

# STANDUP

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## JOURNAL

See Girard's Article  
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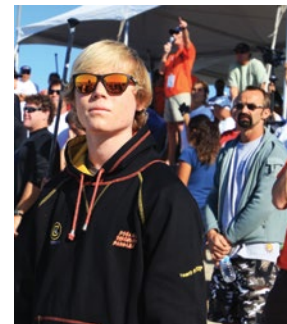
Kai Lenny and windsurf/kiteboarding hero, foil designer Alex Aguera revolutionize the next decade. Photo by Franck Berthouot

## CELEBRATING TEN YEARS A SPORT!

THE INTERVIEWS: Then, Now, Future with Gerry Lopez • Candice Appleby • Laird Hamilton • Kai Lenny

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It wasn't until the January 2008 Surf Expo that we began to see sup board and paddles featured more prominently by industry pioneers Hobie, Kialoa and Surftex, and Tropical Blends' Jim Hayes and shaper PJ Johnson of Kane Garden also had booths with sup boards on display, as did noted Florida surfboard shaper Ricky Carroll, who sported one of his hand-shaped giant sup boards leaning against the back of his booth. Even a year or two later, many companies admitted they had no idea sup would be worth

the effort, but to hedge their bets they displayed a board or two at the show to see how surf and kayak shop owners would respond. Today, standup paddling is center stage at Surf Expo, and the running comment among industry leaders is "they should change the show's name to Sup Expo."

So it's been 10 years! *Standup Journal* celebrates our sport's first decade by asking a smattering of sup pioneers about those early days and why they thought a sport that

didn't really even exist was worth the risk...why they stepped forward to spend money for tooling, molds, design brain cells and their ability to put food on their family's tables. Fair warning: we tried to include every sup industry leader possible, but we did miss some important pioneers. I apologize for that, but you will find that these replies cover the ground well as we push into the next decade of progress with the most exciting sport to emerge in decades...a sport, to quote Laird Hamilton, that's "too stupid to not go huge." -Clay



## The Last 10 Years of Standup Paddling Through My East Coast Eyes

By Girard Middleton



March 2005—It was a blustery afternoon in South Beach Miami. Onshore winds were flexing their muscles, leaving the white sands absent of most people. It was this day that would bring my first exposure to a new watersport that would change my life. I was packing up my surf lesson boards (I'd started "SoBe Surf" in 2002 while serving as a chaplain for 3 national championship baseball and football teams at the University of Miami), when my waterman friend Rick Arango came walking out with a lifeguard rescue board and a long, handmade wooden paddle from Hawaii.

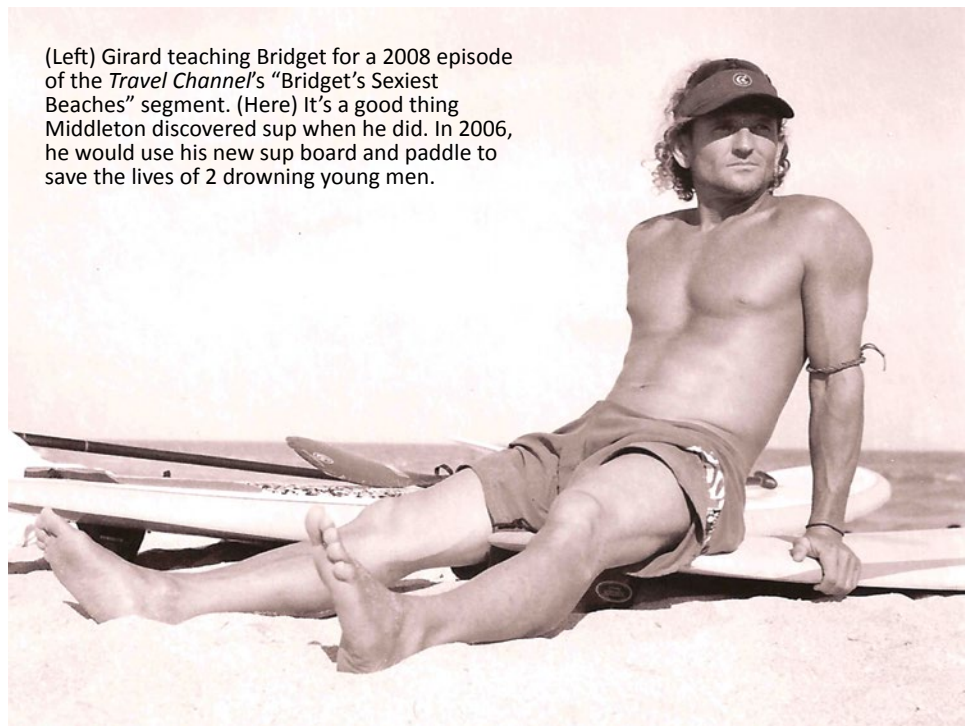
Rick had just come back from visiting Laird Hamilton and family on Maui, and he was stoked about this new thing that was evolving there: a sport called standup paddleboarding. I had to try it. Even with the high winds and choppy water, after one lap around the swim buoy and two quick falls along the way, I was in love...and my beautiful 10-plus-year relationship with sup had begun!



