Chapter 1
History and Tradition

Water Polo is a game that captures a number of different facets of some of the more popular sports in world culture. Much of what is involved with water polo, as can be seen in this chapter, is comparable to the sports of hockey, basketball, and soccer.

To visualize the sport, combine the dual skills of swimming and ball handling; and, add to it the physicality and power play opportunities of hockey, the fast break opportunities and passing of basketball with the pivot (center) position, and the penetration and goalie play of soccer. Water Polo players typically swim over 1½ miles in a game.

Physiologists have ranked the sport as one of the most strenuous activities of all. In 1991, Water Polo was quoted as the “Best overall sport in terms of physiological demands placed on the athlete,” by a panel of physiology experts from all over the U.S. (Ludovise, C1,6) The exercise of swimming itself utilizes many sets of muscles. Add to swimming the head-high ball handling skills of passing and shooting, the leg support generated through the eggbeater kick and the physical contact between players, and you have a thoroughly arduous sport.

The game has as its roots the aquatic festivals, called galas, which were held in the English resort towns in the mid-1800’s. In order to attract more spectators, the festivals included a rugby-style game which involved a submersible ball. The name is the only connection between water polo and the horse version, as polo was derived from the East Indies word “pulu” which means ball. The first “pulu” ball was made of Indian rubber. (Smith, 2) There was, however, a variety of the game where the players played on barrels with sticks.

In the 1860’s, there was a version of “football in the water” which was developed but not codified by the London Swimming Association. The first game of Water Football was played at the Crystal Palace in London in 1874. In 1876, the first rules were written by William Wilson in Aberdeen, Scotland at the Bon Accord Club. At this time, Wilson deemed the sport “Aquatic Football.”
True to its early descriptions, the game was similar to a scrum in rugby and points were scored by physically advancing the ball over or underwater and placing it on a goal. The ball, originally a pig’s bladder was later made of rubber, and malleable enough to even fit in a players’ swim suit. Two hands were allowed by all players. (Worldwide aquatics, 1)

Ten years later, in 1886, the Association Swimming Club of Glasgow formed a committee to standardize the rules. Within a year, goalposts were used to “shoot” at, one hand at a time was allowed to touch ball, and players were not allowed to use the bottom of the pool. (Lambert and Gaughran, 4)

In 1888, the London Water Polo league met and revised the rules to take advantage of changes in the swimming strokes (Trudgeon) and thus speed up the game. The goal was made larger (3 feet by 10 feet) and a point could be scored by throwing the ball into this area. The composition of the ball was changed to leather and the seven field players could only use one hand, and could only be tackled if they were in possession of the ball. Passing became a much more integral part of the game. (Worldwide aquatics, 1)

In the same year John Robinson, and Englishman, introduced the game in the United States at the Boston Athletic Club. The first men’s competitions in the sport were between clubs, with the Knickerbocker Club of New York taking the first National Championship in 1898. The New York Athletic Club started water polo in the fall of 1890. One of the first recorded series of matches was
For decades the U.S. game used the early physical style of play, even to the extent of requiring the 1904 Olympic Games in Saint Louis be played by these 1876 vintage rules. The result was that no European teams participated in the 1904 Games and the U.S. “won” gold, silver, and bronze medals.

The dimensions of the pool, or lack thereof, had a large impact on the early tenor of the game. With few large pools, Water Polo had a very rough style because there wasn’t much room for the fourteen players and thus minimal swimming space available. With the addition of new facilities, the European game changed. The Europeans took a dominant role in the sport most especially with the adoption of FINA, the Federation International de Natation Amateur, as the uniform rules in 1911. The U.S. schools and Clubs still “clung” to the older style wrestling “softball water polo” rules for years to come.

Water Polo has long been affiliated with schools. Cambridge University in England fielded its men’s water polo team in 1882 and started the oldest collegiate rivalry in the sport with Oxford in 1891. The U.S. universities started water polo as early as 1897, when the University of Pennsylvania began its program. (Lambert and Gaughran, 5,11) The sport was unfortunately dropped as men’s varsity status from the Ivy League in 1937. Most recently, Prince William was a member of the University of St. Andrews Water Polo Team and prior to that played at Eton. (Prince of Wales, 1)
Men’s Water Polo was revived on the West Coast in the late 1920’s and early 30’s as newer Colleges were the beneficiaries of more modern pools which created the opportunity to play the sport using more mobile swimming style. – Fullerton was the first community college team in 1933.

