

SUPer Dad

A FATHER-SON TEAM CRASHES A LOCAL SUP RACE

BY MARK ANDERS

“What do we get if we win, Daddy? Do we get a big trophy?”

“I’m not sure, Luke,” I tell my very enthusiastic 6-year-old. “We’re just going to do our best, right?”

“I know, I know. But I’m pretty sure we’re gonna win.”

At least one of us is confident. The idea of paddling in an SUP race had never even occurred to me. But my wife, Ilene, saw a flyer at the gym and suggested I sign up.

I’ve paddled SUP casually a couple times a week for the past several years, mostly just cruising the flatwater of the Intracoastal Waterway near my home. Sometimes Luke or his 4-year-old brother, Nicholas, comes along, riding on the nose of my 12-foot custom SUP (shaped by my good friend, Steve Walden). I’ve never truly sprinted on the thing, except maybe to chase down—and surf—waves created by big ol’ cabin cruisers as they head south for the winter.

Not being the racing type, I agreed to do the SUP competition on one condition: that Luke would be my copilot. This was my easy way out. He’s a shy kid, so I was sure he wouldn’t be up for it. But alas, my new tow-headed partner is stoked, to say the least.

The Coastal Urge SUP Cup was to be only the second such competition ever held here in Wrightsville Beach, North Carolina. The race course: three-and-a-half miles around Harbor Island. I figured the race would take me at least an hour, so to make sure we both could handle it, Luke and I set out for an hour-long test paddle.

As I stroke harder, Luke instinctively leans side-to-side to counterbalance my paddling. We’re actually a great team. My only concern is Luke’s tendency to hang at least one appendage off the board at all times. He loves the way the warm water gathers and splashes, but the errant leg or arm slows our progress. I start to lecture Luke on the hydrodynamics of SUPs when we pass a couple fishing along the sun-drenched bank.

“That’s so great,” the fisherman says as we slide quietly past. “You know, son, you’ve

got a very cool dad there.”

Luke nods.

I blush.

The morning of the race is sunny with big white, puffy clouds and not a hint of wind. But by the time all the competitors launch their boards, a brisk southeast begins to blow. Luke sits on the nose of my board, quietly watching the other competitors. They’re watching us too. Some are obviously stoked to see a father-and-son team; a few seem surprisingly irked. Are they really giving stink-eye to a 6-year-old?

As the starting horn blasts, we hang near the back of the pack to stay clear of the really gung-ho racers. But soon I realize most of these folks are pretty new to SUP. Like a cheetah in a herd of wildebeest, I’m off. My inner competitor is awakened.

I start stroking. And we start passing. I decide then and there I’m not going to let anyone pass us. Nobody.

“Shit. The guy with the kid just passed us,” I hear a pair of twenty-something guys laughing. “That’s not good.”

Others weren’t as chill about it. In particular, a fit brunette in her early 40s on a tricked-out SUP whines as we pass.

“That’s not fair. His kid is paddling too!”

She’s serious.

Oh really? I think to myself. Wanna borrow my 45 pounds of extra baggage?

Truly though, Luke is much more than added weight. He’s my cheerleader.

“Yeah! Go Dad, go!” he says while windmilling his little arms in the water. He’s my coach and strategist, alerting me when

other paddlers are gaining on us. He’s my entertainment, singing songs from school and keeping me laughing.

“Dad, I have to go to the bathroom!”

“Poop or pee?” I ask bluntly, while battling the stiff southeast blow.

“Pee.”

“Just go in your trunks,” I advise, matter-of-factly, while silently thanking God for sparing us from an on-water number two emergency.

“Really, Dad? Just pee in my pants?”

“Yeah, really.”

Luke laughs, looks happily relieved, and then starts paddling again.

In the end, we’re the 10th board to cross the finish line with a time of 50 minutes flat. Ilene and Nicholas greet us with smiles and hugs at the dock. Luke climbs up wearing the biggest, proudest grin I’ve ever seen.

I just sit on the board, thankful to be finished, muscles buzzing from the effort. If I’m being totally honest with myself, part of the reason I wanted to bring Luke along was to have an excuse for why I didn’t paddle faster or place higher. But I think my little copilot was actually my source of motivation. I wanted to make him proud. I wanted to win for him. For us.

We don’t win a trophy, but I insist that Luke accepts our 10th place prize: a sweet new backpack from Patagonia.

“But you didn’t get anything, Dad,” he says, authentically concerned while proudly cradling his new backpack.

“It’s okay, buddy,” I say. “I’ve already got everything I need.”



“THAT’S NOT FAIR. HIS KID IS PADDLING TOO,” WHINES A FIT BRUNETTE ON A TRICKED-OUT SUP.