

How to Watch Water Polo

A guide for spectators

The Pool

A water polo pool is 25 or 30 metres by 20 metres, with a minimum one metre area behind each goal line. The 2m, 4m and 5m lines are easily distinguished on the side of the pool by coloured markings: goal line: white; 2m line: red; 4m line: yellow; 5m line: green.

The Game

Water polo can best be described as contact soccer in a pool, in which athletes use their arms, not their legs, to throw the ball through the opponent's goal. Each team has seven players in the pool at one time, including a goalie whose duties are the same as their soccer and hockey counterparts. They are the only players who may touch the bottom of the pool in defending the three-metre goal area. Goalies are also the only players who may touch the ball with both hands.

Play begins with both teams lined up at opposite ends of the pool and the ball held in a ring at the centre of the pool or dropped from the side of the pool by the referee. Teams sprint to the centre in an attempt to gain the first possession.

Players may move the ball by passing it through the air or across the water's surface to a teammate, or by carrying the ball while swimming or dribbling. This is similar to dribbling in basketball, except the ball floats on the water's surface as opposed to bouncing on the floor.

Also, like basketball, there is a shot clock. Each team has 30 seconds to shoot the ball at the goal; if no shot is taken, a free throw is awarded to the opposing team. In addition, a game clock keeps track of the time left in each quarter of the contest.

Play is extremely physical, and the top players are among the world's best-conditioned athletes, swimming constantly throughout each of the four seven-minute periods, all the while battling the opponent for possession of the ball. Most players are tall with a long reach, making it easier to receive and intercept passes, and many players begin their careers as competitive swimmers. Players stay afloat by using an eggbeater kick, which allows them to tread water and also rise up well above the surface to throw the ball or to defend.

Fouls are very common in water polo, and the referee indicates a foul by blowing a whistle and holding out the appropriate hand signal.

Penalties range from a free throw given to the other team, to a penalty throw, to an exclusion, in which a player is excluded from play. Exclusions last for 20 seconds of game time, until the offender's team regains possession, or until a goal is scored - whichever comes first.

Because of the physical nature of water polo, players wear not one swim suit, but usually two, lest one is accidentally ripped during play. Players also wear caps which serve two purposes. They allow for player identification as each player's number is displayed on the cap. In addition, the ear guards of the cap prevent injuries to the head and eardrums.

Scoring

Goals count one point, and scores can run in the teens in this fast-paced game. If the score is tied at the end of the match, a tie is recorded in the standings for preliminary play.

In a semifinal or final round match, a winner must be declared. If there is a tie at the end of regulation, teams play two three-minute overtime periods. If the score is still tied after overtime, "sudden death" play occurs, in which the first team to score is declared the winner.

Position by Position

Drivers

Drivers are field players who specialize in driving skills and quick shooting techniques. Drivers must be extremely fast swimmers and have above average hand-eye coordination. They also focus considerable attention to defensive play.

Goalkeepers

The goalkeeper, or goalie, is the only player permitted to take the ball in both hands or punch it, so long as they are within their own 5-metre line. They patrol the 3-metre long goal area and are called upon to make "saves" to prevent an opponent from scoring. Within the 5-metre area, the goalie is permitted to stand during play. They are not allowed to go beyond the half-distance line but are allowed to shoot at the opponent's goal, as long as they do so from their half of the pool.

Centre Forward

(Two-metre man or hole set)

The centre forward is the offensive player who takes position directly in front of the opponent's goal, between the 2-metre and 5-metre lines. The best hole players have above average size, great leg strength, excellent passing abilities and are skilled in specialized goal scoring. They are similar to centres in basketball, in that, in a sense, they "post up," looking for a pass that enables them to get a close-in shot at the goal.

The two-metre players are always closely guarded.

Major Fouls

Major fouls are serious infringements of the rules for which the offender is charged with a personal fault, which results in an ejection for 20 seconds or a penalty throw. Fouls usually are called only when the offended player doesn't have the ball. Players with the ball can be fouled, except in instances of blatant acts of brutality or fouling a player within the 5-metre area when the referee believes a goal would have been scored.

A player with three major fouls is excluded from the rest of the game with substitution, except in cases of brutality (see below), in which no substitute is allowed. Examples of major fouls include:

- Splashing - to deliberately splash water in an opponent's face.
- Overly-aggressive fouling - any foul to the head, neck or face or any foul intended to cause bodily harm.
- Dead-time foul - any defensive foul committed during dead time (dead time occurs when the clock is stopped after the referee blows his whistle and before a player plays the ball). A defensive player committing a foul is excluded for 20 seconds.
- Double dead-time foul - when both an offensive and defensive player simultaneously commit a foul during dead time. Both players are ejected and a face-off/neutral throw is awarded.
- Brutality - a major foul which includes deliberately attacking, striking, or kicking an opponent or making disproportionate movements with that intent or to endanger another player in any way. The offending player is excluded from the remainder of the game without substitution.

