

# Gemma Palmer-Dighton

From her first SUP taster session in 2015 to becoming an approachable champion for women and a voice for the global ethnic minority on the water. I caught up with Gemma to discuss her paddling journey and the high points over the past year.

**Photos:** Nick Dighton unless stated.

## Follow my SUP journey @GetGemma

### What sparked your interest in paddleboarding?

First, anyone who knows me knows I love to try new things and develop new skills. So in 2015, when my local district council advertised SUP as one of the healthy lifestyle taster sessions with the help of Google, I found out more and was intrigued. Not one to miss a great opportunity, I signed up then and there for a paddleboarding and kayaking session with the Grafham Water Centre, which is dedicated to watersports. I enjoyed both experiences and went away particularly excited about SUP.

**Photo:** Claire Barber



### What was the decider for you to switch from competing in triathlons to focusing on paddleboarding and, in particular, the race scene?

I've struggled with a reoccurring ankle injury and had to sit out running. I was missing getting out through the seasons to explore my local neighbourhood, nature reserves, reservoir trails and woodlands. I knew I had to develop a creative way to train which would support my return to running. Having got my first iSUP the day before the first lockdown in 2021, I found that paddleboarding offered me everything I needed, including health, fitness, the opportunity to master a skill and look after my well-being. SUP has been an unexpected joy, and I have been able to transfer my learnings from competing in multisports events to SUP racing. Why compete? It is about pushing my comfort zones, exploring how that feels and seeing where I can improve. SUP racing is where I can compete not only with the clock and with other competitors but with myself. I thrive on this and love it!

### Which race did you first compete in?

My first competitive race was The Paddle Skedaddle in May 2021, a 26km race run by Norfolk Outdoor Adventures. I was thrilled to complete the race and finished 5/15 (women) and 42/58 (overall). Especially as I took a dunk on the Broads. This race takes place on the Norfolk Broads, an environment that should not be underestimated. Paddling on this type of water can be demanding because you are racing in exposed sections of rivers and broads, changing water flows and wind. You're amongst other leisure users, including pleasure cruisers and sailboats tacking cross river. As racers, we were exposed to the elements, whether it was the wind, the rain or the heat. And, having competed several times in this particular

environment, I have had all those experiences on the same day! Taking part in The Paddle Skedaddle will always hold a special place in my heart as my first race. It made me decide that I wanted to compete and leisurely paddle. The next natural step for me was to invest in a 14ft hardboard so that I could train to paddle further for longer, more efficiently and faster).

### And, have there been other races that have been notable for you?

In 2021, as well as The Paddle Skedaddle, I took part in the East Anglia SUP Initiative (8km) on Hickling Broad, which is when I first met the welcoming race community. Since the racing bug hit me, I planned that in 2022 I'd give myself a chance to experience as many

different types of races in distance, disciplines, series and locations. I've paddled Medway River Raid, Loch Awesome, Paddle Skedaddle, Battle of the Thames, the Norfolk Broads Ultra and finally, a SUP Bike Run, which I like to call a SUPathlon. Next year I'll focus on a few key races in the GBSUP calendar and those that I couldn't fit into my diary this year, including The National Championships, Trent100, and the Great Glen Challenge. For me, Paddle Skedaddle is my favourite race and distance, but my biggest achievement was the Norfolk Broads Ultra which is 72km paddled over two days. What made this race so notable was my overcoming both the distance and the weather conditions resulting in my ranking third out of the eleven women competitors!



Local fete promoting SUP awareness



NBU PaddledItMate met great friends



Emy, another ambassador and I catch up at Loch Awe



Photo: Bob Smith



Photo: Claire Barber



## What advice would you give to those wanting to try SUP racing?

I think what can hold people back from trying racing is the question, can I physically do it? My answer is yes! But you must do it your way; it is your journey. For longer races, of course, physically, you have to give yourself time to plan, prepare and understand how your body responds in the weeks and days leading up to the race and on the day. I also suggest seeking the advice and input of an experienced instructor initially and then a SUP race coach. There aren't many coaches and SUP racers inland in Cambridgeshire, where I mainly paddle on rivers. Because I am self-taught, I benefited from race clinics but mainly from one-to-one video analysis with Martin Rendle, owner of Norfolk Outdoor Adventures, aka NOA. Having his feedback about my paddle stroke was

an absolute game-changer. The result was a much-improved paddle stroke, instantly taking minutes off 5k time trial times! But it is not just the physical but also the psychological that needs to be trained. I believe that racing is a case of mind over body. A huge part of the psychology is not comparing yourself to others unless it's positive, which I realise is difficult. It is instead about focusing on what you can personally achieve in the environment you are competing in because, in an instant, anything can change on the water. You need to be resilient enough to pivot.

## What have been the high points over the last year with your racing and in your role as a ShePaddles Ambassador?

So many high points! Mainly contributing through being a visible and approachable champion for women and a voice for the global ethnic minority on

the water. From meeting and getting to know the fantastic people on the water, the racing community here in the UK and paddlers in the USA, to becoming an ambassador for Turtle Bay Paddlesports & Panda Board Sports and supporting British Canoeing with the promotion of the newly released SUP Safer course. I'm actively looking at ways to inspire and support, starting locally with my paddlers in SUP Huntingdon, a Facebook community to take to the water and achieve their goals. To do this, I'm qualifying as a British Canoeing Paddlesports Leader and starting my SUP race coach course quals. People often stop me with questions about the sport and my equipment; there's a real appetite to give it a go. But, I have to admit, the one that gave me a real buzz was receiving a message from SUP World Rankings with the news that I'd made it onto the long distance list. Not only that, I was midway, ranking 122 out of 280! I remember thinking, this is amazing! To receive this kudos is like seeing your name in lights.

Thanks and acknowledgements to my husband, Nick, family and friends who support me with my paddle adventures. SUP Huntingdon and OG's; Lucy Small from SUPaholic; Adrian Warren, Phil Jobling & Stephen Humphrey's. Graeme Williams at Turtle Bay Paddlesports for the opportunity to join the family as an ambassador. Martin Rendall at Norfolk Outdoors Adventure and the welcoming NOA race team. Sam Rutt at Barefoot Ocean Athlete and the community, Grant Barlett especially for his encouragement to get into racing and Anna Nadolna at SUPer Whale for putting on epic SUP clinics with paddler aficionados like Grant Barlett and Blue Ewer.

Meeting like-minded inspirational people at shows with Sabrina Pace-Humphreys

