

Where Are We Going With This Game?

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When I began my coaching career in the mid-1950s, there were many parents hesitant to have their children playing water polo. They had been subjected to the bad publicity that came out of the old “soft ball” game, where violence led to both injuries and occasional resuscitations. As late as the 1950s, even the media was possessed with the concept of roughness in the game of water polo. If an underwater room were available, the press wanted pictures of players wrestling and gouging beneath the surface. It was bad publicity and hurt the promotion of water polo as a safe and fun sport for the young swimmer. The publicity generated by the violence during the 1956 Melbourne Olympics in the game between Hungary and Russia enhanced the opinion of many—that water polo was rough, ugly and dangerous to play. As a result, many swimming coaches discouraged their swimmers from playing our sport. In the late 1960’s, there was even talk of dropping water polo from the Olympic Games.

After the 1968 Mexico City Olympic Games, many of the countries playing water polo sensed the game was in jeopardy and made a conscience effort to improve water polo through better and clearer rule interpretations, plus a few important rule changes. Gradually the game improved until, in my opinion, during most of the 1970s we had a great game for players and spectators alike. In the 1972 Munich Olympic Games, the United States brought a wide-open, “go for it” style of play, which featured great movement in all aspects of the game, frontcourt picks and screens and a “deep strike”, relentless counterattack. Some of the European press corps, liking what they saw, referred to the American game as Space Age Water Polo. Drivers could drive, two-meter players could shoot and the world had a game that players loved to play and spectators loved to watch. It was a wide-open, exciting game.

Unfortunately, during the early 1980’s, this all started to change. Led by those who interpret the rules, things took a different course. Although playing rules remained much the same, referee interpretation of certain rules, particularly as it affected the two-meter call, changed. Where, before, a two-meter defender making a legitimate attempt to play the ball (not the man) was called for a normal foul, suddenly even minor contact was an exclusion foul. Six on five became a major part of the game as teams were forced to play man-down defense fifteen to twenty times a game. To protect the two-meter defender and stay even-up as long as possible, teams began playing drop-back defense, trying to deny the ball to two-meters and protect the two-meter defender as long as possible. The game quickly became static with few drives and most of the scoring coming late on the shot clock and from the perimeter. Frontcourt offense became a late perimeter shot or a two-meter ejection. What had once been an exciting, movement oriented game now, in my opinion, became a slow, static and an uninteresting sport to play and watch.

By the late 1980s there was momentary concern that too many whistles were ruining the game. An “about-face” was made—suddenly the two-meter foul which had been called at the “drop of a hat”, seemed to no longer exist. Defenders started hammering the two-meter forward, while fewer whistles were being heard. This philosophy quickly spread to the perimeter where again, fouls were not called on defenders holding the drivers. Suddenly we had fewer whistles, more fouls and increasing violence—players

holding, players fouling with intensity to break holds and players trying to retaliate when the opportunity presented itself. It took only a short time before “officialdom” realized that fewer whistles meant rougher play, more fouling and increased opportunity for eventual violent acts. With this realization, whistles began to sound again at previous levels.

By the 1990s the game settled down to more whistles, but continuing static and rough play. Calls began to be heard to try and improve the game through drastic rule changes—changes which would have completely altered the tradition of the game. These drastic changes nearly came about in 1996 when eight experimental rules, which had never been tested at the Senior National Team level, were considered and voted on at the FINA Extraordinary Congress in Berlin. Four of the more “cosmetic” rules were approved. The other four, which would have forever changed the game, as we know it today, were rejected.

And so, “officialdom”, not able to sense what really needed to be done to improve our game, let water polo slip into the new century unsure of it’s direction. The big plus at this moment was the continued growth of women’s water polo with its eventual inclusion in the Olympic program. However, how to improve the present game, make it less violent and help guarantee its continued success as an Olympic Sport was lost, as competing groups appeared to jockey for control of the sport.

