

Coaching and development

Water Polo coaches are like gurus. They are knowledgeable and are able to teach every subtlety and every trick in the book. But few of them have attempted to pass their expertise on in the written word. Lack of time, unfamiliarity with the written word or a simple wish to keep to themselves the “secrets” of the game are among the reasons for their lack of enthusiasm to put pen to paper.

There are, however, some notable exceptions. Among them the Hungarians Bela Raiki and Bela Komjadi, the Americans Monte Nitchkowski and Charles Hines, and the Italians Mario Majoni and Gianni Lonzi, who have all written worthy guides to the sport.

All manuals tackle the different coaching fundamentals, which include:

1. The building of physical strength, fitness, speed and flexibility.
2. Core individual skills, like swimming, handling the ball, catching, passing and throwing the ball; moving in the water using the legs while watching the ball; drills to increase leg strength and mobility are essential.
3. Offensive skills and strategies, including shooting skills, team co-ordinated movement into attack, centre forward pivotal role, the transition from defence to offence, fastbreak and counterattack actions, rhythm and speed of play.
4. Defensive skills and strategies, i.e. moving the team into a set defence; making the transition from offence to defence highly effective; establishing the perimeter where players must go; playing and taking on the centre forward at best; increasing the effectiveness of blocking rate even on fastbreak, etc.

Over the years, both technical and rule changes affected the character of the game. Below are some key dates and developments:

In 1928, Hungarian water polo coach Bela Komjadi invented the "air pass," or "dry pass", a technique in which a player directly passes the ball through the air to another player, who receives it without the ball hitting the water. Previously, players would let the ball drop in the water first and then reach out for it, but the dry pass made the offensive game more dynamic, and contributed to Hungarian dominance of water polo for 60 years.

In 1936, the American James R. Smith, coach and author of books on water polo mechanics, developed a ball made with an inflatable bladder and a rubber fabric cover, which improved performance. The previous leather ball absorbed water and became heavier during the game.

In 1949, among many other rule changes, one was introduced allowing play to continue uninterrupted after the referee had whistled an ordinary foul, speeding up play. Players had to be physically strong and good swimmers.

In 1966, rules were once more revised thoroughly, favouring a sort of technical revolution. Players had to work hard in order to improve their technical skills.

In 1977, after the Montreal Olympics, an overall revision of the rules prompted a “tactical revolution”: two referees were used, defensive zones made their appearances as a strategic concept, exclusion fouls were

replaced by a point system for major fouls; players guilty of these kinds of fouls were excluded for a 1 minute; possession of the ball was limited to 45 seconds (before a scoring attempt).

In 1984, at the Los Angeles Olympics, Yugoslavia, coached by the debutant Ratko Rudic (p284), won the gold medal over the United States thanks to a greater goal difference: +14 for the Balkan team, +9 for the Americans. The home team was leading 5-3 on the 4th period, before their opponents managed to tie 5-5; therefore the rule of the goal difference had to be enforced. Before Los Angeles this rule was enforced also in Munich 1972, after the Soviet Union and Hungary tied 3-3 at the conclusion of an extremely physical and sometimes violent match.

In 1991, it was decided to reduce the exclusion time from 35 to 20 seconds, which, according to some, encouraged teams to commit more fouls rather than shooting.

THE TWO BELAS

With only a few short breaks between 1947 and 1973, Bela Rajki was National coach and technical director of Hungary's swimming and water polo teams. He coached Hungary's Olympic swim team in 1948 and the Olympic water polo in 1952, 1956 and 1972. His teams won gold medals in Helsinki 1952 and Melbourne 1956 and a silver medal in Munich 1972. Rajki also held leading positions in the international swimming and water polo governing bodies. He was president of LEN from 1958 to 1962 (vice president from 1954 to 1958). He chaired the International Water Polo Board from 1960 to 1964, and was vice president of FINA from 1960 to 1964. Among the great Hungarian coaches should be mentioned Bela Komjadi, who, in 1928, invented the "air" pass, or "dry" pass, which made the offensive game more dynamic, and contributed to Hungarian dominance of water polo for 60 years.
