

# Sarah BLUES

@plussizepaddler



**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!

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SARAH BLUES HAS A PASSION FOR HELPING WOMEN OVERCOME COMMON BARRIERS TO PADDLEBOARDING. HER INCREDIBLE ENERGY HAS LED HER TO DEVELOP THE #PADDLEHERWAY & #PADDLEKITHERWAY INITIATIVES. NOW ON HER BRITISH CANOEING COACHING JOURNEY, WE CHATTED ABOUT ALL THINGS SUP AND SARAH'S PLANS FOR 2023!



PHOTO: ALICE CALLOW / RED PADDLE CO



PHOTO: DANIELLE WATSON / RED PADDLE CO

**When did you first try paddleboarding?**

I first had a go SUP'ing in May 2020. I still remember how quickly I realised I was really bad at paddleboarding, but how much I loved it!

**And how did you build confidence and skills?**

In that first year, I attended some lessons locally, and then I found Dorset Race Club. Joining this community helped my progression massively because I was paddling with and surrounded by many abilities, including coaches and instructors. By the end of that first summer, I knew I didn't want to stop paddling, even with the onset of the colder weather. As you can imagine, it was an absolute game-changer for me when I found out they continued to paddle through the winter. I was hooked!

**You are now en route to becoming a qualified British Canoeing Sheltered Water SUP Coach. What made you decide to start your coaching journey?**

My coaching journey started last year, and, to be honest, I wasn't sure if I wanted to go down this route. My motivation came from having many conversations with women telling me about their poor SUP experiences, including not being able to find coaches or instructors who would take them out on the water because of their body shape and size! In response, I approached and worked with some awesome women coaches on my #PaddleHerWay initiative. And to my surprise, I found that I loved the coaching aspect of it. I have completed British Canoeing Core Coach training and SW SUP orientation. The next step is my coach assessment which I plan to complete this year.

**Tell me more about the #PaddleHerWay initiative.**

#PaddleHerWay is an initiative created to help women overcome common barriers to paddle boarding, become more confident and learn to

paddle safely. These sessions are for women, designed by women and run by women. It is about creating a safe learning environment for women to work on their skills in a very non-judgmental and fun way and feel confident to go off and develop these in the long term. Last year I ran four days, and 130 women attended in total.

**What motivated you to apply for the #ShePaddles Ambassador role?**

For me, it was about gaining greater access to a forum to discuss the issues facing women. #PaddleHerWay had already started to evolve (when I applied), and I was having, and continue to have, many discussions with women about the barriers they experience. For example, the standard taught self-rescue (climbing back on your board from the side, unaided) is a huge barrier for many. Whereas being taught how to climb on from the back is, often, a game changer! Becoming an ambassador means I can get under the skin of what is being taught in BC coaching courses and ask how self-rescues are being implemented up and down the country.

**Many readers will know of your #PaddleKitHerWay initiative. How is this progressing?**

I set this up because women told me they were struggling to find a kit that fitted them. I decided to approach leading paddle brands and find out why this was the case. Their initial response was, 'no demand for kit for the average (UK 16) and larger sizing'. So, in 2020 I decided to create a questionnaire. Five hundred fifty women responded, and my research showed 70% of women struggled to find kit, and more of those were above a 16 than below a size 10.

When presented with my findings, I found brands began to come on board, and we were having positive conversations about expanding their sizing. But with the economic recession hitting (among other things),

#ShePaddles



PHOTO: SARAH BLUES

many companies began to backtrack. I decided to try again, and 1700 women filled in my questionnaire this year. My new research shows the need is now even greater! I have gone back to those same brands with my research and asked the same question; why is it that, as a size 20, I easily find regular clothes on the high street, but I struggle to buy paddling kit?

**Do you feel optimistic that brands will start to offer greater variability?**

Having these conversations again is hard work, but more women are approaching these companies and asking the same questions. Plus, everybody is heading outdoors, and there is now even greater pressure on brands to make kit available for all. So yes, I am optimistic that we will get there, but we must keep having these conversations.

**Are there any particular brands you currently signpost women to.**

Lomo is leading the way with wetsuits; you can now buy up to a size 30; Sola go up to size 20 in their wetsuits, and TMF, their parent brand, is also up to a size 30. You can find them all online.

**Tell me about your role as a RED Ambassador.**

Red contacted me when I originally launched @plussizepaddler (with about 100 followers on Instagram), and I was asked to become an ambassador in 2021. I chose to accept this role because I like that their technical kit goes up to a size 22 as standard, that their marketing focus is on

the average paddler size, and that they embrace diversity. Their boards are market-leading and great for my size and weight; in fact, their boards were a game-changer in building my confidence on the water.

I have used my Red SUPs for #PaddleHerWay sessions, and women who are size 28/30 have had no issues getting back on these boards and could stand up

on them at the end of the first session. I have not encountered any other boards where it has been possible to achieve this so successfully! They are a great company, and I am pleased to be part of their family.

The Paddle Her Way sessions will run again in 2023 in the southwest, the midlands, north Wales and Essex – look out for dates and booking information on all social media



PHOTO: SARAH BLUES

# Julie KELLY

@juliekelly7730

I CAUGHT UP WITH JULIE KELLY TO HEAR ALL ABOUT THE INSPIRATION BEHIND HER 2023 SUP ADVENTURE, HER LOVE FOR PADDLEBOARDING, THE IMPORTANCE OF COMMUNITY AND WHY IT IS NOW HER TIME TO SHINE!



