

The Grill —

with Matt Barker-Smith

Interview: Sup Mag UK

Pics: Matt Barker-Smith

Matt Barker-Smith is a Welsh ripper who successfully defended his National SUP Championship crown at Watergate this year. In some demanding conditions Matt once again stepped up and used his powerful style to slay the opposition. SUP Mag UK caught up with Matt for a natter.

Firstly huge congrats on your retention of the National SUP Champs crown – how does it feel to still be number one?

Really great. It feels good to tread a new path; I knew there would be some hungry competitors hoping for the gold but I guess old skool power is the new skool still.

Tell us a little about the comp in general – conditions looked challenging but you made it look easy.

Saturday was all about survival - I would doubt if any paddle surfer loves onshore conditions. It was impossible (in my heat anyway) to get out back. It was great the wind died off on Sunday – every competitor was eager to show how it's done. I guess I had a game plan - save my best 'til last.

How did you feel going into the event? Did spending some time out in Portugal before help you get warmed up and into the zone?

Yes! My week long trip to Portugal really helped. It's been a super busy year for SUP. So with a new board design under my arm and not much time on the water in the last three months I knew I had to find my stoke and be ready for the comp.

Who did you see as your main rival in the event? Did anybody take you by surprise?

Aaron Rowe and Glyn Ovens were looking strong, as was Alex Murray. I was surprised by Ben Fisher but he was knocked out in the semis.

Recently you and wife Abi received the news you're going to parents. How do you think this will affect your SUP surfing and stand up in general? Will this impact you attending the World's next year?

Ahh...yes my little rippa! Abi is gutted she can't SUP surf at the moment, but assures me she has mind ridden every wave she has seen me on, so watch out girls! Very much looking forward to the new addition to the 'Barker Team'.

Do you have any other SUP competition goals – either domestic or worldwide?

I'd like to enter a Stand Up World Tour event. Maybe the Sunset Pro one day? Imagine surfing North Shore's fabled Sunset Beach with only three others – classic! What an experience that would be, never mind how big it was.

What's the plan for you now? Any foreign trips planned?

Ireland in two weeks. Abi will be chomping to get to some warm water waves once the nippa is born so that will be on the agenda.

As much as stand up paddle boarding is continuing to gain popularity do you think UK SUP surfing has fallen by the wayside – many choosing to opt for flat water cruising or racing?

The racing and flat water side of SUP will always be the growth segment - however with two new wave pools about to be built on UK soil it will be interesting to see how this develops the SUP surfing side. Imagine a SUP comp at a Wave Garden – dry hair paddle out.

Tell us a little about your local scene in Wales. As one of the key SUP spearheads in the area it seems to be going from strength to strength?

Wales is a fantastic SUP location – world class even, with so much variety. I have lived in Wales for 18 years and I still discover new waves every year right on my doorstep which keeps things fresh. The coast around the Gower is so beautiful and when people see us on the water with a group they can't help being drawn into the sport - even if it's only for a taster. Racing is growing slowly and another area I want to develop, with cities like Cardiff and Swansea being right by the sea. Then there is the white water side of SUP, which in Wales is yet to be truly discovered. I have a white water inflatable on order so watch this space.

Where's your favourite place to ride – at home or abroad?

One of my favourite places to ride is a local slab not far from our house in Mumbles. It's fickle but when it's on it's a challenge – and I love a makeable closeout! If abroad you gotta love Barbados.

Talk us through the kit you're riding and why it works for you?

I have evolved with my boards over time. It took me about 10 production boards before I was ready for a custom and I chose to work with Roger Cooper. Rocker lines and rails are where it's at with SUP in my opinion. For the moment I'm feeling like my boards ride like surfboards. Riding backhand is the ultimate test to whether a SUP works. I've had a few turns on my latest board where I've surprised myself with how vertical I've gone. Currently 7.9ft x 26 ¾" x 90L with a double within a single bottom contour.

You own a successful SUP retail outlet in Wales (The SUP Hut) – have you noticed more paddlers coming through your doors and if so why do you think people are taking up the sport?

Everyone who paddles must mutter these words: 'It's accessible'. This summer has been immense with lots of coverage on TV and fantastic weather. We helped with the BBC Countryfile feature and that flooded the area with people wanting to try SUP. Once you get a person up and paddling, and they experience what they have seen others do, they get it and they're hooked. People standing on the foreshore know what we're doing now and that helps too. 'Ooohh look at the paddle boarders.'

Which area of stand up paddling do you think will be the most popular – some outspoken paddlers believe SUP is actually a number of sports rolled into one? Or do you think SUP as an all round discipline will remain?

It's hard not to notice the traction SUP racing has seen across the UK. But I like to think that there are areas such as white water which have yet to blossom – maybe a cross between the two?

Any other non-SUP plans moving forwards? We know you're a pretty handy kitesurfer.

I've been looking into displacement boat waves which I'd love to bring into the school, and extending the shop.

Final shout outs and thanks.

I'd like to thank my wife Abi for all her support, the SUP Gower SUPit & Sea crew, Roger Cooper and Ke Nalu Paddles

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