

Helen RUSSELL

Twitter @helengoth
www.hrussell.co.uk

PHOTOS: BRITISH CANOEING UNLESS STATED.

I WAS DELIGHTED TO HAVE THE OPPORTUNITY TO INTERVIEW HELEN RUSSELL. AN ALREADY VERY SUCCESSFUL TRIATHLETE, A COMPETITOR IN QUADRATHLONS AND SUP RACING! POLITICS, DIVERSITY, EQUALITY, AND COMMUNITY ARE INTEGRAL TO HELEN'S IDENTITY. I FOUND OUR CONVERSATION FASCINATING AND INSPIRING.



Photographer: Graham Woolven

INTERVIEWS: EMMA LOVE
AFTER RECEIVING OVER 180 APPLICATIONS FROM AROUND THE COUNTRY, BRITISH CANOEING, CANOE WALES, AND THE SCOTTISH CANOE ASSOCIATION WERE PLEASED TO ANNOUNCE THE #SHEPADDLES AMBASSADORS FOR 2022/2023. TWENTY-ONE INSPIRATIONAL WOMEN WHO ARE PIVOTAL IN PROMOTING AND ENCOURAGING MORE WOMEN AND GIRLS TO GET ON THE WATER. IN THIS SERIES OF INTERVIEWS, EMMA LOVE CHATS WITH EIGHT OF THE AMBASSADORS ABOUT ALL THINGS SUP!
WWW.WOTBIKINIPADDLEBOARDING.CO.UK
@WOTBIKINISUP



How did you first become interested in paddling?

I started kayaking because I wanted to participate in quadrathlons. These competitive races consist of swimming, kayaking, cycling and running. I joined Worcester Canoe Club; I was awful but determined to learn how to do it!

What attracted you to paddleboarding?

Paddleboarding, for me, just feels a bit freer, a bit more liberating than kayaking. I started by completing a taster SUP session with Fladbury Paddle Club in the first year of COVID. I always had in mind to combine it with the elements of the multi-sport, either 'SUP Bike Run' or 'Swim SUP Run' triathlons. But then, I developed an interest in standalone paddleboard racing. And I must admit I have caught the bug! From the atmosphere to the community – I love it!

Which races have you competed in?

Last year I entered the NISCO entry-level category and will be again this year. The first GB race series I competed in was Cardiff Bay, followed by the Battle of the Thames. This year, I participated in Cardiff Bay and Bewl Lake; which was so windy it took 3.5 hours (it should have taken less than two hours) to complete 12 kilometres. But I was determined and did finish!



Photo: Supjunkie

Does paddling help with your mental health?

I lost my partner to COVID during the pandemic; we had been together for 16 years. So being able to get out on the river either with other people or by myself, surrounded by nature, and with a focus on paddling, I find, is very healing and is helping me through the grieving process.

You have a passion for encouraging diversity in sport. What's the origin of this?

I've always been involved in equalities issues; women's politics, and I was a candidate for the Labour Party in the 2019 general election, where I competed for a Tory-safe seat!

How does your political drive tie into your role as a #ShePaddles Ambassador?

I do not view the title as political but come to the role through a political and general sports angle.

Improving access to sports and increasing diversity is political because we are trying to remove barriers and overcome discrimination. I am keen on raising awareness of paddling amongst underrepresented groups who haven't thought of getting on the water before for whatever reason, including prior negative experience(s) of being involved in sports, which is why I am actively involved in 'pride' sports.

Why do you think there continues to be barriers in the paddling world and in general within the sporting community?

Sport reflects society; it's got the same structural barriers that exist in society. In general, there is still an issue around visibility. If you look at who's involved in the leadership of governing bodies, it's very white male-dominated. If you look at the gender of coaches, it is still very white male-dominated. When communities start to see people who look like them, who are participating, coaching, and leading, diversity will increase.

#ShePaddles

I am pleased with British Canoeing's commitment to equality, diversity, inclusion and belonging. BC taking a leadership role on this is very welcome.



Why do you think there is a need to create participation spaces, for example, for women? For the LGBTQ+ community? For the black community? Some would argue we shouldn't be separating, as this reduces inclusivity and creates segregation.

Where you've got standalone competitions or initiatives creating safe spaces for diversity to feel welcomed and involved, these are more successful in attracting participants.

With current societal structures, I believe there's a need to organise, make changes, to have fun together in a safe space where there are no power imbalances based on 'differences'.

