

I'm Proof That...

You Can Whitewater SUP

From Raft Guide with Pro Snowboarding Ambitions to Champion Standup Paddler

By Jayme Moye

Most people try standup paddleboarding for the first time on gentle, flat water. Not Brittany Parker. Equipped with a friend's old gear—a 10-foot foam board from Costco and a paddle held together with duct tape—Brittany attempted a Class III section of the Roaring Fork River. “I pretty much swam the whole time,” she says, laughing. “But I loved it. I think I went out every day for the rest of the summer to learn how to do it right.”

Growing up in the mountains of Colorado, Brittany Parker has always loved board sports like skateboarding and snowboarding. She also loves the Colorado River, which flows past the town where she lives. But she never figured she'd combine the two. “I had aspirations to become a professional snowboarder,” says Brittany, 24. “Then I tried standup paddleboarding on the river.”

It was 2011. Brittany was 19, and had the day off from her summer job as a whitewater rafting guide in Glenwood Springs. She was out on the river with friends doing a fun float when a buddy named Shaine glided by on a standup paddleboard. Brittany was so intrigued that Shaine offered to teach her how to run the river on a standup board. She went with him the very next day, hurtling through the Roaring Fork rapids on the gear he lent her. “I was fascinated,” remembers Brittany. “It looked a lot like surfing, which I'd always wanted to do but didn't think was possible living in Colorado.”

Standup paddleboarding, or SUP, has exploded in the last five years, growing from a handful of surfers SUPing waves in Hawaii to more than 1.5 million participants across the nation. But most of that growth has been among the ocean waves, or in the flat water of bays, lakes, and ponds. What captured Brittany's imagination—river SUP, also known as whitewater SUP, remains largely unknown.

Professional kayakers first began running rivers on standup paddleboards a couple of years ago in mountain towns in Colorado and Oregon. The sport is less popular than other flavors of SUP, perhaps due to its danger and difficulty. The thrill of river SUP comes from paddling through fast-moving water and rapids—the bigger the better. “At first, no one thought a standup paddleboard was a realistic way to get down moving water on a river,” explains Ken Hoeve, a Colorado-based

professional paddler dedicated to promoting the sport. “But people have proven otherwise. Plus, with better-suited designs and materials like plastic and inflatables, the equipment has gotten so much better.”

While Hoeve doesn't think whitewater SUP is any more dangerous than big wave surfing, he wears G-Form pads—pliable body armor—to protect himself on the river. “Rocks and water are what make rapids,” he says. “When you fall, pads give a little extra cushion and help reduce the risk of breaking something.”

Rather than deter Brittany, whitewater SUP's high barrier to entry inspires her. She credits her father, a former high school football player and marine, with giving her the confidence to handle tough sports. “I was an only child, and my dad always said he wanted a boy,” she says. “So he basically treated me like one. Or never treated me like a girl, anyway. He never made me feel like a porcelain doll.”

Brittany's biggest challenge in learning to SUP on the river was getting over the fear of falling. In whitewater rafting, falling into the water is taboo. As a former guide, it was programmed into Brittany's head to keep her body in the raft and out of the water. But that mentality doesn't work when learning to run rapids on a standup board. Falling is part of the equation. “I kept dropping to my knees every time I came up on a scary rapid so I wouldn't fall off,” Brittany says. “Then I realized I was never going to learn that way.”

“Brittany is a legit mountain chick,” says Hoeve, who met Brittany two years ago on the river. “She loves the outdoors, she's got character, and she's really tenacious. She'll paddle with me in the middle of the winter.”

Brittany progressed quickly—whether because of her background in board sports, her experience reading the river as a guide, her steely determination, or what friends call “constant stoke.” It wasn't long before Shaine talked her into her first competition. “Actually, he didn't have to sell me,” Brittany says. “All he did was mention he was going, and I wanted to go, too.”

She showed up at the Rocky Mountain Surf Festival in Glenwood Springs with her loaner gear and an orange PFD—the kind that tourists wear—and immediately felt out of place. “It was the first time I'd met other SUPers—pros like



Nikki Gregg, Dan Gavare, the crew from Badfish,” she says. “They had these really nice boards. I had Costco foam and duct tape.”

The newcomer with the wrong gear surprised everyone with a third-place finish. “I was even ahead of Nikki Gregg for a while, until I wiped out in the Class III section,” says Brittany. “After the race, Nikki came up to me and told me she was thinking, ‘I can't believe this girl is beating me on a foam Costco board.’ I liked her instantly.”

Nikki encouraged Brittany to seek sponsorship, and explained the business side of being a professional athlete. In Brittany's next race, FIBArk in Salida, Colorado, she took second. She's since gotten a new board (sponsored by Badfish), and secured seven other sponsorships, including Level Six and Werner Paddles. Last season, she was featured in SUP the Mag and won the women's SUP Cross race at FIBArk.

This year will be her most exhilarating challenge yet as she heads to Cascade, Idaho, in June to compete in the Payette River Games, the biggest whitewater SUP competition on the planet with the biggest prize purse—\$50,000. She'll go head-to-head with Nikki Gregg, her friend and mentor, plus nearly every professional and wannabe-professional SUP racer in the nation. “I heard that the gals from California—the ocean paddlers—are coming,” Brittany says. “There's going to be carnage.”

After a pause, she adds: “I love carnage.” You can practically hear her smiling over the phone line.