



College Park High School Girls Water Polo

Spectator's Guide to Water Polo

Overview

Water polo is an exciting sport that combines the skills and strategies of swimming, soccer, basketball, and wrestling. It was first developed in the mid-19th century in Britain and was the first sport introduced in the modern Olympics in 1900. The San Francisco Bay Area is especially well-represented at the highest levels of the sport, with several Olympic gold medalists hailing from the area, including from College Park!

Strategy

The objective of the game is to score more goals than the opponent; goals are scored when the ball fully enters the opponent's goal. This is typically accomplished by moving the ball down the pool through a combination of dribbling the ball (swimming with the ball in front, propelled by the player's wake) and passing the ball to teammates (only one hand may be used to pass and catch the ball). Once near the goal, the attackers will often form a rough semicircle with one player in the middle (an area called *the hole*) and pass the ball back and forth until a shot opens up. Offensive strategies may involve various players driving to the goal to get open or to distract defenders. Attackers may also draw fouls as part of their strategy for maintaining possession and advancing the ball (see the Fouls section). Although they are focused on scoring, the offense will keep players back enough to guard against a fast break in case there is a sudden turnover.

Defensive strategies involve trying to block the attackers from passing or taking goal shots as well as forcing turnovers, either by stealing the ball or delaying long enough for the shot clock to run out (which then results in a turnover). Defenders must ensure that all attacking players near the goal are defended with the defender typically positioned between the attacker and the goal; an undefended attacker often has an easy goal shot. Defenders may also intentionally commit certain fouls in order to delay an attack or prevent a score (see Fouls section). All defenders except for the goalkeeper may use only one hand to block an attacker; goalies may block and catch with two hands.

The Start of Play

- Each quarter begins with a *sprint*. All seven players on each team line up on their respective ends of the pool. When the whistle blows, the two players closest to the ball-side referee (typically the teams' fastest swimmers) will sprint to take first possession of the ball, which is dropped in the water by the referee at the center line. Shouts of "our ball!" can be heard as the offense and defense take shape for the first attacking drive.
- After a goal is scored, the game is restarted by both teams swimming back to their respective halves of the pool. The game restarts at mid-pool when a player on the team who was just scored against passes the ball back to her teammate.

The Clock

The clock is a very important part of water polo. Games are divided into quarters; regulation high school varsity quarters are seven minutes long, and JV quarters are six minutes. Some tournaments will have shorter quarters, depending on the schedule.

There are two clocks running simultaneously during a game:

- The *game clock* counts down the time left in the quarter.
 - The game clock stops:
 - After a goal is scored
 - When the ball goes out of bounds
 - When any foul is called
 - When a time out is called
 - The game clock starts (or restarts):
 - At the start of a quarter when the ball is first touched by a player
 - When play resumes after a goal has been scored
 - About three seconds after most ordinary fouls have been called (except for fouls resulting in penalty throws)
 - When a penalty throw is taken
 - A general rule of thumb is that the game clock stops every time the whistle is blown and starts up again when the referee lowers his or her arm.
- The 30-second *shot clock* counts down the seconds left for the team in possession of the ball to take a shot on goal; if the shot clock expires, a turnover is awarded.
 - The shot clock starts and stops in unison with the game clock
 - The shot clock is reset to 30 seconds:
 - When a shot on goal is taken
 - When a goal is scored
 - When a major foul is awarded (see Fouls section)
 - After a turnover
 - When a penalty throw is awarded
 - When a jump ball is awarded
 - When a corner throw is awarded

Fouls

The first thing many people notice about a water polo game is how often the whistle is blown by the referees. Unlike most sports, fouls in water polo are common and are often strategically important, both for the offense and the defense.

- *Ordinary fouls* occur frequently throughout a game. A player who is fouled by an ordinary foul is awarded a *free throw* which gives them a brief time (about three seconds) to make a pass to a teammate without interference.
 - An ordinary foul is signaled by the referee by a single short whistle and an arm raised in the direction of the restart.
 - If the player fouled is an attacker, she retains possession and takes the throw.
 - If the player fouled is a defender, then the ball is turned over to that player and the pass is taken.
 - If the fouled player is *outside* the 5-meter line, that player may attempt an immediate shot on goal rather than a pass to a teammate.
 - There is no limit to the number of ordinary fouls a player may make; however, a referee may call a major foul on a player if the referee feels the player is committing an excessive number of ordinary fouls; however, this is uncommon.

- Ordinary fouls include:
 - Impeding an opponent who is not holding the ball (this is the most common ordinary foul)
 - Touching or blocking the ball with two hands (except for the goalie)
 - Holding the ball underwater so an opponent can't play it
 - Pushing off an opponent
 - Delaying too long to take a free throw
 - Walking on or pushing off the bottom of the pool
 - Being inside the opponent's 2-meter line while not in possession of the ball, unless behind a teammate in possession of the ball.
- Players will often try to *draw a foul*. This is an important skill and is most commonly seen when the player in possession of the ball is being aggressively blocked by a defender. The attacker will turn her side into the defender and drop the ball (safely away from the defender). Because the defender may not impede the movement of an opponent who is not holding the ball, a foul is then often called on the defender, giving the attacker some breathing room to pass the ball.
- *Major fouls* are assigned to the players that commit them. A player who commits three major fouls may not play the remainder of the game.
 - Most major fouls are indicated by the referee with three or four blasts of the whistle followed by pointing at the offending player and then pointing to that team's re-entry area; the player must immediately cease play and swim to the re-entry area for a 20-second *exclusion* (also known as a *kickout*), during which time that player's team must play short. The shot clock is reset when a major foul is called.
 - Major fouls are most often called when a defensive player holds, sinks or pulls back an offensive player away from the ball before the offensive player has had a chance to take possession of the ball, thereby taking away the advantage their opponent had. Major fouls are most often called on defensive players within their own 5-meter line, though they can be called on either team anywhere in the pool.
 - If the foul is committed by a defender and, in the opinion of the referee, it prevented a probable goal, a penalty throw (also known as a *five-meter*) is awarded. This is most commonly awarded in situations where the attacker turns or gets inside the defender close to the goal and is fouled from behind. A penalty throw is indicated by the referee, after pointing to the offending player, by raising his or her arm with five open fingers in the air. The throw is taken from the five-meter line directly in front of the goal. Any player on the team may take the throw.

A few more things you might see or hear about

- *Corner throw* – If the ball goes over the goal line (but not in the net) and was last touched by the goalie, a corner throw (also known as a *two-meter*) is awarded the attacking team. The shot clock is reset, and the attacking team puts the ball in play at the two-meter line near the side of the pool.
- *Dumping the ball* – When the shot clock is about to run out and the attackers have no shot to take, the player with the ball may elect to dump the ball, or toss it in their opponent's empty corner of the pool, forcing that team to begin their possession from deep in their own half.
- *Skip shot* – this is a shot in which the ball is angled downwards to skip off of the surface of the water and up into the goal. A successful skip shot requires strength and skill.
- *Hole set and hole D* – the names given to the attacker and defender, respectively, occupying the hole, which is the position in front of the goal just outside the 2-meter line. This is a key attack position in the center of the action and is often occupied by each team's most physical players.