As part of its resurrection, the N.C.A.A. devised a “new” set of rules which were similar to basketball. These were played throughout the 1950’s and 1960’s and required that field players had limited number of fouls of any variety per game. Once again, the Americans, during their College season, played different rules than the rest of the world.

The first N.C.A.A. Men’s Water Polo Championship was competed in 1969. Gradually, there were incremental changes until finally, in 1976, the colleges adopted the F.I.N.A. style of rules allowing unlimited “normal” fouls. There are currently fifty Colleges and Universities in the U.S. which sponsor Men’s varsity intercollegiate Water Polo. (N.C.A.A. website)

As in many sports, women’s water polo remained in relative obscurity through the early 1900’s. Women’s intramural varieties of water polo were played in the early 1900’s (Cambridge website). One of the earliest recorded competitions took place in 1926, when the Amateur Athletic Union (A.A.U.) Nationals were won by the Los Angeles Athletic Club. The National Championships were established on a permanent basis between 1961-1962, largely due to the efforts of Rose Mary Dawson, coach of the Ann Arbor Club in Michigan. (2004 Hall of Fame, 19)
Women’s Outdoor National Championships,
1926-1977 (A.A.U.) ; 1978-present United States Water Polo, Inc. (Smith, 429, HickokSports.com)

1926  Los Angeles Athletic Club, Los Angeles, California
1931  Pacific Coast Club, Long Beach, California
1962  Ann Arbor Swim Club, Ann Arbor, Michigan
1964  Montana Swim Club, Miles City, Montana
1965-1967  Northern Virginia Aquatic Club, Arlington, Virginia
1968  Foothill Farms Swim Club, Sacramento, California
1969  Northern Virginia Aquatic Club, Arlington, Virginia
1970  Sheridan Swim Club, Quincy, Illinois
1972-1973  Coral Gables Swim Association, Coral Gables, Florida
1974  North Dade Swim Club, Miami, Florida
1975  North Miami Beach Club, Miami, Florida
1976  Fullerton Area Swim Team, Fullerton, California
1982  Slippery Rock Swim Club, Slippery Rock, Pennsylvania
1983  Seal Beach Swim Club, Seal Beach, California
1984  Industry Hills Aquatic Club, Industry Hills, California
1985  Industry Hills Aquatic Club, Industry Hills, California
1986  Santa Ana Water Polo Club, Santa Ana, California
1987  Beach Aquatics, Long Beach, California
1988  Hawaiian Water Polo Club, Honolulu, Hawaii
1989  Beach Aquatics, Long Beach, California
1990  Beach Aquatics, Long Beach, California
1991  California Water Polo Club, Berkeley, California
1992  Beach Aquatics, Long Beach, California
1993  Sunset Aquatics, San Diego, California
1994  Modesto/Stanislaus Water Polo, Modesto, California
1995  Sunset Aquatics, San Diego, California
1996  Sunset Aquatics, San Diego, California
1997  Modesto/Stanislaus Water Polo, Modesto, California
1998  California Water Polo Club, Berkeley, California
1999  Golden Bear Water Polo Club, Berkeley, California
2000  Nor Cal Aquatics, Concord, California
2001  O.R.C.A., Villa Park, California
2002 San Diego State “A”, San Diego, California
2003 Stanford Water Polo, Palo Alto, California
2004 Devil Mountain, Walnut Creek, California
2005 San Diego Shores, San Diego, California

Official recognition of girls and women’s water polo as sanctioned high school Championship sport took place in California in 1998. The first Women’s N.C.A.A. Championship Tournament was contested in 2001. There are currently sixty one Colleges and Universities in the U.S. which sponsor Women’s Water Polo as a varsity intercollegiate sport. (NCAA website)

Internationally, Holland was the first documented team to play Women’s Water Polo in the early 1900’s (Athens 2004, 1)

**Women’s Action, Sydney Olympic Games 2000**

As an Olympic sport, Men’s Water Polo was added to the program in 1900 at the Paris Games, thus making it, along with soccer, the oldest team sport in the Games.

