



## **SUP VIC - INTRODUCTION TO DOWNWIND PADDLING (DOWNWINDING)**

Downwinding is yet another way to enjoy this wonderful sport. Add it to flat water paddling, racing and surfing and you won't have an excuse not to go paddling. However, downwinding is a different skill set from other SUP activities and it does take a relatively high level of experience, skill, fitness, perseverance and pluck to master this aspect of paddling. Downwinding is exhilarating, but it can also be dangerous. Do not under-estimate the level of preparedness you need. Please read the following *Introduction to Downwind Paddling* carefully before undertaking any downwind paddling and periodically as you progress your downwinding skills.

### **EXPERIENCE**

Downwinding is not for beginner paddlers. No one should be trying a downwinder until they are really competent paddling on flat water and in small wind-chop. If downwinding is something that you aspire to, then you can practice in on-shore conditions to get used to the waves. Paddling out through and in the waves will fine tune your balance skills and help build the paddling strength and endurance required for downwinding. Another alternative is to practice off the end of marinas or breakwaters, again, in on-shore conditions. You should be able to paddle with and hopefully catch some waves into shore from the end of the breakwater and paddle out again inside the shelter of the breakwater. Do not go out on off-shore wind days.

When you do start downwinding proper, limit yourself to short runs that are close to shore and in winds of around 10-15 knots maximum. Do not downwind alone. Buddy-up!! If you are joining a DW group for the first time, it is essential that you organize to 'buddy-up' with an experienced paddler for the duration of the downwind course! Other paddlers in the group will most probably be unaware of your capabilities and head off not knowing that this may be your first downwinder in a large group! So it is imperative that you and your experienced buddy stay together (keeping relatively close to one another) for the duration of the paddle! Repeating this procedure will give you the confidence to participate in more downwinders as your fellow paddlers and wind permits!

Building your downwinding skills is a progressive process. Once you have several downwinders under your belt in 10-15 knots and with limited falls, then you move up to 15-20 knot conditions. Again, several of those with limited falls before going above 20 knots. As the wind strength increases, so too does the size of the swells and the degrees of difficulty of climbing back onto your board and staying there. Climbing back onto your board and getting going again is probably the most exhausting part of downwinding when you are new to the sport – especially if you have a lot of falls. Falling in is also time consuming. You lose a lot of time with each fall and your paddling companions

will get way ahead of you or be forced to hold ground and wait for you (which is not easy in strong winds).

## **BOARD**

All-round boards and surf SUPs do not downwind well. Whilst you can obviously paddle these boards when the wind is behind you, they are slow and unresponsive to runners (swells, bumps) and you will get left far behind others. Downwind boards are 12'6" or longer. Fourteen foot is the most popular length of board to downwind in Melbourne. Simply, do not attempt a downwinder unless you are on at least a 12'6" board.

## **EQUIPMENT & SAFETY**

Safety is paramount. You should not be subjecting yourself or others to dangerous situations because of your own lack of skills and experience.

**Leg rope.** Your leg rope (more often, coil type) is equally as important in downwinding as your board and paddle. Without a leg rope, you WILL quickly get separated from your board when you fall off. Above approximately 10 to 15 knots, you cannot swim fast enough to catch your board if you become separated. Make sure your leg rope and the rope attachment loop on your board is in good condition. Like everything exposed to sun and salt water, both the leg rope and the rope attachment loop will deteriorate. Wash both after each use and inspect your leg rope and board attachment loop each time you have washed them to ensure they are not damaged (frayed ropes, corroding leg rope attachments or has any breaks or splits in the silicone/coils).

**Personal Flotation Device (PFD).** Legally, all SUP paddlers are obliged to wear a PFD when greater than 400 metres off-shore. More specifically, no one should be downwinding without a PFD. As a beginner we would recommend a solid foam PFD – one that is on your body, is high-vis and does not need inflating or donning if an emergency hits. Buy one designed specifically for paddling.

**High-vis top and shorts.** You need to be highly visible to other paddlers in your group, as well as other watercraft – power boats, yachts, jet-skis, and rescue craft. As the saying goes, "be seen, be safe!" You will be surprised how hard it is to see others out on the water when the wind is blowing above 20 knots.

**Slip, Slop, Slap.** Downwinding is a physically draining activity – you do not need to fry yourself in the sun as well. Sunblock (wash your hands after applying for paddle-grip purposes) along with a hat and sunnies are required on sunny/hot days.

**Water and nourishment.** No matter how well hydrated and fed you are before you start, you will get thirsty and you may run yourself out of energy. You need to take water on downwinders over approximately 5km and some form of energy supplementation/sports gels over approximately 10 km. You may not use it, but you just don't know if you are going to run low on hydration and energy. And running low on hydration and energy can be harder to battle than any physical obstacles – rolling waves, marinas, reefs, headlands etc.

**Phone and waterproof cover.** Taking a phone with you when downwinding adds a significant level of safety to the activity. Phoning home or even emergency services if you need assistance is far better than just waving your hands frantically out in the middle of the bay! NOTE: A high number of Victorian paddlers carry EPRBs when downwinding on strong-wind days. And as Port Phillip Bay gets colder than the ocean in winter, the time to hypothermia can be very short in the bay; so a phone and EPRB are strongly recommended in winter on the bay!

