

## Olympic canoeist Larry Cain back on the water – as a paddleboard coach

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Olympic gold medalist in Larry Cain, 53, stand up paddles in the frigid cold temperatures on Lake Ontario in Oakville, Ont., on Dec. 13, 2016.  
(Nathan Denette/THE CANADIAN PRESS)

Larry Cain never put his paddle down, even after a successful Olympic career.

The gold and silver medalist in sprint canoe in the 1984 Summer Games continues to win, and beat paddlers younger than him, in the burgeoning sport of stand-up paddleboard racing.

Cain's prowess with a paddle combined with his 18 years of teaching high school phys-ed gave him the skill set to capitalize on a trend. The explosion of people wanting to learn how to stand-up paddleboard (SUP) and get better at it means the 53-year-old can make a living on the water, where he always wants to be.

"It's become what I do," Cain told The Canadian Press from his home in Burlington, Ont.

"I'm fortunate because the whole Olympic canoeing thing has meant that people were really interested in my perspective on technique and how to paddle because it's so similar to canoe. I started giving clinics at races."

Cain and American John Beausang co-founded Paddle Monster, a subscription-based coaching website, which launched in May. Cain says 80 people signed up on the first day.

"I'm basically making the money I made as a teacher doing this," he said.

"I think being a teacher for so many years has helped because I know how to communicate and explain things in various ways until someone understands."

Winning is good for the business as it creates demand for his clinics.

Cain claimed his fourth Surf to Sound Challenge – a 10.5-kilometre race – in Wrightsville Beach, N.C., in November in a time of one hour 12 minutes 35 seconds.

It was a one-two Canadian finish as runner-up Tamas Buday Jr., a 40-year-old former Olympic paddler, finished just six seconds back of Cain.

Cain also won a 50k race on the Tennessee River – the Chattajack 31 – for a third straight year in October.

Because of his canoe background, Cain excels at the hard slogging on the calmer waters of rivers, intercoastal sounds and inlets.

Open surf racing, in which there's less paddling and more catching waves to locomote, isn't Cain's forte. He's working on it.

"When I race in the ocean, I'm racing largely against kids that have grown up in the ocean," Cain said.

"Their skill level is off the charts and I grew up on Sixteen Mile Creek that has barely a ripple, so I'm learning all the time."

Cain won gold in the C-1 500 metres and silver in the 1,000 in Los Angeles in 1984. He placed fourth in the 1,000 metres four years later in Seoul.

Cain retired from the national team in 1996 when he didn't qualify for a fourth Olympic Games. He competed in dragon boats for several years before switching to outrigger canoe racing.

It was in 2010 at an outrigger event that someone selling paddleboards suggested he try it. Cain was initially uninterested, but agreed to take one as a loaner and give it a spin.

"The more I actually tried it, the more I realized it was like C-1, my sprint canoe, just standing up," Cain said.

"I'd been kind of waiting my whole life to have something to do in big water where I could bring my C-1 skills.

"I'm able to do well in flatwater because my paddling skill and paddling fitness are still at a really high level, because I've never really let it drop."

He quit teaching at the all-girls St. Mildred's-Lightbourn School in Oakville, Ont., in 2014 for a job helping coach Canada's paddlers heading to the Olympics Games in Rio this past August.

But Cain knew in 2015 there wouldn't be enough money to extend his contract all the way to Rio.

He and Beausang began plotting Paddle Monster just over a year ago. Cain said he would have returned to teaching to pay his bills if the venture didn't take off.

It did, and that feels like a stroke of luck to Cain.

"I look at myself as a retired teacher and have this other great business I'm doing in my golden years," he said. "It's one of those right-place, right-time, right-person type things."

Cain is on his racing SUP nearly every day, by himself or with buddies, on Sixteen Mile Creek in Oakville or on Lake Ontario, even when the temperature dips below zero.

"Last winter was the best winter of my life because I could paddle every day," Cain said. "You gear up properly and you go out and you're toasty warm. Even when there's ice forming on your board and your paddle.

"I'm 53 and I still look forward to going paddling every day as much as I did when I was a teenager. How crazy is that?"