### 2016: Standup paddling has arrived

I'm sitting in my dream paddleboard shop on Merritt Island (SoBe Surf & Paddle) selling tons of standup paddleboards. We have a private launch into the Banana River Aquatic Preserve just down the street where we do sup manatee tours, and provide lessons and rentals. Bald eagles sit in the trees just outside my kitchen window. My amazing wife, Kristine, whom I met while in Hawaii for the 2012 Olukai Maliko Downwind Run (highly recommend...epic event!) is carrying our first child, conceived on a sup surf trip to Bali. We have the best shop dog ever (Kona), and our baby girl (no name yet) is on the way...and to top it off, I'm writing this story for *Standup Journal*.

(Left) Girard teaching Bridget for a 2008 episode of the *Travel Channel's* "Bridget's Sexiest Beaches" segment. (Here) It's a good thing Middleton discovered sup when he did. In 2006, he would use his new sup board and paddle to save the lives of 2 drowning young men.





(Above) With his dad by his side: Middleton's first paddles were a father/son collaboration, made of cypress and mahogany in his dad's wood shop.  
(Below) As team chaplain, Girard led the prayer immediately after the University of Miami baseball squad clinched the 1999 NCAA World Series title.

I'll be heading up to Wrightsville Beach this weekend to be Head Judge of another pro sup surf contest. Presently, my photo is being used by the Space Coast Office of Tourism on billboards throughout the Southeastern United States, and I'm appearing in *Delta's Sky Magazine* this month, suping with my dog Kona. I'm pondering how standup paddling has been an incredible force for good in my life. And I'm feeling so blessed to be a first-generation sup athlete and businessman on this side of the world. Perhaps the most surprising thing to me about this sport/industry as I reflect on the last 10 years is the amazing human beings sup has attracted, and how it has positively affected their lives and legacies, as it has mine.

I appreciate the many landmark experiences and events I've been fortunate enough to be a part of in the birthing and development of the sport here, as well as the amazing watermen and women I've become friends with through unique shared paddling experiences—not only some of the best athletes of the world, but also amazing characters. The Standup Paddle Athlete Community tends to be the most good-hearted, soul surfing, family-friendly people on Earth. Such a positive crowd is inspiring to be around—from Gerry Lopez to Rob Rojas and the Schweitzers, Lennys, Baxters, Walshes, Chings, Stallas, and Freitas to the great east coast sup stars like Sean Poynter, Georgio and Izzi Gomez, Kieran and Fisher Grant, and so many other sup families and treasured friends I've watched grow up in the sport and in character.

#### 2005: Waiting for the Sup Crowds to Show

Being in the sport so early presented some challenges, but also many unique opportunities...the following words are a brief story of the first years of East Coast sup through my eyes, with a few historical highlights and photos along the way.