PHOTO: LYNNE FORD

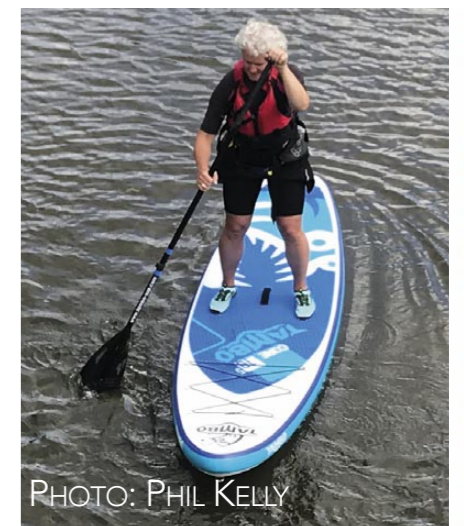


PHOTO: PHIL KELLY

#ShePaddles

**You have challenged yourself to paddle 162 miles in just 11 days from Liverpool to Goole. Where did the inspiration for this SUP journey come from?**

During lockdown, I heard a podcast interview with Jo Moseley (#ShePaddles Ambassador 2019) about the release of her film Brave Enough. The film follows Jo as she paddles from Liverpool to Goole. It highlights her emotional highs and lows, her SUP litter cleans and the money she raised. I had been procrastinating about buying my own SUP. Listening to Jo pushed me to buy one and paddle the same route, encouraging others to join me along the way.

**Are you paddling solo?**

I will be paddling with my friend Lucy Crute-Morris. We have known each other since 1986, when we trained as Physiotherapists in Birmingham. She is also the first person I inspired to buy a SUP. We had planned this trip before I became a #ShePaddles Ambassador, but life got in the way. We start our cross-country SUP adventure on the 1st August, 2023.

**Have you got a daily mileage target?**

Lucy and I recently learned that we would need to paddle around 16 miles a day to complete the trip within our eleven-day target.

**Do you have a personal connection to the route you are paddling?**

My husband Phil is from Liverpool, so that is the westerly connection, and I am from Hull on the east coast. This route is an excellent way to connect those two parts of my world.

**And for you and Lucy?**

Lucy and I have navigated our own personal journeys, managing the various difficulties that life has thrown at us. For us, this trip is a #ShePaddles adventure and a great chance to inspire others to join us. The trip probably represents the definitive 'life's too short' attitude!

#ShePaddles



ALL PHOTOS: PHIL KELLY



**Will you be connecting with other paddlers along the route?**

I took part in The Great Tour, a bike circumnavigation of the UK coast. I joined the tour cycling from Morecombe to Machynlleth (440 miles). We had day cyclists join us, which was a great feature of the ride. This is how we want our SUP adventure to be. We want local paddlers and clubs to paddle with us for a few hours or a full day along our journey. As you can tell, we want to celebrate getting out on the water and encourage others to join the growing SUP community.

**What made you want to become a #ShePaddles Ambassador?**

I wanted to inspire women to leave their comfort zones and try something new. At 55 years old, my outlook is, 'why not have a go'? The UK has some beautiful waterways, and SUP is accessible to women. I love the sense of community and support from like-minded people, and finding your 'tribe' opens up lots of fun and adventures.

**Who has been your paddling inspiration?**

I met Louise Royle when I joined the Kingfisher Canoe Club in Abingdon, Oxfordshire, in 2017. She has inspired me

to push myself and not be afraid to try new things. Her energy and enthusiasm are limitless, and I appreciate her guidance and support. I still plan to explore the world of white-water SUP, as Louise has shown me what is possible.

**Tell me about your SUP journey.**

I joined the local canoe club in 2017 after dabbling with sit-on kayaks, sea kayaking, and SUP. The club runs a yearly Dart trip and having never tried white water kayaking, this was my baptism of fire! I spent more time in the water than in my kayak and found it both frightening and exhilarating. I loved the adrenaline rush and the enormous sense of achievement when I managed to stay upright. I attempted to learn to roll in the pool sessions but just couldn't manage it and felt that kayaking was not for me. COVID and losing our clubhouse meant a break in my water-based activities, and I had watched Louise pumping up her SUP and realised that was my way back onto the water. I bought my first SUP in 2021.

**What drives you to keep venturing out on your paddleboard?**

I lived in Abingdon for over twenty years but had never ventured onto the Thames. Discovering SUP has been a turning point and

has made the water accessible to me. Experiencing the river from the SUP gives such a different viewpoint. I have seen my first Kingfisher, and I often litter pick when I'm out, as it's important to protect our wildlife and nature, especially from plastic pollution.

**Is being connected to a community important to you?**

Yes! Now that I live in Yorkshire, I have connected with a fantastic group of people through the local activity group Active Filey. They run sea swimming sessions four times a week plus running, walking, and cycling sessions. We all have such a laugh, jumping in the waves, swimming in the dark in our wet suits with head torches. Members are now buying their SUPs and are keen to learn more. I am now helping Active Filey become affiliated with British Canoeing.

**What would you say to anyone reading this interview who thinks they are too old, too unfit or lacking the confidence to start new adventures?**

My husband was diagnosed with incurable cancer, and I thought I was going to be a widow at 42. My son also nearly died as a baby from meningitis. So, I realise life can be too short. My perspective is, I have got to look after myself; otherwise, I cannot look after anybody else. My activities are a sort of self-preservation. I like targets – something to aim for. And with the kids now grown up, it is time for my husband and me to shine. I don't care what other people think, and I don't care if they think I am crazy. I would encourage everyone to go out there, have a laugh, have a go, and you never know – you might inspire yourself and someone else!

IF YOU WOULD LIKE TO FIND OUT MORE ABOUT JULIE & LUCY'S PADDLING TRIP, PLEASE GET IN TOUCH WITH JULIE VIA INSTAGRAM @JULIEKELLY7730