

# Cathy

# MILES

@the\_disabled\_paddler



**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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FROM CHALLENGING DISCRIMINATION TO REACHING OUT TO OTHERS WHO FACE THEIR OWN BARRIERS, CATHY IS AN ABSOLUTE TOUR DE FORCE. WE CAUGHT UP ONLINE TO CHAT ABOUT CATHY'S MEDICAL JOURNEY AND HOW THIS HAS SHAPED HER PERSPECTIVE ON WHY WE NEED TO EMBRACE INCLUSIVITY AS A SUP COMMUNITY.



**You identify yourself as the disabled paddler. Can you tell me about this?**

I was on my third length of a swim fit session at my local swimming pool, and I just felt like I'd been hit on the back of the head with a crowbar! I had an inkling that I'd had a stroke because I couldn't get my right arm to move properly. My GP sent me immediately for a CT scan and discovered a 4 cm by 10 cm brain haemorrhage, an 'arteriovenous malformation' which is a hereditary condition.

Twenty-four hours later, I was having a shower, and I could feel the headache returning. Shampoo notwithstanding, I knew I had to get back to my bed, and I turned off the water, started crawling and passed out on the bedroom floor. Two and a half weeks later, I woke up in the hospital post having had brain surgery!

**How long was it before you were able to return home?**

I was taken by air ambulance to Kings Hospital (July 2017) and released from the Brain Injury Support Unit at the end of November. So, five months in all. The staff who supported and treated me were just

amazing. When you think, I was paralyzed and in a wheelchair for four months, and then by the time I was discharged, I could walk again!

**What has been the long-term impact of having such a major injury?**

I can no longer write; I need assistance carrying things, I find it difficult to retain information, and I am not so confident. Physically, the right side of my body has been affected.

**Are you currently training to be a British Canoeing Sheltered Water SUP Leader?**

Yes! I have completed my leadership training twice now because of my difficulty retaining information. And, I have a special consideration from British Canoeing that says I don't have to stand. This is because if my foot won't play ball on a particular day, I can do nothing to make it point forward. It sometimes can be pointing forwards, but at other times, it sticks out at an angle which I can only describe as pointing at three o'clock. It looks like a weird ballet position! Consequently, I cannot stand and instead must kneel on my board. Otherwise, I do everything expected for this remit, including the rescues.

**Did you SUP before your injury?**

No, my first time was after my stroke and I took my dogs on my board too! I went with friends to Action Watersports (Lydd, Kent), and we were determined to have fun. I had no idea whether I could stand, but photographic evidence shows I did!

**And you are going to try WW SUP soon?**

I am, indeed! I have paddled on the sea, and my local water is the River Medway, but I still hanker after an adrenaline rush. I am heading to Holme Pierrepont, Nottingham later this year, and I'll probably be on my knees the whole time. I just accept that's how it works for me.



#ShePaddles

CATHY BY HELEN MATTHEWS



**Do you encounter prejudice in SUP?**

Some online SUP groups believe the 'standard' to be considered a 'proper' paddle boarder is being able to stand. And they argue that if you are on your knees, you haven't much experience! I disagree with this. I paddled 819 km in total last year, but because I must kneel a lot of the time, this automatically puts me in the inexperienced bracket?

**There is a lot of discussion about the 'right way' to climb back up on a SUP from the water is from the side. What are your thoughts on this?**

This discussion frustrates me. I can only get back on from the end of my board (and not the side) using a line by putting it through the centre handle. I hold one end in my right hand, and with my left hand, I pull myself up. It works a treat every single time. It's brilliant.

**Do you use an electric pump?**

There is no way I could pump up my board by hand. And yet some argue (again) to be a 'proper' paddler, you must not use an electric pump. This makes me feel automatically excluded!

As a community, we must reflect on what we say and our language. We automatically discriminate by putting these statements out there about the 'right' and 'wrong' ways to SUP. We need to be inclusive with the language we use. We need to be inclusive in encouraging everyone, whatever their barriers are, to join the sport. And inclusive with how we support individuals on the water.

**And your personal inspiration?**

Anna Teubler and Ash Clare have been my inspiration. And after watching Jo Mosely's film, 'Brave Enough', I was overwhelmed. Her film prompted me to set up the Disabled Paddler. And I now receive daily messages from all over the world! For example, a woman in Australia got in contact to say her husband, who was a very keen surfer, had recently had a stroke. But was determined to return to surfing. I get messages from individuals describing the difficulties and barriers they face, and interestingly, around 70% of those making contact are women.

**Since having your stroke, has your perspective on life changed?**

Absolutely! If you are not doing it for yourself, who are you doing it for? Having had a near-death experience, the consultant asked my husband if he wanted me to slip away because he could not guarantee my outcome (to which my husband replied, no, save her. She is Irish, and she will only come back and haunt me!) I firmly believe life is short; you must grab it by the short and curlies and squeeze!



CATHY BY ANA TEUBLER