**"I CALLED EVERY TRADITIONAL PADDLE MANUFACTURER IN THE LOWER 48 THAT I COULD FIND, ASKING IF THEY COULD MAKE ME PADDLES LONGER THAN 5'6" ...NO COMPANY WANTED TO WASTE ITS TIME."**

*-Girard on trying to find a sup paddle in 2005*

In 2005 I knew of no one producing sup equipment, other than handmade boards and paddles special ordered and shipped from Hawaii...out of my budget for sure. I called every traditional canoe paddle manufacturer in the lower 48 I could find, asking if they could make me paddles longer than 5'6" (the longest I could find in stores at that time). No company wanted to waste their time trying, so my dad and I began making our own in his wood shop; first out of cypress, then cedar...then, as we were in the

middle of making a mahogany paddle, production paddles and boards became available (2006/7).

I received a call from Deano Kiyohara, C4-Waterman's rep who had heard I was suping in Miami and promoting the sport through my business. C4 had just set up a distributorship in Sarasota with Juan Rodrigues and his business partner. Soon after, I was set up with three of C-4 Waterman's first-run

boards and paddles, using them in my business and to surf and train on. Every day I would either paddle out to the 2-mile anchor buoy and back or cruise along the beach.





One of my most consequential memories happened late one afternoon while out for a workout paddle along Miami Beach just after the lifeguards went off duty. I heard a strange gurgling noise off shore...two college-age boys were taking their last breath of life, too exhausted to call for help or even raise a hand. I paddled over and loaded them on my sup and got them to shore where they spit up loads of seawater. It seems that one didn't know how to swim and the other had tried to rescue him, and both almost drowned. The emergence of standup paddleboarding certainly made a difference in their lives!

I competed in the first two East Coast sup ocean races (that I know of) in early 2007: the first in a calm ocean, and the second in and out of head high surf. The US Lifeguard Association added sup as an exhibition class to their competitions. I won both races on a 10'6" C-4 Waterman sup surf model, immediately becoming addicted to the total gut check of pushing through the pain of an all-out distance race and using all my waterman skills for the race in and out of surf. Competing in sup races has continued to positively affect my mental toughness in all aspects of my life since.

Meanwhile, sup competitions began to emerge in central Florida. In 2007, John Hughes added sup racing as an exhibition class to Cocoa Beach Surf Museum's Florida State Paddle Board Championship during the Easter Surf Fest. Then, in 2008, sup was added as an official division.

2008 also marked the beginning of East Coast sup surfing competitions. Again, the Cocoa Beach Surf Museum blazed the trail adding our new sport to their 7<sup>th</sup> Annual Waterman's Challenge Event, directed by Matt Bellina. Surf legends and visionaries Rich and Phil Selig

added sup surfing to the National Kidney Foundation's NKF Pro/Am Surf Fest on Labor Day, 2008 (the largest non-profit surf competition on Earth). I competed in both these events in 2009 after making the move to central Florida, and I have been directing the sup surf portion of the NKF event since 2011.

### Connecting with Other Sup'ers

Some of the central Florida sup athlete pioneers include Chip Bock, who competed in some of the first sup races and who is still going strong today, and John E.B., who is known for pushing the envelope on shortboard sup surfing and competing in the first sup surf comps. Another East Coast icon is Iain McFarland, whom I met while competing in the 2009 NKF event; we became close friends and training partners. When I realized I couldn't beat Iain in racing, I started providing him raceboards and sponsoring him in contests. He went on to win every mAJor sup race in the state in 2010 and finished top 30 in California's Rainbow Sandals

Gerry Lopez Battle of the Paddle that year.

Another Cocoa Beach native, Justin DeBree, in 2008 paddled to Georgia from Key Biscayne, Florida, a total of 420 miles, setting the world record for the longest standup paddleboard journey at that point as a benefit for the World Skin Cancer Foundation. The Slater brothers (Kelly, and bros Sean and Steven) hold a surf competition each year in Cocoa Beach to benefit the same charity. I was asked to help organize and surf in the first sup surf exhibition heat at their 2010 event.

While living in southern Florida, television shows featured me standup paddleboarding, and in 2008 the Travel Channel's "Bridget's Sexiest Beaches" show featured me teaching host Bridget Marquardt how to sup in the Florida Keys. Other media exposure followed, like the 30-minute

**"IN ONE EARLY SUP SURF CONTEST, THE PROFESSIONAL SURFING JUDGES WERE ACTUALLY SUBTRACTING POINTS IF COMPETITORS USED THEIR PADDLES FOR MANEUVERS ON THE WAVE!"**

With Kelly Slater at the Slater brothers' annual Florida charity surf event. // Another podium for Middleton: the 2010 Cocoa Beach NKF Pro-Am.



segment of me on “Just Down The Road” and NBC’s “First Look” that helped propel the popularity of the new sport.

