

LET'S GO SURFIN' NOW... EVERYBODY'S LEARNIN' HOW

By Dave Donaldson, CTRS



Why do we paddle out? That is the question that every surfer has heard at least once. For some, it is about competition, the best move, the longest ride, the biggest wave. For others, it is about creating something soulful, capturing or at least borrowing some of the oceans energy as a medium. There is something grounding about being on a board beyond the break, riding the swells up and down while waiting for the next wave, watching the sunrise or dolphins play just out of reach, or ... just being. The ocean evens the playing field; there is no judgment, just an endless supply of energy to enjoy.

Having a disability doesn't mean that surfing is out of reach. But first you need to get to the beach. The closer you can park to the water, the better. Having surfed all over the United States, I've started to notice an abundance of disabled parking at public beaches. For the rest of the non-disabled population, parking is sometimes the biggest obstacle to getting in the water. Most municipalities will provide beach wheelchairs at one or more of their beaches. Finding out which ones would take nothing more than a phone call to the local parks and recreation department.

Before you begin, consider a wetsuit. A wetsuit will keep you warmer and allow you to be in the water a bit longer as well as providing a little extra buoyancy.

A surfboard or something to ride on is your primary consideration. If you have no intention of standing up to ride waves and you can kick to move in the water, start with a boogie board. You don't have to swim too far out and you can ride the whitewater and have a lot of fun.

For those who don't stand, but want a little more challenge, try a wave ski. A wave ski is a surfboard that you sit on and paddle with a kayak paddle. I've worked with surfers with amputations, brain injuries, spinal cord injuries, and cerebral palsy who paddle into waves and have a blast with less than an hour of instruction.

Lay-down paddleboards are another option for someone who doesn't stand. They are a traditional water board that can be paddled for long distances and provide a great upper body workout. In California and Hawaii, there are paddleboard races that span 20 miles or more that run between islands. While not what one thinks of first as surfing, paddle boarding is a very traditional waterman sport.

Stand-up surfing takes a bit more practice to accomplish. The size of the board is important; the longer and wider a board, the more stable platform to stand on. Choosing a nine-foot board gives a better chance to stand up than riding a six-foot board. Longer boards are easier to paddle as there is more flotation, keeping you on top of the water.

Practice first in the whitewater - a lot! Get the feel of the water pushing you before you attempt to stand. See if you can change the direction of the board by leaning it side-to-side while moving forward. Try to push your trunk up keeping your hips on the board. Once you get comfortable riding on your belly, it's time to stand. After practicing on the beach (many times) try to "pop up," a move that involves a transition from your belly directly to your feet. It's a challenging move, but with practice, becomes second nature. A low center of gravity will make things much easier. Once you get your feet underneath you, keep your knees bent and stay low, arms out for balance, then breathe, relax, and smile...you're surfing.

Additional instruction from an experienced surfing instructor can be very valuable and make your first surfing experiences very positive. Paddling out a few days in a row will help to cement the experience providing muscle memory for the moves and motivation for the next paddle out.

Whether you choose to stand up, sit, or lay down to experience surfing...it's all surfing. My guess is that when you paddle out the first time you'll experience the "stoke" ...a very positive, unique and hard-to-describe feeling. If you surf, you already know. If you don't, go out for a paddle and find it. It involves tapping into one of the world's greatest energy sources and harnessing that energy for a great time.

Check out DS/USA's SummerFest calendar for surfing events close to you.

Mahalo!

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