



WATER
POLO



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HISTORY OF WATER POLO

Water polo is now an established sport played throughout the world but it has a long history which began in England. The first documented evidence of the game was when the Bournemouth Premier Rowing Club carried out the "first series" of aquatic handball matches" on July 13th 1876.

Various ball games had been played in the water before this time, the most common seems to have been a type of polo in which the swimmer "rode" an inflated skin or barrel, propelling the ball with the hands or a form of paddle and moving about by using the feet. These games were probably more in the way of "comic relief" and the game played on "barrel horses" was still to be seen in the early years of the present century. This is probably where the name "Polo" came from.

There is evidence of earlier references than 1876 to the game we know today. Probably the first that can be found is a resolution passed in 1870 at a meeting of The London Swimming Association - "that a committee be appointed to draw up a set of laws for the game of 'football in water'".

Evidence suggests that the game was played in the 1870's in Leeds with a rugby ball and in Burton-on-Trent where a goal was scored by grounding the ball on the end of the bath, with the goalkeeper standing on the end and allowed to jump onto any player in possession of the soft india rubber ball. In the magazine "The Field" a brief notice appeared of a water baseball match played at Crystal Palace but there do not seem to have been any recognised rules.

Gradually, the game developed and there is no doubt that in the matches played in the sea off Bournemouth, the team consisted, as today, of seven players, although the field of play was 50 yards in length and the goals were marked by flags.

About this time the game spread rapidly in Scotland and by 1877 several clubs were playing the game. In that year, W Wilson of Glasgow drew up a set of rules and a game was played under them at the Bon Accord Club gala.

By 1884 the Midland Counties ASA had sufficient clubs playing to institute its own Championship, won by Birmingham and Leander, and the Swimming Association of Great Britain was asked to recognise the game. The Council declined and the Midlanders started the "Aquatic Football Association". This stirred the ASA into action and in 1885 the governing body passed an official set of rules.

There were to be six players on each side, goals 10 feet in width marked by flags. This made the game much more scientific but as standing was allowed it did not do away with the roughness which we are told, was often displayed unnecessarily.

At the Annual General Meeting of the ASA in 1888 a committee was appointed to revise the rules and formulate a set of championship conditions.

The report which was adopted contained two special points:

1. The goals should be 8 feet wide fixed at least one foot from the end of the bath and a cross bar 6 feet high.
2. A player must be actually swimming when passing or playing the ball.

After the first National championships won by Burton the rules were again modified, with regard to goal dimensions. The referee was given more stringent powers. The post of umpire was abolished and replaced by goal judges. It was at this point that the rule was introduced prohibiting the goalkeeper from throwing the ball more than half the length of the bath when he was standing.

The first international match was against Scotland in 1890 and was won by Scotland although it was played under the English rules. The following year the match was played in Scotland and again the Scots won. The English officials found there were many points in the Scottish laws which could be adopted.

With a view to unifying the laws an International Board was set up. In Liverpool in 1892 this body passed a revised set of rules which was binding on both countries.

The English must have been quick to learn for, apart from the third Scottish win in 1897 the lists show English victories over Scotland for the next 50 years.

By 1894 the pattern of the game was set and altered little in the next half century, the game became accepted throughout the world with rules very similar to those of today but without the increase in speed in swimming and of the game in general, the no moving clause abolished and varying penalties for the various classes of infringements which exist today.

With all this pioneering work it is not surprising that Britain dominated the early Olympic Games, winning golds in the 1900, 1908, 1912 and 1920 Games.

The ASA Club Water Polo Championships first took place in 1888. County Championships were started in 1896 with the North of England dominating the competition through to 1923.

1962 was the start of the annual 4 Country competition (England, Wales, Scotland and Ireland). England have dominated this event except in 1967 when they did not participate in protest over the Welsh choice of venue (Maindee Baths, Newport) the pool did not conform to the conditions of the tournament as regards to the depth of water.

Today England does well to compete against teams from Europe and around the world, the vast majority of whom are professional players and enjoy televised coverage and large crowds of spectators. The modern game is fast and furious, involving contacts in the water similar to rugby.

The modern player must be exceptionally fit, strong and fast at swimming, even when not involved in play, he/she cannot touch the sides or floor of the pool and must 'tread water'. They spend hours daily carrying heavy loads across the pool to build leg power, swimming to increase their speed and fitness and on weights programs to improve strength and stamina necessary to wrestle for the ball. In fact Water Polo is used by many other sports, especially swimming, as an enjoyable alternative method of fitness training.

Water Polo Rules

The pattern set by Britain with teams of seven playing in positions similar to those of Association Football, was followed internationally. The players were not allowed to move once the referee's whistle had been blown for an infringement until the free throw had been taken. Up until the early 50's water polo was a great spectator sport but with television being installed in more and more homes the popularity of the sport declined.

The rule was therefore, changed after the 1948 Olympics to allow free movement after the whistle, except for the player taking the throw, and this revived interest but the rule whereby a major offender or offenders could be ordered from the water until a goal had been scored remained in the laws.

In the 1960's significant changes occurred. In 1966 a system of penalty points for major fouls was devised by which a free throw and a penalty point was given against the offending team, but the offender was not ordered out of the water. If a side received 3 penalty points against them a penalty shot at goal was awarded to the other side. This was a very weak rule and was proved so in the 1968 Olympics when at the end of the match 73 penalty points had been awarded. The teams Yugoslavia and Russia in fact, having played for them as the easiest way to score goals.

As a result of this in 1969 the International Water Polo Committee changed the rule and decided for a major foul the offender would be ordered out of the water for one minute or until a goal has been scored and any player given 3 major fouls against him was out for the rest of the match although a substitute could replace the player after the one minute suspension or a goal.

They also decided that any team having possession of the ball for more than 45 seconds without shooting would concede a free throw to the other side.

The playing time up to 1952 was two halves of seven minutes each way with time out for all stoppages. In 1953 this was extended to ten minutes each and in 1961 changed to 4 quarters of 5 minutes actual play time.

Today a team consists of 13 players, with only 7 allowed in the water at any one time (1 goalkeeper and 6 outfield players), however, substitution can occur at any time in the game. Play is 4 quarters of 7 minutes actual playing time, which means a game lasts for about an hour. Similar to Basketball, teams have 35 seconds possession in which to score, ensuring a fast, exciting game. Similarly to Ice Hockey, players who commit "major fouls" (such as striking, pulling back or sinking an opponent) during the course of play are excluded from the game for 20 seconds. For misconduct, the penalty is permanent exclusion (with substitution) of the player and in the case of brutality no substitution is allowed.

For a complete guide to the rules of Water Polo you are advised to read the ASA Water Polo Referees Handbook incorporating the Rules of Water Polo available from Swimming Times Publications Ltd.

2 Kingfisher Enterprise Park, 50 Arthur Street, Redditch, Worcs, B98 8LG Tel: 0800 220292

For more information contact:

National Development Officer for Water Polo:

Piers Martin, E-mail: piers@asagb.org.uk

Tel: 0788 7682528

or your District Secretary:

Midlands: C G Freebury,

24 Curzon Close Allestree Derby DE22 2SX

tel: 01332 550167

North: Ms Julie Allsopp

177 Urmston Lane Stretford Manchester M32 9DE

tel: 0161 8668588

North East: D Leighton,

52 Hadfield Rd, Hadfield, Hyde SK13 7NR

tel: 01457 854276

South: A F Jordan

1 Torquay Road Chelmsford Essex, CM1 5NF

tel: 012 45 251997

West: P Jones,

1 Whiteley Ct Leckhampton Rd Cheltenham GL53 0BJ

tel: 01242 526604