

Padding with Man's Best Friend

Saki

Chesapeake Conservancy/National Park Service (NPS)

November 14, 2020



Figure 1: Daphne and I paddleboarding

I have spent over 20 years exploring the Chesapeake Bay area via kayak or stand up paddleboard (SUP). About the only thing I enjoy more than getting out on the water by myself is paddling with good friends. Three years ago, my wife and I decided it was time to enhance our lives by adopting man’s best friend, a beagle/corgi local rescue puppy that we named Daphne. She has since become my closest paddling companion, joining me on countless outings and making each adventure a little more enjoyable.

What makes for a good dog-paddling relationship? If you ask ten people, you are likely to get ten different answers, so take my advice with a grain of salt. In my opinion, there are five major factors: physical characteristics of the watercraft, skill of paddler, physical characteristics of the dog, comfort level of the dog, and needs of the dog.

1. Physical characteristics of the watercraft

Not all watercraft are created equal, but I hesitate to say that one is necessarily better than another. Many are fine given the conditions for which they were designed. That being said, a sea kayak is often a good choice for open water, long distances, and variable weather conditions. But its small cockpit is a limiting factor for carrying four-legged friends. In contrast, a recreational kayak has a large cockpit where a dog can often stand in front of the paddler without hindering their stroke. Sit-on-top kayaks are sort of a mixed bag, so if you go that route, look for one with a stable, flat surface forward of the seat where a dog can easily stand. Some people let their dogs stand behind them but I am hesitant to put Daphne anyplace I cannot easily access while we're on the water. Stand up paddleboards are probably the most popular means of transporting a small dog, but when it comes to carrying a big dog, an open canoe is hard to beat.



Figure 2: Many recreational kayaks have large cockpits that can accommodate dogs of many sizes



Figure 3: Open canoes are hard to beat for hauling lots of stuff like dogs, children, and camping gear

I've tried three setups with various watercraft to take Daphne out on the water. All incorporate flat platforms with rubber surfaces that I created to give her something stable on which to stand.

My least favorite is my sit-on-top kayak with sea kayak dimensions where I attached the platform to the front. With Daphne on it, the center of gravity is too high for paddling in anything except calm, flat water due to its lack of stability.



Figure 4: Daphne on a homemade platform mounted to a sit-on-top kayak

One setup that works very well is to put Daphne between two people on my ultra-stable tandem sit-on-top.



Figure 5: Tandem kayakers take Daphne and a friend out for a ride

Daphne’s favorite option is the SUP (shown at top). The flat, foam surface is as comfortable for her to stand on as it is for me, and the platform that I made gives her another four feet of space so she can move about and stretch her legs.

2. Skill of the paddler

The most important factor is the skill of the paddler. Before taking a dog out on any watercraft, the paddler should attain basic paddling skills and experience with that watercraft. They should also know what they are capable of and understand their limits. Paddlers typically practice rescue techniques under controlled conditions before they actually need to use these skills to save their life. I strongly suggest doing the same with dog rescue skills.



Figure 6: Sara demonstrates that she can rescue Cassi

3. Physical characteristics of the dog

Weight and height are the main physical characteristics of the dog when it comes to paddling. All things being equal, a heavier or taller dog will upset the watercraft more than a lighter or shorter one. Daphne weighs about 30 pounds and with her short corgi legs, she makes a good paddleboarding partner. In contrast, I have a much more difficult time with Cassi, because she is tall and weighs 50 pounds. That is not to say that big dogs don't make good paddling companions. One just needs to ensure they have an appropriate watercraft and sufficient paddling skills to accommodate.

4. Comfort level of the dog

Dogs, like people, have different comfort levels when it comes to being on or in the water. Many people are surprised to learn that as much as Daphne enjoys being on the water, she hates being in it. In contrast, Cassi

is a fantastic swimmer and quite comfortable in the water...maybe a little too comfortable. She won't hesitate to jump off the boat, which makes training more challenging.

Daphne did not take to paddling quickly. My wife and I introduced her to it when she was about six months old and we had to work to get her comfortable. What really helped is the fact that we enjoy being out on the water and I think Daphne sensed this. I made sure Daphne got plenty of "shore time" to explore and sniff around...things she loves to do. We also rewarded her with treats and praise whenever she came out with us. Most importantly, we made it a habit, taking her out about once a week over several months. At first, she simply accepted her fate. We started her out on short trips over very flat water, then gradually increased the length of the trips and variety of paddling conditions. In time, she began to relax to the point she would sit or lie down. Once, she even fell asleep on the tandem.



Figure 7: Daphne feeling relaxed on the SUP

5. Needs of the dog

As a dog owner, you're responsible for the well-being and safety of your pet. That means making sure they have enough fresh water and food, are not too hot or cold, have a properly fitted personal floatation device, and regular bathroom breaks (pick up solid waste). They can't tell you what they need with words but hopefully you know them well enough to read their body language.

If you are like me, you enjoy being out on the water and love spending time with your dog. Putting the two together is not trivial, but with some planning and patience, the reward will be well worth the effort, helping strengthen the bond between paddler and man's best friend.