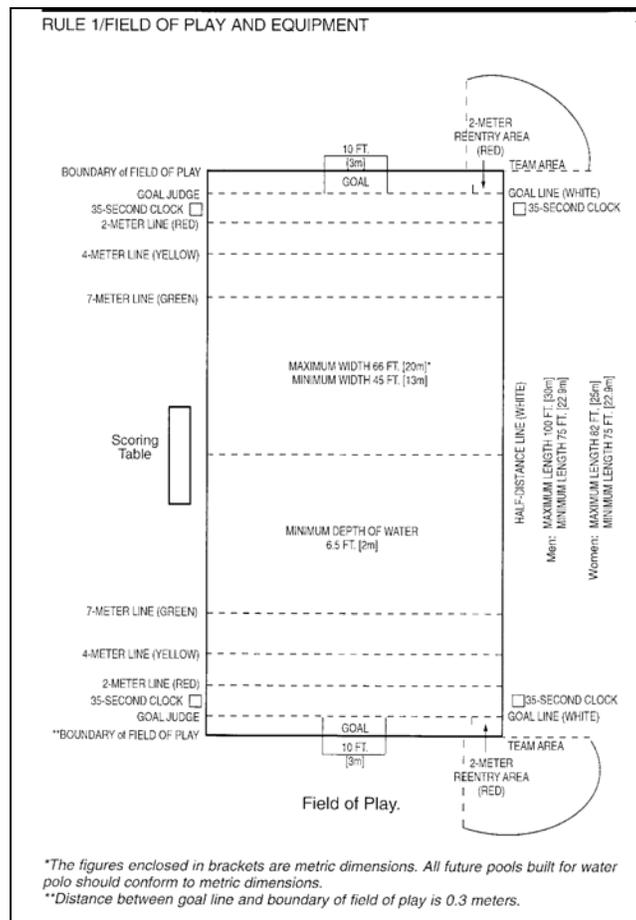


## Chapter 7 Basic Water Polo Rules

As covered in Chapter 1, the history of water polo is replete with rules changes and differences in rules from one continent to the next. In the United States, there was a long period where the Americans didn't play by the European and F.I.N.A. rules at all (circa. 1890-1910), then only during the summer Club season (circa 1950-1975) and now, the two sets – N.C.A.A. and F.I.N.A. are very similar.\* (Note: there will likely be more rule changes that will affect the upcoming description.)

Water Polo is played in a pool with a course that is either 30m. X 20m. for men or 25m. X 20m. for women. The minimum depth of the pool should be 6.5 ft. Markings on the pool and their significance are as follows:



**Red:** 2meter line – an offensive player inside the 2m.line without the ball or ahead of the ball is offside (ordinary foul).

**Yellow:** 5 meter line – a major foul within the 5m.line may result in a penalty shot; and an offensive player may take a direct shot after an ordinary foul if beyond this line.

**White:** Half distance line – players line up after a goal and the goalie may not touch the ball past this line.

\* Note: see end of chapter for current differences between N.C.A.A. and F.I.N.A. rules.

## Classification of fouls:

There can be unlimited fouls of a certain variety in water polo. Most of the fouls committed are termed “ordinary.” The penalty for this type of foul is a “free throw” given to the player who was fouled; or, if committed by the offense, given to the closest player on the opposing team.

Examples of these types of **ordinary** infractions, are:

### A. Ordinary (regular) fouls – unlimited.

- Placing the ball under water. (see sequence below): when a defender presses down on the offensive player’s hand and (s)he is in contact with the ball. If the offensive player is without contact, it is allowable to take the ball under water.

*Note: It is an ordinary foul to take or hold the ball under the water when tackled, even if the player holding the ball has the ball forced under the water as a result of the opponent’s challenge (Fig. 3). It makes no difference that the ball goes under the water against that player’s will. What is important is that the foul is awarded against the player who was in contact with the ball at the moment it was taken under the water. It is important to remember that the offense can only occur when a player takes the ball under when tackled. Thus, if the goalkeeper emerges high out of the water to save a shot and then while falling back takes the ball under the water, the goalkeeper has committed no offense; but if the goalkeeper then holds the ball under the water when challenged by an opponent, the goalkeeper will have committed an infringement of this rule and if the goalkeeper’s actions prevented a probable goal, a penalty throw must be awarded under Rule 22-2.*



Fig. 3

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Ball under example part 1 – white cap defender reaching over offensive player (#2) with her hand on top of the ball



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## Ball under part two- total submergence of yellow sphere



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- Making contact with a player who is not in control of the ball.