And so, as water polo enters the 21st century, in my opinion, our sport has begun to lose spectator appeal. Continued changing and confusing rule interpretations have created unstable situations which are bad for the game. Renewed violence is upon us! Well advertised, it can threaten the continuance of the sport. Parents of young, future water polo stars are not going to be interested in their children playing a sport where deliberate attacks can take place with serious injury always a possibility. Water polo should be a wide-open, fast moving, fun sport which players and spectators enjoy. Contact has always been a part of water polo, but not violent and purposeful attacks. Water polo should be basketball and soccer in the water, not boxing and wrestling. If rules and rule interpretations do not permit a basketball-soccer type of game and, instead encourage boxing and wrestling, we might as well change the rules, shorten the playing field, put a boxing-type ring around the pool, start each quarter with a bell and go ten, three minute periods. At least boxing has some rules for control—no hitting below the belt, no hitting after the bell, ten counts, etc. Obviously, boxing and wrestling cannot be allowed to be major features of our sport. Tactics and fair play go right out the window and the game is tremendously affected in a negative way. None of us want this!

What are some the things we can do to make and keep water polo a good game? Three simple suggestions follow-- I’m sure the experts can suggest many more!!

1. First, don’t let pressing defenders hold perimeter drivers without the threat of ejection. This is where much of the trouble starts. When drivers are held and forced to foul to break free, they are often retaliated against at a later moment. “Holding” on the perimeter breed’s violence. Defenders should defend by body positioning, swimming and step-in help from their teammates. Drive defenders should tackle the driver ONLY when the driver is lifting the ball. Drivers must be able to drive. Can you imagine NBA basketball players like Kobe Bryant, Allan Iverson or Jason Kidd held on the perimeter and not allowed to penetrate with the drive? Can you imagine the basketball post player

being held to the point that he/she can't jump, move or shoot? If you allowed this to take place, basketball would have no game—or should I say you would have the present game of water polo. Effectively, holding destroys good tactical offense. It takes about ten seconds to teach a big player to hold, and years to train a great driver to drive and score. Don Cameron, former Australian Olympic Water Polo Coach, has written about the driver and his/her defender and uses the Basketball Case Book to illustrate how a driver in basketball must be defended to allow each player a chance to move and play. Water Polo officialdom should read the Basketball Case Book. I totally agree with Don's studies on defending the driver. Where's the excitement in a hold? Are spectators attending a game to watch holding, or to see the driver, through skill and movement, free him/herself for a shot and possible goal? During much of any game, ten players are somewhere on the perimeter. With five defenders holding and five drivers trying to break free, we are encouraging violence from the outset. Holding on the perimeter cannot be allowed if we want an exciting and free-flowing frontcourt offensive game.

2. Call the fouls at two-meters!! When the defender plays the ball and fouls, call a normal foul. If the defender plays the man/woman and not the ball, eject. If the defender playing the ball persists in fouling, eject after three successive fouls or force the defenders to switch to prevent ejection. Switching defenders allows drivers to move and forces defenders to help with all aspects of the defense. It puts movement back into the frontcourt game.

3. Consider returning to the 35-second ejection clock. Twenty seconds doesn't always penalize the defending team, particularly when the ejection occurs in the mid-or-back tank and the coach is out of time-outs. A 35 second ejection clock allows the offense to set-up, run plays and creates higher percentage shots. As a result, the defense may not be as prone to commit the ejection foul.

These are only a few suggestions, but something must be done to reduce violence and open-up the game. Countries whose players tend to be physically smaller must have the same opportunities and advantages as those countries that field the larger and stronger players. Holding throughout the field of play destroys the tactical movement aspects of the game. If the situation persists, the women's game will be even more adversely affected—women have more suits to grab and hold.

Will future driving greats be given the same opportunities to drive as some of the world's past All Stars? We must not let great players with incredible skills be neutralized by perimeter holding.

Where are we going with this game? I started this article with references to the problems our sport faced fifty or more years ago. Sadly, I end with many of the same concerns that threaten the continued development of our sport. If we expect to keep water polo as a major world sport, we had better start working quickly to make it happen. In this day and age, there's too much competition for athletes and for the sports dollar for water polo to present anything other than an interesting, fast moving and exciting product.

Hopefully, there's better news on the horizon. Recently, new rules have been proposed that many experts feel will again open-up the frontcourt game. If so, and these rules are approved, maybe we've taken a step in the right direction. Let's hope so!!