Ordinary Fouls

Ninety percent of all fouls called result in a free throw awarded to the opposing team. These fouls include:

- Taking the "ball under" to keep it away from an opponent.
- Hitting the ball with a clenched fist.
- Touching the ball with both hands.
- Standing - any player except the goalie taking an active part in the game while standing on the bottom of the pool.
- Two-metre violation - a player within two metres of the opponent's goal line.
- Impeding - pushing, pushing off from, or preventing the free limb movement of an opponent who has not gained an offensive advantage and who is not holding the ball.

Water Polo Glossary

30-second shot clock - as in basketball, a team has 30 seconds to shoot the ball. The clocks are usually located at the edge of the pool.

Advantage rule - a cornerstone of water polo which permits a referee to refrain from declaring a foul if, in their opinion, such a declaration would be an advantage to the offender's team. Applied properly, it speeds up the game and results in more scoring.

Backhand - a pass or shot, made with either a bent or straight arm, in which the ball is projected directly behind the thrower.

Balking - a body, arm, or eye movement, or combination of these, which freeze a defensive player or makes them leave defensive positioning, to the advantage of the offensive player.

Ball under - an ordinary foul. Taking or holding the ball under when an opponent makes bodily contact with the shoulder, arm or hand.

Caps - identification caps with plastic ear guards and visible number worn by all players. Usually one team wears white and the other wears blue. Goalkeepers' caps must be red.

Corner throw - offensive player putting the ball into play at the 2-metre mark on the side nearest to which the opponent caused the ball to cross the goal line.

Counter attack - offensive strategy that seeks to create a fast break or advantage situation at the offensive end after a turnover by the opponent in the defensive end.

Dead time - usually refers to the time between the whistle for a foul, which stops the clock, and the restarting of the clock after the ball is put in play.

Dribbling - the technique of moving and controlling the ball while swimming freestyle

Drive - quick swimming movement made toward the goal by an offensive player without the ball.

Drop - almost a zone defense, where the defensive players drop back to help protect the centre of the pool and help block shots. The ball carrier must be pressured to force a bad pass or hurried shot.

Dry pass - a pass made where there is a need for a quick reception by the receiver and the ball may be caught without touching the water.

Eggbeater - the alternating leg kick like a breaststroke kick, that enables players to lift themselves vertically out of the water while constantly treading water.

Ejection area - an area behind the goal line, opposite from the desk and beside the time bench, where penalty time is served by a player who has committed an exclusion foul.

Free throw - the method of putting the ball in play after a team is awarded the ball by the referee after a foul (dropping from a raised hand onto the surface of the water or throwing into the air).

Fronting - defensive positioning whereby the 2-metre guard gets in the passing lane (between the ball and the centre forward), thereby preventing the centre forward from receiving a pass.

Goal throw - a free throw awarded to the goalkeeper after a member of the offensive team has caused the ball to go out of bounds across the goal line.

Green markers - the line 5-metres from the goal line.

Holding, sinking, grabbing and/or pulling back a player who is "holding the ball" is not a foul so long as it is not done in a manner likely to injure the offensive player.

Man-down/man-up (6-on-5 extra man) - when a defensive player commits a major foul and is ejected for 20 seconds, the offensive team has a "man" advantage.

Natural goal - a goal scored from open play when both teams are at full strength, as opposed to a goal scored from a penalty throw or a man-up situation.

Penalty shot (penalty throw) - free shot at the goal, taken upon the signal of the referee, from any point along the 4-metre line with only the goalkeeper between the shooter and the goal.

Personal foul - a foul that results in exclusion or a penalty shot. Any player committing three personal fouls is excluded from the remainder of the game.

Press - the basic "man to man" defense that is the most commonly used strategy. The idea is to guard each offensive player tightly without fouling. Defenders should always position themselves between their goal and the player they are guarding.

Red markers - the line 2-metres from the goal line.

Slough (pronounced sluff) - a defensive strategy whereby a defensive player drops off the attacker they are guarding to adopt a position to guard an offensive player who is attacking from a more dangerous position.

Stationary pick - when an offensive player swims a defender into another (usually unseen) offensive player, similar to setting a screen in basketball.

Substitutions - replacing one player with another. This may occur at any time in the ejection area, or between periods, after a goal is scored, or to replace an ejected player.

Swim-off - the players taking up positions on their respective goal lines and swimming toward the ball at the centre of the pool at the blast of the referee's whistle. This occurs at the beginning of each period.

Wet shot - a shot that is attempted while the ball is controlled in the water, usually a quick wrist shot; also called an off-the-water shot.

Yellow markers - the line 5-metres from the goal line.