*A common form of impeding is where the player swims across an opponent's legs (Fig. 7), thus reducing the pace at which the opponent can move and interfering with normal leg action. Another form is swimming on the opponent's shoulders. It must also be remembered that the foul of impeding can be committed by the player who is in possession of the ball. For example, Fig. 8 shows a player keeping one hand on the ball and trying to force the opponent away to gain more space. Fig. 9 shows a player in possession of the ball impeding an opponent by pushing the opponent back with the head. Care must be taken with Fig. 8 and Fig. 9, because any violent movement by the player in possession of the ball might constitute striking or even brutality; the figures are intended to illustrate impeding without any violent movement. A player may also commit the offense of impeding even if the player is not holding or touching the ball. Fig. 10 shows a player intentionally blocking an opponent with the player's body and with the arms flung open, thus making access to the ball impossible. This offense is most often committed near the boundaries of the field of play.*



Fig. 7



Fig. 8

NCAA rule book

- Going inside the opponents' two-meter area on offense without the ball going first.
- A player's cap coming off – not called until capless player's team on offense; stoppage of play.
- Using the bottom of the pool to assist in an offensive or defensive motion – goalie excepted.
- Using two hands to handle the ball – goalie excepted.
- Using a clenched fist while making contact with the ball – goalie excepted.
- Failure to take the free throw within a reasonable period of time.
- Leaving early for the start of the period.

- To assist a player at the start of the period or any other time of the game.
- Using more than 35 seconds of offense.
- Pushing off from an opponent. By using the hands or feet, a player may not use another as an object to gain separation and advantage by pushing or kicking.

### Pushing or Pushing Off

SECTION 10. To push or push off from an opponent who is not holding the ball;

*Note: Pushing can take place in various forms, including with the hand (Fig. 11) or with the foot (Fig. 12). In the cases illustrated, the punishment is a free throw for an ordinary foul. However, referees must take care to differentiate between pushing with the foot and kicking - which then becomes an exclusion foul or even brutality. If the foot is already in contact with the opponent when the movement begins, this will usually be pushing, but if the movement begins before such contact with the opponent is made, then this should generally be regarded as kicking.*



Fig. 11



Fig. 12

NCAA rule book

**B. Ejection (exclusion) fouls:** punished by removal from the field of play for a period of twenty seconds. Limited to three per game.

- Interfering with a free throw.

### Interfering With Throws

SECTION 5. To interfere with the taking of a free throw, goal throw or corner throw, including:

- Intentionally to throw away or fail to release the ball to prevent the normal progress of the game or
- Any attempt to play the ball before it has left the hand of the thrower.

*Notes: A player is not to be penalized under this rule if the player does not hear the whistle as a result of being under the water. The referees must determine if the actions of the player are intentional.*

*Interference with a throw may take place indirectly when the ball is hampered, delayed or prevented from reaching the player who is to take the throw, or it may occur when the execution of the throw is interfered with by an opponent blocking the direction of the throw (Fig. 13) or by disturbing the actual movement of the thrower (Fig. 14). For interference with a penalty throw, see also Rule 21-17.*

**Interpretation:** If the defensive player puts a hand up that is away from the thrower (this hand must be behind the defensive player's head), it is not considered to be blocking the direction of the throw.



Fig. 13



Fig. 14

NCAA rule book

Exclusion fouls (con't.)

- Splashing in the face of an opponent

66 RULE 21/EXCLUSION FOULS

it can also occur less obviously when a player produces a curtain of water with an arm, seemingly without deliberate intent, in an attempt to block the view of the opponent who is about to shoot at goal or to make a pass.



Fig. 15

The punishment for intentionally splashing an opponent is exclusion under Rule 21-6 or a penalty throw under Rule 22-2 if the opponent is inside the 4-meter area and is attempting to shoot at goal. Whether to award a penalty throw or an exclusion is decided solely by the positioning and actions of the attacking player; whether the offending player is inside the 4-meter area or outside is not a decisive factor.

NCAA rule book

- Holding, sinking, or pulling back an opponent not in possession of the ball.

**Holding, Sinking, Pulling Back**  
SECTION 7. To hold, sink or pull back an opponent who is not holding the ball. "Holding" is lifting, carrying or touching the ball, but does not include dribbling the ball.

Note: The correct application of this rule is very important both as to the presentation of the game and in arriving at a proper and fair result. The wording of the rule is clear and explicit and can only be interpreted in one way: to hold (Fig. 16), sink (Fig. 17) or pull back (Fig. 18) an opponent who is not holding the ball is an exclusion foul. It is essential that referees apply this rule correctly, without personal arbitrariness.



