-up paddleboarding through waves.

Chuck Patterson, 42, of Dana Point, Calif., does it for a living.

"This sport pretty much allows anyone to get off the couch and try it," Patterson says. "It is about balance and confidence, and it opens your eyes to how beautiful it is to be outside, and enjoy the water and the scenery. There are so many different aspects to this sport, including racing and the surf side of it."

Patterson has witnessed some unbelievable moments. He has had a blue whale breach in front of him, startled a huge Marlin sunning itself on the surface, paddled alongside dolphins, grey whales, whale sharks, thresher and mako sharks and in the past two years, had several great-white shark

encounters.

A paddleboard is considered a vessel by the U.S. Coast Guard, so you always must wear a personal-flotation device whenever you are paddling navigable water. You will see some people wearing helmets.

"It is a sport that is evolving rapidly," says Chris Huffman, an optometrist from Moon who was paddleboarding at North Park Lake earlier this week. "It is really good for rehabilitation of knees and hips and shoulders."

"Pittsburgh is such a great city, and when you are out on the water, you get a better appreciation of how great a city it is," says Barb Pugh of Sewickley. "You can take the entire family out on the water because people of all ages can do this sport. My mother who is 74 has done it, and I have seen kids 3 years old doing it. ... If you can maintain balance, you can do this sport."

Or, you can have fun trying to get your balance.

Cole Musser, 11, and John Pugh, 12, were at North Park Lake trying to do tricks on the board by standing on the edge and seeing how far they could get the board out of the water.

"I do skateboarding, so this is similar," Cole Musser says. "My favorite part is falling in the water. You shouldn't be scared. You just have to fall in the first time and then you know what it's like so then there's nothing to be scared of. I like to go fast and race my dad. It is just fun to be outside"

"It's a most relaxing, peaceful feeling," John Pugh says. "I love the water, and I would rather be outside doing this than sitting inside in front of a computer."

"You can either choose to stay dry and stay on the board, or you can choose to get wet and fall off the board, which is fun," says John's sister, Sammie, 16.

TIPS

- Mounting the paddleboard: When you're a beginner, it's easier to kneel just behind the center point of the board, rather than to stand directly upright. From that kneeling position, get a feel for the balance point of the board. The nose shouldn't pop up out of the water and the tail shouldn't dig in. After you're ready, stand up on the board one foot at a time. Place your feet where your knees were. You might want to bring a friend to wade out about knee-deep with your board. Have your friend stabilize the board as you get the hang of standing on it.
- Your feet should be parallel, about hip-width distance apart, centered between the rails (board edges). Don't stand on the rails.
- Keep toes pointed forward, knees bent and your back straight.

- Keep your head and shoulders steady and upright, and shift your weight by moving your hips.
- Your gaze should be at the level of the horizon. Avoid the temptation to stare at your feet.
- It's much like bicycling: When your forward momentum increases, your stability increases, as well.

Source: www.rei.com

GET INVOLVED

At this time, there is no organized group in Pittsburgh, but if you want to become involved you can. There often are people paddleboarding at North Park Lake. Other places to get equipment and information:

- Riversport in Confluence, Somerset County, Details: 800-216-6991 or www.riversportonline.com
- Northeast Paddleboard Company, Boston, Pa. (near McKeesport). 412-720-5058 or www.northeastpaddleboard.com
- Standuppittsburgh.com offers information on equipment and where to go.

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