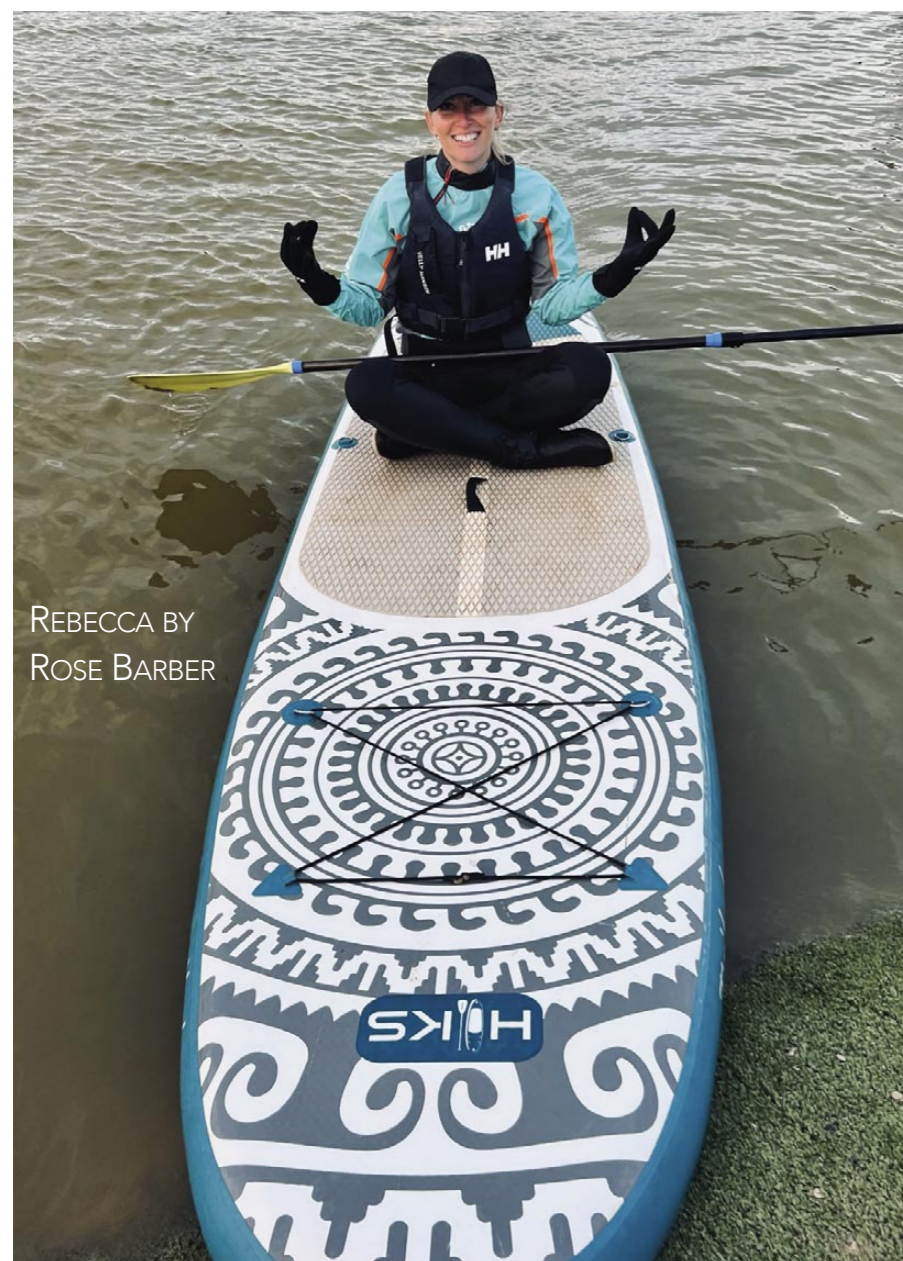


Rebecca EDWARDS

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FOR REBECCA, FOOTBALL WAS HER DREAM BUT, LIFE IN THE END TOOK HER DOWN A VERY DIFFERENT PATH. WE CHAT ABOUT HOW PLAYING SPORT AS A CHILD MADE HER FEEL, HER DIAGNOSIS AND LIVING WITH ADHD PLUS HOW THESE EXPERIENCES HAVE INFLUENCED THE SUP PROJECTS SHE IS CURRENTLY INVOLVED IN DEVELOPING.