For example, British Canoeing's Inclusion Survey identified that, "LGBTQ+ often still feel unwelcome in paddling...that fear of being outed and treated poorly on account of their sexuality or gender identity," is very real; they are not well-represented in the paddling community as it is still very much perceived as not a sport for them. It saddens me that there is still a lot of homophobia in sports.

Equally, there's often resistance or hostility to women organising getting together in various spheres of life, right? Whether it's socially, in the workplace or in politics - there's a similar discussion around quotas for MPs, which is a scheme to get more women involved in spaces where there are barriers.

Periods, menopause, body image, sexuality, identity: these conversations are happening now because of safe spaces. When diverse communities are welcomed and involved in

the structures of sport, these topics will become mainstream, but until then, we need to have these safe spaces. There is a need for more schemes like #ShePaddles and #WePaddleTogether.

As well as the #ShePaddles events happening each year around the UK, are there any particular #WePaddle events you would like to highlight?

In July 2022, Pride House Birmingham organised a pilot in partnership with British Canoeing called 'Paddling with Pride', and it was held at the Roundhouse, Birmingham, in the run-up to the Commonwealth Games. Pride House's ambition was to create a

safe, welcoming, inclusive environment and a celebration of the LGBTQ + communities in all things paddling! There was a huge turnout, and many of those who took part had never paddled. It was such a brilliant and positive atmosphere. What I loved about it was that people could look as they wanted; they could be on the water without fear, hostility or abuse, and it was such a safe and friendly space.

It is excellent that there are opportunities to have the confidence to come along and get on the water in a safe, empowering, and welcoming space. I am looking forward to joining this event again in 2023!

Photo: Helen Russell



Savanna

GUDE

@the_paddling_yogi

PHOTOS: CAMERON HOPKIN

IT WAS GREAT INTERVIEWING SAVANNA – I LOVED HER ENTHUSIASM AND ENERGY FOR ALL THINGS SUP! WE CHATTED ABOUT HER GOALS FOR 2023, THIS YEAR'S SCOTTISH WOMEN'S PADDLE SYMPOSIUM AND HER SUCCESS AT THE 2022 WHITE WATER SUP FESTIVAL!



Let's start with a fun question! What's your dream 'must have' food when SUP'ing?

I am obsessed with peanut butter and love it on absolutely anything! Peanut butter on apples, peanut butter on carrots, the list goes on and on. I absolutely love it!

Any personal SUP goals for 2023?

I have two goals. My first is training for my SUP-Yoga qualification, which I plan to do later this year. I've been teaching yoga for about five years, and I now want to combine this with my love of paddleboarding. My long-term plan is to run retreats for women in Scotland, including SUP-Yoga in the programme.

My other goal is to experience solo paddling out on the sea. I plan to complete the British Canoeing Coastal Navigation and Tidal Planning Training award, followed by the Stand Up Paddleboarding Coastal Leader training. These two courses combine the theory of understanding tides, weather, planning a journey in moderate conditions etc., with the practical of leading groups in that environment. I am safety conscious, and understanding the coastal environment is very important. I'm happy to go out with friends who are much more experienced, knowledgeable, and know the seascape. But I would like to have a greater understanding before going out alone.

Why do you think the #ShePaddles initiative is important?

When you do outdoor courses, it's usually with many guys, and that's not a bad thing, you know? But, as a woman, you realise you are in the minority. The #ShePaddles movement is great because it gives us role models. I remember seeing Jessica Phillip and Emy McLeod when they were both ambassadors and feeling so inspired. And I love how #ShePaddles gives you a community! You suddenly realise, "Oh, there are other women" out there doing this too.

What continues to draw you to the outdoors and paddleboarding?

I love SUP! It helps me switch off from my job, which can be stressful. It's nice to have a hobby where I can chill out and let go for a little bit.

When I was very young, I wasn't very happy and struggled at school. I joined a Venture Trust programme designed to introduce young people to the outdoors. As part of this programme, you can choose, plan, and go on an expedition. A lot of what we did was paddling-based and in a very remote area. It was excellent! And it had a very beneficial effect on my life and helped me understand how being outdoors can positively impact me. I think all schools around the UK should have programmes like this; the mental health benefits can last a lifetime.

#ShePaddles

#ShePaddles

"The Scottish Women's Paddling Symposium was such a safe environment, where women were made to feel comfortable and welcome."



White Water SUP Fest 5-6th August
www.standuppaddleboarduk.com

Scottish Canoe Association
Comann Curach na h-Alba
www.canoescotland.org/womens-courses-events

#ShePaddles

Who are your paddling inspirations?

