

Origins

There is scant documentation as to the origins of water polo. What is known is that the term "polo" is the English pronunciation of the Indian word "pulu", meaning ball. Just as the ball game played on horseback became known as "polo," the ball game played in water became known as "water polo," although there is no connection between the two sports, of course.

The early incarnation of water polo took its lead from rugby football and was played in rivers and lakes. The basic principle was to "carry" the ball to the opponent's side. By 1869, an Indian rubber ball started to replace the original ball, which was made from a pig's stomach. One year later, the London Swimming Club developed rules for "football to be played in swimming pools".

The first official game was played in the Crystal Palace Plunge in London. Early games were generally exhibitions of brute strength. Passing, punting and dribbling were scarcely ever practiced. Each player had one goal in mind: to score goals, regardless of his position. A goal was scored when a player placed the ball, with two hands, on the deck (in the days before nets were introduced). A favourite trick among players was to place the ball, then five to nine inches in diameter, inside their swim suit, dive deep below the surface of what were often murky waters and then reappear as near to the goal as possible. Unfortunate was the player who surfaced too close to goal, however: in the days when the keeper was allowed to stand on the deck, the opportunist found himself pounced on by the goalie from a great height.

By 1880 in Scotland, the introduction of the Trudgeon stroke permitted rule changes to make the game faster. The game moved from a rugby-style affair to a soccer-style of play, with the introduction of a goal that took the form of a cage 10ft wide by 3ft deep. The ball, which by now had become a leather association football, had to enter the cage for a goal to be registered. Players could only be tackled while they were holding the ball, and players could only handle the ball with one hand at a time. Double-handed throws in play resulted in a foul. The early rules used in Scotland in the late 1880s spread throughout Britain and were widely adopted as standard.

The United States was the first nation beyond Britain to take up the game. In 1888, John Robinson, an English swimming instructor, organised a team at the Boston Athletic Association and two years later, J.H. Smith and Arnold Heilban started a team at the Sydenham Swimmers Club (later at the Metropole AC) in Providence, Rhode Island. Records show that the New York Athletic Club (NYAC) introduced the game to members in autumn of 1890.

The early American game was played in the "old" English style, but soon developed distinct characteristics. Play involved close formations and fierce scrimmages. It was rough, tough game in which the ball was often dunked below the surface and held there by players who were excessively physical in terms of modern standards. They grabbed each other when and where they chose to and water wrestling was common, with fights often producing greater interest than actual play. The game was about survival of the fittest. Some tussles only ended when one man gave up the fight for lack of air. Many needed to be dragged from the water and resuscitated.

The smallness of American pools was the reason given for the continuation of the American style of play

after "new" English rules had been introduced to the USA. Louis deBreda Handley, a swimmer who failed to finish the mile at the 1904 Olympic Games before becoming the legendary coach to Olympic swimming champions Ethelda Bleibtrey, Martha Norelius, Aileen Riggan, Gertrude Ederle and Eleanor Holm, among others, said: "There is no room for above water passing action."

The first American polo championships took place on January 28, 1890 in Providence, where the Sydenham Swimming Club defeated the Boston Athletic Association 2-1. By the turn of the century, the game was one of the more popular spectator sports in America. Water polo spread to Hungary in 1889, Belgium in 1890, Austria and Germany in 1894 and France in 1895. The game was included in the Paris Olympic Games of 1900 as an exhibition. Only club teams participated and Great Britain's Osborne Swimming Club, Manchester, defeated Belgium's Swimming and Water Polo Club of Brussels 7-2 in the final game. Pupilles de Neptune de Lille, of France, took third place.



At the St. Louis Games of 1904, the host nation played alone and was the only country to participate. Germany showed an interest in entering, but declined after discovering that the American-style of water polo was to be played instead of the European or English-Scottish version of the game. The Americans used a deflated ball and goals only counted if a player held the ball in the opposing goal. The tournament, never recognised as an Olympic event because of the absence of any international challenger, was won by New York Athletic Club, with Chicago Athletic Club granted second place when the third team, Missouri Athletic Club, refused to play for second.

In the years that followed, Britain continued to dominate European and Olympic matches, winning Olympic titles in 1908 in London, in Stockholm in 1912 and Antwerp in 1920. In 1911, a decisive advance was made in the game when FINA made the English-Scottish rules obligatory for all member nations. The game gathered popular momentum when 12 nations competed at the 1920 Games in Antwerp. From 1928, Hungary started to emerge as the leading polo nation of the world, a position that, one and off, it retained throughout most of the years until the 1980s, when Yugoslavia, the USA, the Soviet Union, Italy and Spain all fielded very competitive teams.

From 1912, the water polo ball was a leather soccer ball which absorbed water and was heavy and slippery to handle. After the 1936 Games in Berlin, James R. Smith (USA) developed a water polo ball made with a cotton bladder (later changed to nylon to improve performance), and a rubber fabric cover that was red for much of the first half of the 20th Century. By 1948 yellow had been adopted as a better colour for visibility of play. That modern ball did not become official equipment at the Olympics until Melbourne in 1956.

THE GAME

Except for the Olympic Games, all major international competitions are organised by FINA, and the Games are organised under FINA rules.

World Championships have been held together with swimming, diving and synchronised swimming since 1973, when the inaugural event was held in Belgrade. The game was for men only until 1986, when the women's tournament made its debut in Madrid.

A second tournament series, the FINA Water Polo World Cup, has been held every other year since 1979. In 2002, FINA organised the sport's first international league, the FINA Water Polo World League, in which the best national teams compete against one another in an annual season format with a purse of nearly half a million dollars (p28).

In 2007, the first men's Water Polo Development Trophy was launched by FINA in Kuwait City, from May 2-8. The tournament, which included 12 teams normally not represented at the major FINA competitions, was won by Colombia, which defeated Puerto Rico in the final 16-4.



THE BASICS OF WATER POLO

The Field: The playing area is 30x20m and the pool must be a minimum of 2m deep.

Teams: Teams have 13 players, with a goalkeeper and six field players participating at any one time.

Players' Code: Players tread water the entire game and cannot touch the bottom or side of the pool. No player except the goalkeeper may handle the ball with more than one hand.

Duration of Play: The game is separated into four quarters of eight minutes at elite level, with a two-minute interval between quarters.

Start of Play: Each quarter is started with teams lined up on opposite goal lines. The referee's whistle is the signal for teams to sprint towards the centre of the pool, where the ball has been placed or dropped.

Time Clock: A possession – or shot - clock controls time. 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. A separate game clock times the passing of each quarter.

THE LINES OF THE GAME

2m line: This is the distance from the goal. The offensive team may not pass this line unless preceded by or accompanied by the ball.

5m line: If an offensive player is fouled (in the eyes of the referee) within this distance of the goal, he or she is awarded a penalty shot from the 5m line; fouls beyond the 5m line carry a free throw or a direct shot at goal.

Centre line: Refers to where the ball is placed or dropped at the start of play.

FOULS

There are three types: ordinary, exclusion and penalty.
