

The first thing that comes to mind when you think about surfing is the huge Pacific swells and the Hawaii 5-0 theme. Maybe California, South America or Australia. But Central Canada? Surfing in the land of hockey heroes on frozen lakes? Well, cast your stereotypes and misgivings aside, my friends. Surfing is alive and well in Canada, as is Stand-Up Paddleboarding (SUP), an emerging sport with a growing following in the Great White North.

Located on Georgian Bay in Wasaga Beach, Ontario, Blu Wave designs and manufactures quality boards in shapes that provide optimal paddling in a variety of conditions that are commonly found in Canada. It was founded in 2010 by avid traveler, paddler and surfer, Aaron Pilon.

Pilon discovered stand-up paddleboarding on a trip to a surf town on the Pacific Coast of Mexico. He figured that a combination of his two favourite sports — surfing and kayaking — would be a hit in the lake-rich cottage countries across Canada.

This abundance of lakes and a cottage culture provide the perfect canvas for a number of different surf-related activities.

For example, the Blu Wave website explains that the smaller cottage country lakes of Ontario offer a great venue for flat water paddling, a zen-like activity that offers a tremendous fitness benefit. And with a favourable wind direction and intensity, and the Great Lakes can provide some pretty sweet waves and a unique and exciting surfing experience in Canada.

Spotlight on Business Magazine spoke with founder and owner Aaron Pilon about SUP around the world and Blu Wave's support for the exciting and very accessible sport.

Hitting the Lake Standing Up!





“On one of my surf vacations, I started to see stand-up paddleboarding at some coastal destinations,” Pilon explains. “The paddling I’ve done in Ontario around Collingwood, I would kayak out in Georgian Bay. Those days when the winds would pick up and you get three-or- four-foot swells, I’d grab my sea kayak and take full advantage of the conditions.”

The wheels started turning. The prospect of a paddle board that you could both stand on and catch waves, should conditions become favourable, became attractive to Pilon. “My first SUP experience was in a small Mexican town. The next year I went to a surf town in Chile and met a fellow surfer and a board designer who would design boards as a hobby, just for himself,” Pilon points out.

That particular trip was supposed to be a three-week surfing getaway. It turned into a six-week discover, as Pilon began to think seriously about designing new boards specific to the Canadian experience.

Even for those of us unfamiliar with SUP and surfing, it seems obvious that the designs of the boards would have to consider conditions and varying uses. Pilon explains that his unique designs account for such variances.

“There is definitely a distinction between a board you would use on flat water in a small inland lake versus a board you would use to surf an ocean. Shorter boards that look more like a performance surf board are designed for waves and more of the typical surfing conditions. Flat-water boards tend to be longer and narrower with more of a pointy nose on them. More like the look of a kayak. We call them ‘touring boards.’”

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Pilon also points out that there is a category of board design that does a bit of everything. “There’s a board design in the middle which we call ‘all-rounders’ and they are just what you’d assume them to be. They are made for a variety of conditions. So a 10-6 or 11-6 all rounder, you could use on flat water or to surf small waves.”

So what about the surfing conditions in Central Canada?

“The really interesting thing that many people don’t realize is that, the Great Lakes are basically inland seas. In certain conditions they feel very much like an ocean. Great Lake surfing has grown in popularity over the last decade. And stand-up paddleboarding has brought people into sort of a surfing culture, and has spawned an interest in Great Lake surfing. SUP has brought this culture to more people.”

Unlike ocean surfing in destinations like Hawaii and Mexico,





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would say forget it! I'm not going out today. It's too windy and rough!”

Blu Wave is proud to be on the forefront of building the sport of SUP in Canada. There are, in fact, competitions on the race side and on the surf side of this emerging sport. “There are distance races from 5K to 20K. And even some of the marathon canoe and kayak races like the Muskoka River X, which is a 120km race, are now offering a SUP division,” Pilon explains. “There's another one up in the Yukon that now has an SUP category. So it's happening all around these types of competitions.”

the waters of the Great Lakes and many northern bodies of water can be frigid. Pilon laughs about the adverse conditions being part of the quirky Canadian surf culture. “Great Lake surfers are quite a hardy bunch! They have to be. Most of the best waves in the Great Lakes come in the fall and winter. The water's cold and you don't get ground-swell. So you could surf an ocean wave in Hawaii, and there might not be any wind at all, and you could still be surfing a 10-foot wave. In the Great Lakes, to get waves, they're all wind-generated... Often people say that if you can surf in the Great Lakes, you can surf anywhere.”

In a nutshell, these Great Lake surfers look out their windows, waiting for what the rest of us would consider to be lousy weather, to grab their board and head out to the beach. “We go out on days that a typical ocean surfer

The evolution of the sport is occurring quite quickly, all things considered. The racing side of SUP is becoming less of an add-on to canoe and kayak competitions, and one that is (pardon the pun) standing up on its own. Pilon points out that international sporting bodies are taking notice. “There's a strong movement toward seeing paddleboarding as an Olympic sport in the next decade or so.”

One might assume that the SUP culture resembles that of the coastal surfing scene or that of a snowboarding or an “X-Game”-type philosophy. But Pilon explains that the SUP culture is much more accessible to a wider range of participants at different skill levels of most “extreme” sports. This changes the profile of the SUP culture to be somewhat



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unique.

“The SUP core demographic tends to be a bit older than that of the snowboarding and extreme sport people. I would say generally 30 to 60 years old rather than 15 to 25. You see a lot of athletes that have come into SUP racing that have been competitive athletes in other disciplines, whether it be triathlon, or other paddling disciplines like canoe and kayaking. Some of the top SUP racers in Canada are former Olympic athletes in these other sports. Many have found SUP racing as their second career as an athlete.”

Perhaps the best summation of the SUP experience and Blu Wave’s role in the sport comes from Simon Whitfield, Canadian Olympic Triathlon Gold Medalist. “There’s nothing like open space out on the ocean paddling, it’s cycling without the cars, mountain biking where the ground moves. Beyond paddling the SUP community is special. It’s inclusive. We share a joy for being out on the water, dancing on a board, out exploring... There’s nothing quite like sharing your passion for paddling with like-minded individuals who love to explore. During my sporting career I loved to innovate by asking questions ‘is there another way to do this?’ and looking for creative answers.

When I discovered paddling I was drawn to people who thought the same way. Blu Wave thinks differently, whether it’s the hatch cargo compartment on the Catalina EXP touring board, their paddle surf board shapes or

Aaron’s willingness to listen to me ramble about new design ideas. It is a testament to Blu Wave’s commitment to innovate and explore well beyond the water. It’s great to see a Canadian company finding success in an industry that was once thought to be the exclusive domain of Hawaiians and Californians!”

Pilon confirms that the company’s primary focus is the Canadian market. He certainly doesn’t rule out expanding into other markets down the road, but there are no immediate plans to take the plunge. “U.S. expansion is something we certainly think about. It’s a possibility in the future. The sport has grown exponentially in recent years. In fact, it is definitely the fastest growing water sport in the world. So for the time being, we are going to focus on our home market where we have a pretty cool story to tell. Our customers seem to really like that we are a Canadian company.”

“We are really focused on design and moving the sport forward,” Pilon mentions. “We have a true quality focus as well. We aren’t the most expensive board out there, but what we offer for a medium-to-high-end price point, you get quality, great customer service and a company that actively supports the sport.”

Stand-up paddleboarding has become one of those great accessible sports that almost anyone can enjoy on almost any body of water. So grab a Blu Wave board and hit the beach — and take it at whatever speed you chose! ●