REBECCA BY
ROSE BARBER

Have you always been very active?

Yes. I have always been involved in competitive sports; I played football for West Ham but had to retire due to injury just as the women's game was turning professional. I then worked for Colchester United, where I created a women's football academy, which was exciting and meant that I could be involved with football at a high level. But it was, admittedly, bittersweet not being able to play myself. Football was my dream, but life, in the end, just took me on a different path.

Did such a big change of direction impact you?

I really hit a bad patch with my mental health. Football was all I knew, and outside of my work as a PE teacher, I played football every other minute of the day. It was a tough time, as you can imagine. From being very active as a footballer, I trained three to four times a week and spent a whole day playing. Then suddenly, not having it in my life - I needed to swap that with something, and SUP has made such a big difference.

You are very open about having ADHD; how has this affected you?

I had lots of struggles as a child and played every sport possible because I knew it made me feel better. It was as an adult that I received my diagnosis. The only way I can describe how I experience ADHD is; I have a web browser open on my computer, with 100 tabs open. And I'm just dotting around and working on each one. Because of my hyperactivity, everything is at 100 miles per hour, and I want it done five minutes ago!

Do you find SUP helps you with your mental health?

SUP is like a reset button, and it helps me put all those tabs back in order and slowly brings me down. Getting on my board and paddling, even if it is just for five minutes, helps me prioritise what I need to do for the day. Being on the water physically makes me stop. And when I sit there, I reflect, enabling me to think.

#ShePaddles

PHOTO BY REUBEN SWEETMAN



How have your own experiences of mental health influenced your choice of projects you're developing?

I'm currently discussing with a charity specialising in supporting services, including the army, fire, police, and the NHS. As part of their rehabilitation, the aim is to bring them down and have the time to enjoy the lake.

You run your own business, Mersea Boating Lake, which includes paddling and open-water swimming on Mersea Island, Essex. How did you discover such a beautiful spot?

During lockdown, when we were allowed to do just one walk a day, my family and I took the opportunity to explore the island, and

that is when I saw the boating lake being dug out. I asked if I could submit a business plan, and it went from there! I am fortunate; the owners support what I do here. I firmly believe that we are all destined to find our role in life, and I have been so fortunate to have found mine.

PHOTO BY EMILY CROOKS



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To find out more about the #ShePaddles weekend and SUP Squad, please visit www.merseaboatinglake.com.

Are there any initiatives you are currently involved with?

I recently linked up with GBSUP. We have been working together to create GB SUP Junior, which I am excited about. We hosted our first race at the end of last year, which was great. The kids loved it. They felt like all their weeks of training had come together, and they were doing something they enjoyed.

How many children are you supporting locally with the race initiative?

I run a children's SUP programme at the lake and currently have up to 25 children (8-18yrs old) attending twice a week. Each session is a couple of hours long and includes learning to look after their kit, developing their paddling skills and enjoying playing. As they move up through the levels, they can join our SUP race squad, the 'Mersea Lakers'. This opens the pathways to competing regionally and nationally. Our group are excited about racing and love the competitiveness of it all.

SUP race boards and accompanying equipment are a big investment – what do you say to parents whose children may be interested in the sport?

As a parent, I know that if my child got into the scene and further down the line, I would have to purchase a board costing around a £1,000, then realistically, I am not going to be super encouraging. I've been speaking to GBSUP about this, and we all agree these races need to be inclusive. If a nine-year-old turns up on a 10' 6" ISUP, which is far too big for them, that's cool. We want to support the children and encourage them to participate and enjoy the SUP racing experience.

As part of your role as a #ShePaddles Ambassador, are you setting yourself any personal challenges or running an event?

I am pleased to be organising a #ShePaddles weekend this year (23-25th June). This will be a warm, welcoming, and inclusive space for 120 women to come together, camp on-site, and enjoy many activities, including early morning swimming, campfires, singing, yoga, and a party. On Sunday, we're going to run a fun mini-triathlon! This will include SUP or kayaking, running, walking, jogging, and swimming. I think it will be a really rewarding experience for everyone involved, and I look forward to it.



#ShePaddles