Women’s Water Polo became an Olympic sport 100 years later in 2000 at the Sydney Games. The addition of the women’s competition to the Olympic Program was due in large measure to daily protests that were staged by the Australian Women’s National Team during the 1999 International Olympic Committee meeting in Melbourne. (Wigo, “Speaking Out”, 7)

Notable evolutionary changes in the sport:

- Ball – changed from leather to rubber with a cotton bladder due to James R. Smith’s invention and collaboration with AMF Voit in 1936. Folklore has it that the color was changed from red to current “yellow” in 1948 because fabric for the rubber ball was made from “Mae West” life jackets. Another reason given for the new “optic yellow” look was to improve visibility. The rubber ball finally was used in the 1956 Melbourne Olympics. In the 1980 Moscow Olympics a nylon bladder was introduced, which made the rubber ball much “livelier” and more likely to skip on the surface of the water. (UPS, 2)
• Caps – changed from minimal cotton material without numerals, two different colors to distinguish teams, to cotton with numerals and earguards for protection in 1976. Now nylon caps with numerals and earguards and multiple colors (2004).

• Suits – changed from full length “costumes” to “trunks” for men in the early 1930’s, thereby allowing less material for players to grab a hold of. Women’s suits continue to evolve in efforts to overcome these restraining impediments due to player-to-player contact. (Lambert and Gaughran, 14)

• Length of game – changed from four quarters of five minutes each to four quarters of seven minutes each in 1976 Montreal Olympics to place more emphasis on endurance.

• Game format – two halves to four quarters (late 1950’s).

• Size of squad – changed from eleven players on a side to thirteen players on a side in 1984 Los Angeles Olympics in order to allow for more speed and depth among players. The Women’s roster size has remained at eleven. (Athens, 1)

• Time outs – none allowed until 2000 Sydney Olympic Games – where two were allowed for the regulation game and one during overtime.

• The pool dimensions – the 30m. by 20m. course with minimum depth of 7ft. and numbers of players on a side (n=7) have remained constant for nearly a century. The size of the goal has remained 3 feet by 10 feet perpetually, as well. In the women’s game, the course was slightly shorter (25m.) until most recently when the 2004 Athens Olympic Games moved the length to 30m.

• Overtime play to break ties as a possible conclusion to the matches in championship games – 1988 Olympics.

The U.S. lost a chance for a gold medal in the 1984 Los Angeles Olympic Games as a result of a tie with Yugoslavia in the gold medal game. These were the last Games where a medal could be decided after a tie on the basis of goal differential.

• Referees – originally utilized one referee per match. In 1980, at the Moscow Olympic Games, this was changed to include two referees in order to detect and call more of the fouling that takes place. In 1997, the use of flags to indicate possession was dropped in favor of hand directions and pointing.
One of the more memorable moments in Men’s Olympic history involved this exact problem – only one referee. During the 1956 Melbourne Olympic Games the Hungarian team had a match with the Soviet Union when a Russian player, Valentin Prokopov, opened up Ervin Zador’s eye in the fourth quarter – the game had to be called off with the Hungarians winning, 4-0 and much blood-letting. One referee wasn’t nearly enough to control the overly-physical contact. Half of the Hungarian team defected after the game rather than return to Soviet repression at home. Many of these players came to California and taught the U.S. players new tactics, including the eggbeater kick. (wikidpolo, 4-5). The story of the Hungarian water polo athletes and their defection from the awful brutality occurring in Budapest has been captured in a recent 2006 documentary: “Freedom’s Fury,” written, directed and filmed by Colin Keith Gray and Megan Raney Aarons. www.freedomsfury.com

- Exclusions – with this variety of foul, a player is removed for a specified period of time. The amount of time has been reduced over the years from until a goal is scored (prior to 1964) to one minute to 45 seconds to 30 seconds to the present 20 seconds or until there is a change of possession or goal scored.
- No moving rule – prior to 1952, players were to remain stationary after the whistle was blown. This was changed to allow more movement in the game in the 1956 Melbourne Olympics. (U.S.A. Water Polo, “Tribute to 1996…”,17-18)
The “Modern” game – Water Polo at the 1996 Olympic Games in Atlanta

As one can see, the rules evolution has added swimming stamina and team play to the already rugged nature of Water Polo. This has made the game dynamic, fast moving, and quick thereby increasing spectator interest.

In Men’s Olympic competition, Hungary has been far and away the most dominant country, winning eight gold medals in over 100 years of competition, with Great Britain a distant second with four – mostly early in the 20th century (see Appendix#1). There are 75 participating countries in the World that participate internationally in the sport of Water Polo. (FINA, 1)

In Women’s Olympic competition, the two gold medalists have been Australia (’00) and Italy (’04) (see Appendix #2).

References:


Boston Athletic Association Report, 1890-91.


Ludovise, Barbie. “In Demand, This Sport is Top.” Los Angeles Times, 16 January 1991, C1, C6