Fig. 16



Fig. 18



Fig. 17

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Holding exclusion foul – dark cap#6 has his left hand under water & his right on top of offensive player



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**Sinking** exclusion foul – white cap defender sinking the dark-capped offensive player on the entry pass.



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**Pulling back** exclusion foul – white cap defender #10 is pulling back the submerged offensive player from reaching the ball



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**C. Penalty Fouls:** punished by a free shot on goal at 5 meter mark.

- For a goalkeeper or other defending player to pull down or otherwise displace the goal.
- For a defending player intentionally to play or attempt to play the ball or block a shot with two hands.
- For a defending player intentionally to block or attempt to block a pass with two hands.
- For a defending player to play the ball with a clenched fist.
- For a goalkeeper or other defending player to take the ball under the water when tackled.

“It is important to note that while the fouls described above, and other fouls such as holding, pulling back, impeding, etc., would normally be punished by a free throw (and exclusion if appropriate), they become penalty fouls if committed within the 4 meter area by a defending player if a probable goal would otherwise have been scored.” (www.fina.org)

Penalty foul: dark-capped player pulling back white-capped dribbler as she shoots (inside 5m. area)



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**D. Major Foul:** Punished by removal from the game and perhaps penalty throw.

**Kicking or Striking**  
SECTION 8. To kick or strike an opponent intentionally or make disproportionate movements with that intent.

*Notes: The offense of kicking or striking can take a number of different forms, including being committed by a player in possession of the ball or by an opposing player; possession of the ball is not a decisive factor. What is important is the action of the offending player, including if the player makes disproportionate movements in an attempt to kick or strike, even if the player fails to make contact.*

*One of the most serious acts of striking is elbowing backwards (Fig. 19), which can result in serious injury to the opponent. Similarly, serious injury can occur when a player intentionally heads back into the face of an opponent who is marking the player closely. In these circumstances, the referee would also be justified in punishing the offense under Rule 21-10 (Brutality) rather than under Rule 21-8.*

Fig. 19

NCAA rule book

**E. Referee signals:**

Fig. U      Fig. V      Fig. W

Fig. V. By a goal judge to signal an improper start by raising both arms vertically.

Fig. W. To indicate a player's cap number. To enable the referee to communicate better with the players and the secretary, signals are made using both hands if appropriate where the number exceeds five. One hand shows five fingers with the other hand showing additional fingers to make up the sum of the player's number. For the number 10, a clenched fist is shown. If the number exceeds 10, one hand is shown as a clenched fist with the other hand showing additional fingers to make up the sum of the player's number.

Fig. X

NCAA rule book

## F. Rules Questions & resources:

[www.scafwp.org](http://www.scafwp.org) or [www.ncaa.org](http://www.ncaa.org) or [www.fina.org/waterpolo](http://www.fina.org/waterpolo) or [www.nfhs.com](http://www.nfhs.com)

True or False:

1. Re-entry areas are always located at the team bench area, which is usually at the corners of the field of play opposite the official's table.
2. When a person is called for an exclusion foul, (s)he can re-enter the field of play without going to the penalty box.
3. If a team on offense does not come out of its huddle without undue delay after a timeout expires, the referee shall award the ball to the opposing team.
4. The ball may be played by either player involved in a neutral throw before it hits the water.
5. A referee may issue a red card to a player in the water if (s)he refuses to leave the field of play after he has been whistled for either a misconduct or disrespect foul.
6. A goalie can touch the ball on the opposition's side of half.
7. It is considered a goal (i.e. 1 point) if 50% of the ball goes inside the plane of the goal.
8. A goalie can shoot and score a goal at the opposition's net.
9. A referee will point in the direction of the team that is on offense after (s)he makes a call.
10. The ball lands partially onto a sideline and rolls back into the field of play. The ball was never out of bounds.

(see answers below)

1. T      2. F      3. T      4. T      5. T      6. F      7. F      8. T      9. T      10. T

Game management for water polo includes responsibilities which rely on rudimentary understanding of the aforementioned rules. Dr. Barbara Kalbus, past President of United States Water Polo and an expert in competition management, has written a very definitive version of these responsibilities as applied to the workings of the timers, scorer, and exclusion secretaries. See the website: [www.sopacwp.com](http://www.sopacwp.com) (“online host form” – “desk manual”) for a complete description of these responsibilities.

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< <http://www.nfhs.com/> >

\* Rules Differences between N.C.A.A. and F.I.N.A.

[http://www1.ncaa.org/membership/governance/sports\\_and\\_rules\\_ctees/playing\\_rules/waterpolo/waterpolorulesdifferences](http://www1.ncaa.org/membership/governance/sports_and_rules_ctees/playing_rules/waterpolo/waterpolorulesdifferences)