**Car keys.** You need to consider how you are going to get into your car after the downwind run. You need to take your car keys with you (in a waterproof case) or have your keys secured in a surf-lock attached to your car.

**Backpack or bum-bag.** So where do you put all the above mentioned stuff? A backpack or bum-bag is ideal. It may take you a few models to figure out which one you like. Considerations are comfort, ease of getting back on your board whilst wearing one, storage and what kind of PFD you are wearing. Note that some good quality paddle-designed PFDs have pockets that will relieve you of this need.

**Fins.** You will probably be presented with the situation of loading 2 or 3 boards on one car. Stacking boards of equal lengths is a lot easier if they do not have fins in them. As such, you may need to take screw a driver in your 'car kit'. The recent advent of screw-less 'clip-in' fins makes the loading and transport of boards a lot easier. That said, clip-in fins can be accidentally 'clipped-out' with a fall if your leg rope gets wrapped around your fin. Loosing of a fin on a downwinder is diabolical as you lose all control of your board. As such, clip-in fins are not recommended for downwinders for inexperienced downwind paddlers – only once you get to the stage of being fully comfortable downwinding and rarely falling in, can you elect to move to a clip-in fin. You can now purchase fin screws with a flat flange head that do not require a screwdriver and can be tightened and loosened by fingers only.

**Limitations.** It is important to know your limitations and take the necessary progressive steps to advance your downwinding prowess and experience. Don't get sucked-in to going out on a day that is outside of your skill level – easy to do when all the experienced downwind paddlers are 'frothing' over the conditions. Be prepared to look at the conditions and make the call, "I'm out", if you feel that the conditions are beyond your skill and or fitness level.

## **FITNESS**

Downwinding is a very physical activity. Far more than just a flat water cruise. It tests your aerobic capacity, your balance, your endurance and your strength. Do not attempt to downwind if you are carrying an injury or health condition that is going to limit your ability to put in 100% effort. You need to be fresh and ready to go, go, go when you hit the water!

## **WEATHER**

Do you understand the terms, "off-shore" and "on-shore" as mentioned above? Do you know on any given day which direction the wind is blowing? Do you know the exact direction of the downwinder that you intend to do? Do you know if the wind is forecast to change direction (and if so, to which direction) and/or speed over the next 4 to 6 hours? Do you have a Bay Winds website or app on your phone that you look at often?? Do you know what landmarks are relevant from your positioning on the water? You need to be able to answer "yes" to all of these questions, as they are the relevant questions that will help keep you safe on the water. (See [www.baywx.com.au](http://www.baywx.com.au), etc, or the VIC Wind phone app.) There are no prizes for those who need rescuing after setting off without understanding the weather conditions that they have launched themselves into...

## **LOGISTICS**

One of the downsides of downwinding is that it is time consuming. Loading boards, ferrying cars and people adds significantly to the actual paddle time. And the logistics can be confusing... Do you wear glasses? If so, what are you going to do with them? Where will your car be? How are you going to get into your car after the run? Do you have dry clothes to get changed into? Do you have them stored in a car at the finish of the run? Can you transport 2 or 3 boards to or from the start or end point? Do you have tie-downs suitable for 3 boards? Do you have padding for 3 boards? Prepare yourself carefully. Also, the excitement of going on downwinders can easily see you leaving something essential behind – leg rope, car keys are the most common omission! You need to be organised and capable of sharing the load and time with your fellow downwinders. We suggest you always pack two bags to minimise the chance of leaving stuff behind – one for the downwinder itself (leg rope, PFD, etc) and a bag with towel and dry gear for the end. Turning up for a downwinder without the necessary equipment to contribute to the logistics of the downwinder is unacceptable to your fellow paddlers. It adds to the time it takes the group to downwind and puts an extra burden on your fellow paddlers. If you are properly prepared then you will get the best out of the experience. And you'll ensure that you are invited again!

### **PUNCTUALITY**

Be on time! If the group meeting time is 9.00am, be there at 8.45am. All boards, cars and equipment needs to be sorted before the group can set-off to the starting point. Nothing is more annoying than someone arriving with a board on their roof when everyone else are already sorted, packed and ready to go. And, as a rule, the group doesn't wait for stragglers!

### **FURTHER ADVICE**

Get on the internet and watch all the videos you can to familiarise yourself with what downwinding entails. Look out for the technical skills of the paddlers and observe and read the conditions of the wind and water. In particular our own David 'DJ' Peterson's videos are very instructive of our local conditions and the local runs that we do. DJ's vids are also invaluable as indicators of the foot skills needed to move around the board. His vids can be seen on Seabreeze or vimeo. Also tune into Paddle with Riggs to see Jeremy Riggs and some of his friends downwind paddling in open ocean in Hawaii. There are many other sources of instructive downwinding videos on YouTube that are also great fun to watch.

### **HAVE FUN!**

The investment in time and effort to get to a good downwinding skill level is well worth it. It is simply one of the most fun things you can experience paddle boarding. But, the conditions for downwinding are such that it is also the most dangerous things you can do paddle boarding. So, do your homework and your preparation first!

**Happy and safe downwinding!**

**SUP VIC Inc**