Cal Major is so inspirational, and it is cool to observe how mentally and physically tough she is. Equally, and as corny as this sounds, everyone inspires me. Different people and their travelling journeys are nice to see and to get comfort from.

And do you have a mentor?

I have never had a mentor, but I would quite like one. I am very fortunate with Adam Burns, the manager at Willogate Activity Centre, where I used to work. He sparked my love for SUP and is a brilliant person who was encouraging and continues to encourage me to do SUP training and gain my qualifications. I plan to do my SUP Coastal Leader with him.

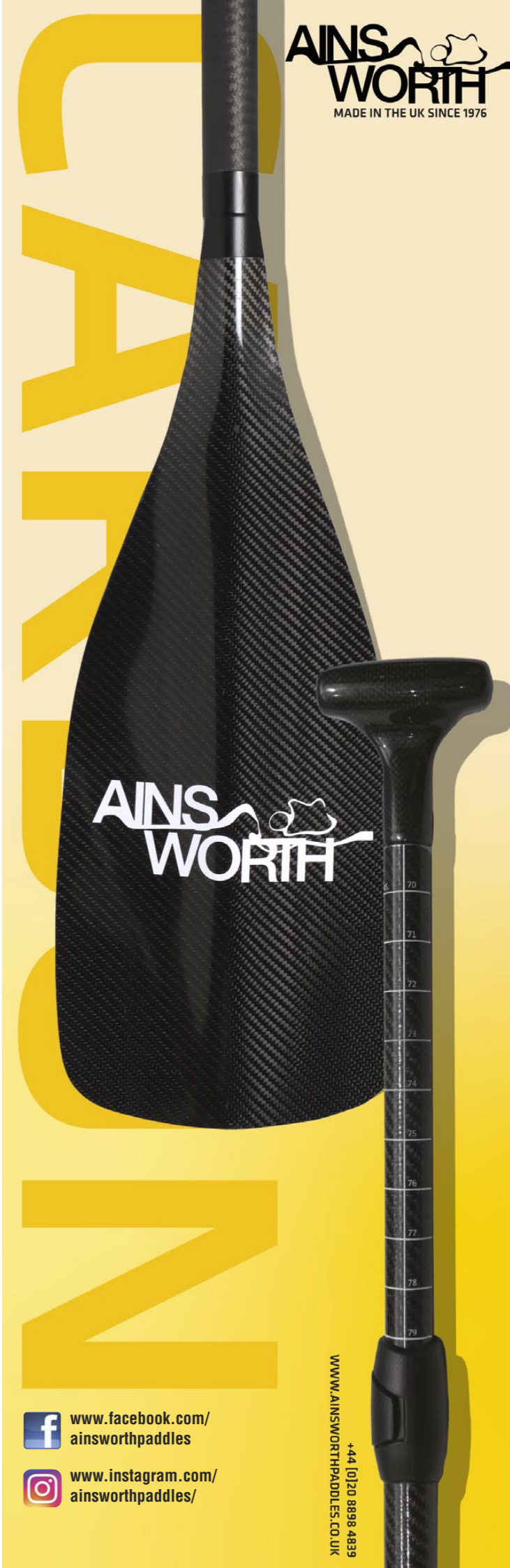
Any paddling events over the past year that have been memorable ?

My partner and I attended the White Water SUP Festival in North Wales run by Anthony and Lianne Ing (Stand Up Paddleboard UK) for the first time last summer, which was super fun, and I was thrilled to come third in the women's SUPX race!

This year's Scottish Women's Paddle Symposium was a fantastic experience. It was my first time on the organising committee, which was very exciting. Women from Scotland, Wales, England, and Germany joined us! What I loved about the conference was that women coaches ran it for women. It was such a safe environment where women were made to feel comfortable and welcome. And everyone had the opportunity to try new things if they wanted to, go out and paddle, plus socialise with other inspiring women paddlers. I am already really looking forward to next year's, which will be May 17 - 19th, 2024. Put it in your diaries!

What would you recommend to women applying to the Ambassador programme this year?

Just do it. The more you're in your head about it, the more you can make excuses not to apply but do it! I realise that sounds scary, and it is scary to make an application. But this is the best advice I can give - just to do it and then think about it when it's happening. And don't overthink it; that's the best thing. Just take that step forward.



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WWW.AINSWORTHPADDELS.CO.UK +44 [0]20 8898 4839