

COMPETING for a different CROWN

by
Aliese Willard



CANDICE APPLEBY
“it was like, if i'm not no. 1,
then what am i?”
MY IDENTITY WAS SO WRAPPED
UP IN BEING NO. 1 THAT I WOULD STRESS
MYSELF OUT ABOUT THE
POSSIBILITY OF GETTING SECOND.”



Photo by Erik Aeder

Photo by Aaron Schmidt

by all appearances, Candice Appleby's life in 2012 was as vibrant as the cerulean waves she paddled through. With a sunny smile and attitude to match, the professional standup paddleboarding (SUP) racer was dominating in the sport she'd helped build.

She'd won the Battle of the Paddle (a competition akin to the "Super Bowl for SUP") in Hawaii and California four times, and racked up enough wins at other competitions to be christened the "Queen of SUP" by athletes and fans.

Her world ranking climbed to No. 1, and she traveled to exotic shores (Japan, Fiji, France, Brazil) to compete. SUP racing and surfing was truly her life. With the same tenacity she used to train, she worked to spread awareness of the sport by teaching clinics, hosting seminars, and launching a SUP training club for adults with a friend.

Her life appeared to be as cheery as her Instagram posts. That's why it came as a surprise when she was knocked off her board at the 2012 Battle of the Paddle, taking second place to her biggest rival.

Plenty of people fall off of their boards in SUP racing. But not Appleby, the SUP Queen, and not in the midst of the most important competition of the year. She knew her toppling off-balance was indicative of a host of struggles simmering beneath the surface. The first issue was her identity.

"It was like, if I'm not No. 1, then what am I? My identity was so wrapped up in being No. 1 that I would stress myself out about the possibility of getting second, [that] when I won I didn't even feel joy," Appleby said. "I felt relief and that's not what winning is really supposed to feel like."

In addition to the oppressive anxiety and pressure she felt, she was paddling with a hand injury. Most days she could barely hold a cup of coffee or make a fist with her left hand, much less grip the paddle she used to propel herself through the water.

Though she had surgery to try and correct the torn soft tissue in early 2013, she began competing prematurely, and received cortisone shots for the pain. Appleby knew she needed another surgery, and she still hadn't announced how the injury happened.

A church sermon two weeks before the 2013 Battle of the Paddle gave her the soothing clarity she needed.

"It was one of those sermons that just spoke to me," Appleby said. "It was all about how the Lord loves you just the way that you are and you don't have to do anything to prove yourself to Him; He loves you right where you're at."

With the knowledge that she was loved no matter how she ranked, Appleby found the courage to pull out of the Battle of the Paddle. She sent out a press release explaining why she would not be competing, and acknowledged publicly for the first time the source of her hand injury:

"In February of 2011 my hand got in the way of someone's foot, as it was on its way to kick me in the chest," she wrote. "Yes, truthfully/sadly enough, my injury is a defensive wound from a past abusive relationship."

Her admitting the abuse was the beginning of a turning point for Appleby, a time of healing in which she confronted her physical wounds of the present, and her emotional wounds of the past. She was comforted when she realized how her openness in the press release had helped others.

"I had a lot of women and different people come up to me and share with me how that helped them, and how they felt like they weren't alone," she said. "I knew it was part of my healing process, but I also knew that God would use it to help somebody else."

She underwent a second surgery on her hand, though it was too late to completely fix the problem; some of the damage was permanent. To this day, Appleby can't make a complete fist. But she can paddle, and was able to make a complete comeback. She won the 2014 Battle of the Paddle, and the Pacific Paddle Games in 2015 and 2016.

Though she was excelling physically, God wasn't

done shaping and healing her heart.

She learned about Celebrate Recovery, a therapy program through the Saddleback Church she attended in California, and decided to join. Designed to help people struggling with "hurts, hang-ups and habits," the program helped Appleby tackle and deal with the years of emotional damage she'd endured. One by one, hurts from the past resurfaced, and with God's help she confronted them.

She had suffered through childhood sexual abuse, and persistent bullying from her "first day of kindergarten to the last day of high school." Her classmates played cruel jokes on her, and teased her for freckles and red hair — which are now her most-complimented features as an adult. Appleby also spent most of her 20s in serious relationships with men who didn't share the faith she did.

"I was at the height of really excelling in my career, but in a relationship that became physically abusive because I didn't fully know my value. I didn't know my worth," she said. "I had this desire to be accepted and to be loved; I really wanted to have a boyfriend and all that kind of stuff. [I was] still loving the Lord, but not living by the way that I knew I should live."

She learned the importance of not bottling up and hiding her pain, as she had always done.

"God put us here to do life together and help each other heal, and as an athlete, God's given me a platform ... And I think that's the responsibility I have now, is to be vulnerable, to share my victories, and share my struggles to help other people be able to get through life here, because we're not supposed to do it alone," she said.

And though she'd become a Christian when she was 5 or 6 years old, she realized her mindset about competing needed an overhaul. Appleby admits to having an "I'll show them" attitude in regards to

the kids who bullied her in school, and based her self-worth on her success in SUP racing.

"I started winning and I felt really good about myself, and I was letting those wins kind of fill that God-sized hole in my soul," she said. "And that's where I was finding worth, in these victories, because I was like, 'Finally, I'm a winner.'"

Now she has new motivation to surpass her competitors.

"I have more of an eternal perspective of what's most important. I still want to win just as bad as I wanted to win before, but I want to win now for different reasons," Appleby said. "I want to stand on the top of the podium to glorify God and to share my experience, strength and hope that I've brought from Him."

She no longer worries about where she'll finish, either.

"My prayer now when I compete is just, 'Keep me safe, let me have fun and let Your will be done, and put me where You want me to be.' If I ask the Lord to put me where He wants me to be, then I can't really argue with it at the end of the day, you know? And so I don't get as nervous, and I don't stress out," Appleby said.

"At the end of the day I know that I am more than a paddler. I know that my victory is in Christ, and everything else is just extra bonus." 5



Photo by Sean Dulany