Chapter 6
Individual Defensive Skills – Team Defense

“Defense wins championships……No rebounds, no rings.” Such are the statements of team sports coaches regarding the value of defensive efforts.

To quote five-time Olympic Water Polo coach Monte Nitzkowski: “It is my opinion that most games are won because of great individual and team defensive skills. Even if the offense is having an ‘off day,’ the defense can carry a team to victory.” (Nitzkowski, p.29) Former seven-time N.C.A.A. Water Polo Championship coach Pete Cutino states: “We feel that the most important phase of water polo is defense.” (Cutino, p.44)

This chapter will look at individual and team skills that contribute to good defensive play. Each player should master these skills so as not to be the “Achilles heel” of their team. Players must remember that good defense only occurs when teammates and goalies play together and help each other out when someone is out of position, mismatched, or beaten.

Every player should understand the value of defense and take pride in his/her ability to contribute to a solid team effort, even though there are few statistics that will give notoriety to his/her performances. Water polo players don’t need to be blessed with tremendous skills to be able to play defense, just good anticipation, hustle and desire.

A. Body Position – pressure defense

*Technique points: Players:*

- Should recover their bodies as quickly as possible when swimming from offense to defense so that their hips are on top or near the surface of the water and towards the cage.
- Safest defensive position is usually between the player someone is guarding and the cage.
- Should know at least three of the following situations all of the time on defense – 1) where the ball is, 2) where the player(s) is(are) that they are guarding, 3) where the cage, other defenders and goalie are, and 4) the possession clock time.
- Should try to, whenever possible, stay between the ball and the person they are guarding – i.e. ball-side defense. This will prevent the offensive player from easily receiving the ball.
- Should always try to swim for position (see p.3); i.e., to an area before the offensive player rather than grab, hold, pull back, etc. the offensive player to obtain an advantageous spot. (anticipate)
- Should try to show their hands as much as is possible when guarding an offensive player to show the referee that they are not fouling and therefore stopping the clock.

*Hands up body position when defending one-on-one (dark cap = defense)*

![Image](https://www.santamariatimes.com)
Hands up defense, pressing the player with the ball (dark cap = defense)

Hips up and towards the cage, watching the ball (dark cap = defense)

Front position on 2m., hips up & towards the ball, closely guarding offense (white cap = defense)
#1 “Ball-side, pressure defense” – offensive player #5 has the ball.

\[ \begin{array}{c}
1 \quad 6 \quad 5 \\
2 \quad 3 \quad 4 \\
\end{array} \]

B. Front court defense:

All defensive (X) players in graphic above are playing “ball side”…i.e. they are playing \textit{between} the offensive player with the ball (\#5) and the offensive players \#1,2,3,4,6 that they are guarding. This effectively denies a pass anywhere else in the pool except the unguarded goalie at the other end.

Players must constantly look back and forth between the ball and the player they are guarding (“head on a swivel”). On defense, one \textbf{cannot assume} that the ball nor the player being guarded will remain stationary for very long.

The player below (white cap\#7) is showing body position for guarding a perimeter player and denying her the ball.

\textbf{Hips up and towards the cage – perimeter guarding (white cap \#7)}

Joan Gould

www.waterpoloplanet.com
Defending the passing lane, i.e. between the ball and the offensive player (defense = white cap)

Guarding driver on the perimeter, hips up and towards the cage, watching ball (white cap= defense)

C. Pressuring the ball: (marking the ball makes it less easy for the passer to see his(her) receivers)  
Technique points:

- Try to match the defenders hand to the passers hand.
- Continuous eggbeater motion necessary while moving towards the ball.
- Avoid unnecessary fouls which stop the clock and give a free pass; but, at the same time adequately press the pass.
- Keep hips up on the surface to avoid being “turned.”
D. Guarding the Two-Meter player:

*Technique points:*

- Don’t concede a beneficial position for the offense (strike zone). Try to force him/her as far away and off-center as is possible. Eggbeater strength is essential guarding this position.
- Try to stay ball side for as long as there is adequate pressure on the ball as it advances down the pool.
• Keep distance from the offensive player. If you are too close with any portion of your body, this is a form of leverage (s)he will use to position (him)herself. Most especially, **HIPS must be UP** while guarding this player so as not to be “turned.”

• This is a thankless task; you must be willing to put up with physical contact and continue to strive to avoid a disadvantageous position – i.e. behind the 2m. offense.

• Minimize the shots your goalie must cover; for most offensive 2m. players, this means giving the backhand shot side – i.e. playing on the power side shoulder.

• When an entry pass is made, make an equal effort to the ball as is the offense player’s; try to stay to the side of the offensive player – i.e. **NOT over** the top of (him)her.

• When making contact with the 2m. offense, try to check (him)her in the low torso so as to keep the player off-balance and move (him)her to a less advantageous scoring position.

• Referees calls must be **adjusted** to; each referee typically has slightly different interpretations of what an ejection foul will be. Listen for the whistle as you foul the 2m. player; back off and reposition ball-side once you hear the whistle.

**Hands up 2m. defense (white cap)**

![Hands up 2m. defense (white cap)](image)

**Moving to the side position, two-meter guard (white cap)**

![Moving to the side position, two-meter guard (white cap)](image)
Fouling two-meters, moving to side (dark cap = defense)

E. Field shot blocking

**Technique points:** Field players should:

- Extend one arm straight up over head and walk (eggbeater) towards the shooter – narrowing his(her) angle on the cage, do not waive arm.
- Listen to goalie commands – whether to press the offensive player or not.
- Funnel all shots to the middle of the cage so the goalie has fewer square feet to cover.
- When shot taken, try to absorb with middle of forearm, not hand or fingers (tipping).
- Try to rotate over the hip in order to increase range when moving body towards the shooter.

