



How To – Stories

# SUPBall // The Hybrid Sport For People Who Love Water (And Balls)



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Hybrid Sports like SUPBall are whacky, playful and often don't require you to be all that skilled to join in. They're the games you need to start playing – but what the heck are they?

## Welcome To SUPBall

It's Sunday evening and the crowds are piling into Wharf Bar at Sydney's Manly Beach. 10 adults hop onto stand up paddle boards next to the wharf and head to their opposing sides – 5 on each. Suddenly, paddles are flying and people are tackling each other. A volleyball is tossed between team members trying to throw it at an orange buoy at either side of the ocean court.

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Passers-by stall, a look of ‘What the heck is going on?’ spread across their faces.

It’s a game called SUPBall and it’s not surprising you haven’t heard of it – at least not yet.

It falls under the umbrella of hybrid sports – games that combine elements of two or more traditional sports in creative, sometimes wacky ways. Think: **SUPBall**, **Canoe Polo**, **Foot Golf** or even **Chess Boxing**. They are the renegades of the sports world because they challenge our conceptions of what we recognise as traditional sports like football, basketball or tennis. While they have yet to crack the top 20 physical activities list in Australia, according to the new AusPlay survey by the Australian Sports Commission (ASC), there is a definite appetite for something new with Aussies spending over \$10.7 billion annually on sports or physical participation fees.

### **How Mucking Around Led To A Brand New Sport**

SUPBall came to life in the summer of 2009-10 when Craig Moulds, Annabel Horton and Tom Parish of the **Manly Kayak Centre** decided to introduce stand-up paddle boards into their rental fleet. After a couple of cold stubbies one Sunday evening, they started mucking around on the new boards with a volleyball in tow. What evolved out of it was an entirely new hybrid sport combining netball, water polo, lacrosse and rugby – played on stand up paddle boards.

It took the better part of that season to develop the game structure, explains Craig, but by the end of it more than a dozen people were coming out weekly to play casual games.

“Stand up paddle boarding is a fun sport anyway and throwing a ball into that took us to different places with it,” says Craig.

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In the summer of 2016/17, they had 150 players competing over three competitions, including the Sunday Super League for elite players. The game has even made its way to the UK, Spain and France and Craig is talking potential licensees throughout Australia.

“People were amazed,” says Craig, “Because once you see a game, especially at the level we’re playing now, it’s quite athletic, there’s loads of skill involved. It’s not unlike basketball or netball or Aussie rules, where it’s a real team play.”

With the exposure at the wharf and an **increased Facebook presence**, SUPBall is crossing the line of obscurity to wider public interest.

### **Going From Wacky Idea To A Recognised Sport**

To get added exposure, the Australian Sports Commissions encourages individuals to apply for recognition. Renee O’Callaghan, Director of National Participation Outcomes of the ASC, says there are a lot of benefits to getting recognised by the ASC such as opportunity for funding and access to infrastructure.

“We want Australians to be participating in sport more often. So we encourage organisations to offer those opportunities that Australians want to participate in,” said Renee in a phone interview.

According to Renee, the ASC normally only receive a handful of new sport applications every year. It’s an open process she says, so there is no limit on how many they put through. It comes down to whether or not the activity meets the

ASC’s criteria, such as, if it fits **their definition of sport** and if there are active branches in at least four states and a minimum of 1,000 active members.

Sports are then grouped into categories based on similar criteria. Basketball and football for instance sit at the top in Category A because of sheer number of participants. These categories also become the basis for the ASC's **investment framework**.

To get recognition from the ASC, first hybrid sports need to convince the public to try them out.

### **Laughter And Intensity: The Recipe For Hybrid Sports**

When Georgia Goulding, a Kiwi now living in Australia, was first told about Canoe Polo she says she laughed hard out.

"I was like 'who the hell would invent that? That's hilarious.' It's like when you think of Ultimate Frisbee being an actual sport. But then you **watch it** or play it and its next level," says Georgia. "But because it's not traditional, nobody thinks about it as a legit sport. That's what Canoe Polo is like."

It's basically water polo in canoes, says Georgia. There are five people per side and two raised goals at either end played in any body of water large enough to support it. Georgia fell into it to supplement her white water kayak training because both games involve a lot of rolling.

"It's super intense," she comments. "If you can't roll up, you have to get out. And to get out it means you have to pull your [canoe] skirt off and get out of the boat.... It takes you out of play for about 30 seconds to a minute which is massive because the games are only 7 minute halves."

This intensity is a running theme in hybrid sports. In SUPBall, they've introduced a rule that once someone scores, the whole team has to paddle around their team's buoy before they can make contact with the ball again – but the play doesn't stop.

"One of our goals, and one of the key reasons the game is so fun is because there are minimal stoppages. The moment you start blowing whistles and telling people to stop and penalising them, we found it just takes away from the continuity and flowing fun of the game," says Craig Moulds.

### **Getting People Involved**

But it's not all about intensity. Compared to a lot of sports where you need a certain skill set to even play the game, hybrid sports allow more people to experiment with no experience.

Craig saw this as an opportunity to offer SUPBall training sessions between competition games to bring everyone up to similar skill levels. Georgia Goulding even trained with the New Zealand Canoe Polo team because "everyone's sort of around your level anyway."

The second biggest driving factor for Australians to get involved in sport is fun, enjoyment and social play at 55%. This really boils down what hybrid sports can add to sporting world.

Georgia encourages people to take this fun approach to sports and start thinking outside of the square.

"Stop being so traditional," she says "Yes, canoe polo is a little bit hectic because you have to have a boat, and other people that play it. But get out on the river. Make your own boat."

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