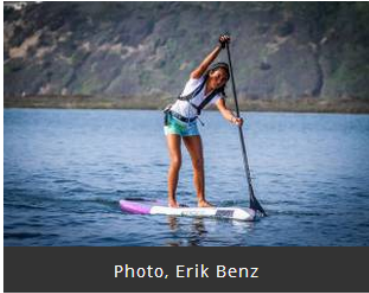


Erika Benitez is not your typical American teenager. Yes, she goes to school like the rest of the kids her age, but that is where the similarities end. Instead of chasing boys at the mall, 14-year-old Erika is chasing them down on the water. More often than not, she wins. As the popularity of stand up paddling continues to grow, more and more young paddlers are gravitating towards the sport. This is particularly true in Southern California where a hip surfing vibe permeates the SUP community, regardless of whether or not participants themselves actually surf. Erika first tried stand up paddling in 2009 in flat water conditions at Alamitos Bay in Long Beach. According to her father, Erika began to get serious about her training regimen the next year.



Photo, Erik Benz

Committing oneself to a training schedule can be tough. Most of us have a range of responsibilities from work to family, along with a mix of additional obligations which altogether make it challenging to carve out the time to get on the water multiple times in a week and engage in something that vaguely resembles a training regimen. The daughter of a commercial diver and nursing assistant, Erika and her parents have dedicated themselves to a schedule which enables her to train four times a week at [The Paddle Academy](#) in Dana Point – an approximately 74 mile round trip journey from the family's home in Stanton. "It feels like driving to Las Vegas twice a week, but its all worth it," her father told me. "She is so happy when she is training and I'm so stoked to see her improving and getting stronger. I believe my passion and her

passion for SUP creates the right balance."

Each trip lasts around four hours when you factor the length of time necessary to drive there, train and return home. Erika typically does her homework and reads during the journey. An excellent student, her favorite subjects are Science and English and she is currently enrolled in advance placement courses in Math, English