### 2012: Florida Sup Heats Up

By 2012, Florida was right up there with Hawaii and California in sup popularity. The Eastern Surfing Association (ESA) added sup as a competitive surfing class. I finished 2<sup>nd</sup> place for that season, between two young men who would go on to become great friends and world class pro competitors: Fisher and Kieran Grant.

I moved to Cocoa Beach, Florida, in 2009 to be nearer my dying father, where I leased out a run-down waterfront lodge, making it into a sup destination. From 2009–2014 I grew my “SoBe Surf & SUP Resort,” and in 2011 Kona Brewing Company hired me to help launch their coconut-flavored beer in Florida (Cocoa Brown), which has a standup paddler on the label. This began a long-lasting relationship with me as one of their pro athlete ambassadors. We held an event that included a great luau and paddle clinic for the mAJor media reps and Kona execs at my sup resort. This led to more media exposure for the sport (*Wall Street Journal*, *Men’s Health*, etc.). SoBe Surf & SUP is where Candice Appleby (also a Kona ambassador) and Anthony Vela held their first-ever “Precision Paddling Clinics” that are now so popular today, and where Annabel Anderson stayed and trained for several weeks just before winning her first BOP title. Many other top sup athletes visited during those years... good memories.

### Dad’s Passing...Embrace of the Sup Ohana

The day before the 2010 Battle of the Paddle kicked off, my cell phone rang as I was finishing up a run in the deep sand on the shores of Doheny Beach, Dana Point. It was my brother. He informed me that my father (and best friend who had helped me build the first sup paddles from his garage), R.B Middleton, had breathed his last breath five minutes earlier. I’ll never forget how the sup community loved and comforted me, helping to form friendships that I will always be thankful for. This is what I appreciate most about our worldwide sup community.

Now I am maturing with the sport, judging more contests than I compete in— and I’m genuinely surprised at how much I enjoy judging sup surf contests. I understand the sport inside out, and I truly want all the competitors to do well and to be scored competently and fairly without bias. As a competitor, I know what is like to be ripped off by judges who have an agenda or who just don’t understand performance sup surfing, and I want to make a difference.

I remember in one early sup surf contest, everyone was scratching their heads at who was winning heats, only to find out the professional surfing judges (with zero sup experience) were actually subtracting points if sup surfers used their paddles for maneuvers while surfing the wave! In 2012 I was hired by event director Mitch Varnes to direct the Olukai sup surf pro portion of the 1<sup>st</sup> Annual Ron Jon’s Beaches and Boards Fest, a pro surf

contest that included the ASP Juniors. The contest was started to set a higher bar for East Coast surf contest professionalism. We brought in paid judges who knew sup surfing, and whom I instructed on judging criteria.

Also, to keep spectators’ interest, I realized we needed to have good play-by-play description as the heats unfolded, so I took the mic and became the announcer. I knew most of the competitors and was knowledgeable and passionate about the sport. Up until then, most contest MCs either ignored the sup surf heats or made derogatory remarks about them. Most of the top competitors came. We had overhead surf, and the contest was a success, setting the bar for East Coast sup surf competition quality and standards ever since. At the same event this year (2016), I was hired to run the Olukai Supsquatch rides using Archie Kalepa’s own board that was shipped from Hawaii...what a blast!

I am so excited about what the *next* 10 year’s adventure of life will bring, and about continuing to make a positive difference in the standup paddling community and industry worldwide. I care deeply for all of you, and know if we stay the waterman’s course of love, honor, faith, strength, integrity, and family values, our paddleboard world will always get better. Aloha! -Girard

(Below) **Fulfillment of a 10-year dream:** 2016 grand opening of Girard’s SoBe Surf & Paddle, Merritt Island, FL. (Bottom) With shop dog Kona on the Cocoa Beach Tourism Bureau’s billboard.