Field player (dark cap) arm extension, up on hip, walking towards shooter– listen to goalie commands

Funneling shots to the center of the goal, matching arms (defense = white cap)
White cap #3 matching arms with player @ 3 spot – point position

F. Sloughing and crashing:

*Technique points:*

- Perimeter defensive players should look back to the 2-meter match-up and see if the guard needs help.
- A “crash” is made by the defensive player swimming toward the entry pass as it is being made to two meters; a “slough” can occur anywhere in the pool before the pass.
- The angled portions of the pool are typically the best areas to crash and slough from because these shots typically do not have as high a percentage of scoring. (see below)


- Perimeter players should swim head-up freestyle with quick, choppy strokes when crashing to get to the two-meter entry pass before the 2-meter offensive player; if no whistle is heard designating a foul, the crasher should swim through the ball and dribble it to a safe area (on the outside).
Crashing to the two meter area to prevent a shot (white caps #8 and #12)

- There are many combinations and variations of the partial zone dropping/sloughing/crashing type of defense. All involve the defenders covering more than one offensive player and an area of the set offense. The goalie must be prepared for outside shots when this defense is utilized. Upcoming is one variety of this defense.

#2. Perimeter slough/crash: 4-5 drop

The objectives of sloughing, dropping, and crashing from the perimeter are to:
- encourage a poor angle shot (see previous page), prevent a shot from 2m., and force the offense to make drives and accurate passes to be able to beat the goalie with a shot.
- There are many variations of this defense. The 4-5 drop/crash, shown above, takes place between the defenders of the 4 and 5 spots. When “5” has the ball the “4” defender drops and when “4” (or 1, 2, or 3) has the ball the “5” defender drops. It is a “teeter-totter” between the two defenders. A defender crashes when the ball is passed to 2m. This is most effective when there are right-handed players at “4” and “5”. Notice that the other defenders #1, 2 are in the passing lanes to prevent cross-passes! The #3 defender is playing in the “gap” as well – another form of partial zone defense.
G. Other Individual Defensive Moves:

Technique points: Water polo is a team game therefore no player should assume that (s)he only has the responsibility (unless so designated) to guard one player the whole time. The best defenses always have all seven players looking to help each other. Defensive maneuver examples:

1. Switching - used any time a defensive player is in a disadvantageous position (i.e. behind the offense); or, if there is a mismatch between the offensive and defensive players. Can be used effectively on counterattack defense and in the set defense. For example, in the diagram below, the defender of player #4 switches over to #3 take away his(her) offensive advantage.

![Diagram](image)

2. Stair-stepping (ladder-down) – used when the offensive players are lined up towards the offensive end rather than in an arc and spread. This allows the defense to double-team an offensive player, with or without the ball, from behind and perhaps steal the ball or deflect the pass or shot from behind.
White caps = offense, dark = defense: dark cap #8 looking to “stair step” on white cap #5

Note: possible “switch” needed in the sequence above between defensive players #6 & #8 to avoid the offensive pick.

Double-team or stair-stepping the dark cap offensive player #10

Stair-stepping on #3 spot – two blue caps on one white @ point position
3. **Foul-and-drop** – used to help or double-team on another offensive player. Immediately after fouling, the defensive player swims to an area to prevent a pass to an open player. The fouled player has a free throw and cannot shoot (unless outside 7m. or 5m.) and therefore must find a different teammate to pass other than the open one.

Foul and drop – white cap #12 making perimeter foul so that dark cap #13 cannot shoot the ball.

4. **Gapping** – occurs anywhere in the set defense when a defender moves to an area between two offensive players and attempts to cover both by moving between them quickly. In the diagram below, the defenders of #2 and #3 have “gapped” between the 2, 3, and 4 players, thereby allowing the #4 guard to double-team another player, if necessary.
Defender “gapping” between two offensive players, likely @ the 2 & 3 spots (white cap = defense)

5. Fronting - Defender stays in the passing lane between the player with the ball and the 2m. player (or any other potential receiver) to deny this player the ball. This can be done front-to-front, hips up; or, back-to-front so as to look for the ball, as below.

White cap#11 fronting dark cap, front-to-front

Back-to-front, dark cap #9 defense looking to ball and fronting versus white cap#8
6. Extra-stroke - An effort by the defender to swim to a spot and beat the dribbler so as to avoid a disadvantageous position and possible ejection foul.

White cap#7 below takes an extra stroke to move between dark cap#11 and the goal

7. Baiting: encouraging an interceptable pass. Defender places (his)her body in a position in or near a passing lane which disguises and allows the possibility of a steal.

8. Foul-to-steal: pressing very tightly on the ball and trying to strip the offense of the ball. Typically done when a team is behind in a game and trying to get a quick score.

9. Jamming & Stunting: moving back and forth between the ball and other open offensive players to try to slow the ball down and allow a teammate(s) to catch up. In the diagram below, defensive player “b” jams and stunts between offensive players #3 and #4 to try to slow down the ball and allow defensive player “c” to catch up.

10. Spinning - defender turns his(her) body so as not to be held by offensive player. Important move for the defender to avoid an ejection foul or a 2m.shot. This move
is particularly important for women players, as there is more swim suit material for the offense to make contact with.

Defensive player dark cap #4 twists (spins) to get free from grasp of offensive player white cap #4

References:


Nitzkowski, Monte, “Defending the two meter offensive specialist,” Water Polo Scoreboard, 6.1 (January/February 1991): 23