

WATER POLO

Learning and Teaching the Basics

CHAPTER ONE

Taking a Young Inexperienced Water Polo Team to Competitive Level



Monte Nitzkowski

I'm often asked, "Coach, what's the quickest way to become competitive in this sport? We have a new program with young players, and we're getting clobbered."

There are four basic axioms which must be followed if you wish to make young teams quickly competitive:

1 **CONDITIONING:** Get your players into top physical condition. This is the easiest of the four axioms to achieve. Most of the athletes probably have a swimming background and are already in pretty good shape. Hit them hard with a conditioning program which features considerable basic swim training, a lot of ball conditioning and conditioning for quickness. You might not get them in better shape than your opponents, but "equal shape" is good enough.

2 **BALLHANDLING:** Spend a lot of time on ballhandling. All players need to continue to develop their ballhandling skills—for young players it's a must. Passing is the name of the game. If a player can't pick up the ball and pass it accurately, his/her team will be in constant trouble. Ball control is essential and without it, success is impossible to achieve.

Along with basic ballhandling skills, at the earliest stage of development, young players must be taught how to draw a foul. Most often, opponents will press against inexperienced teams. If players can't draw a foul and pass from the free throw, they will find it extremely difficult to move the ball into scoring position.

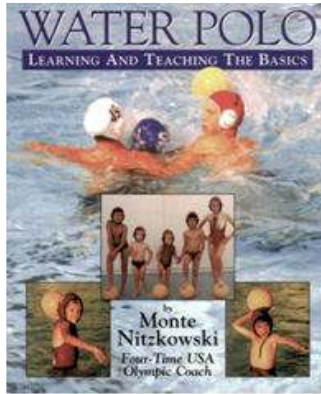
3 **DEFENSE:** Young teams can learn to play good defense years ahead of becoming experts on offense. Most coaches spend way too much time working on offense with a young team. Use that time to learn to play outstanding individual and team defense. This means players must learn to defend one on one against Drivers and Two-Meter players. Also, they must learn team defensive tactics such as stairstepping, sloughing, foul and dropping, gapping and time switching. Finally, they must learn to play within the defensive scheme (press-dropback) employed by their coach. This plan usually will be developed from scouting reports, the tendencies of the opponents, and his/her own team's defensive abilities. Being able to play good defense is essential for the young team.

When working on defense, coaches must teach their teams to play counterattack defense. Experienced teams love to take advantage of young teams by pressing and then counterattacking the turnover. If young teams are going to stay in the game, they must learn the principles of counterattack defense.

4 **OFFENSE:** Ball control is the answer here!! Youngteams cannot afford to get fancy on offense and they should never take low percentage shots. Deny the ball to your opponents. Beginning teams constantly turnover the ball. To counter this tendency, every effort should be made to control the ball for the entire thirty-five seconds. Put the percentages on your side. Good things happen when your team controls the ball. Even if percentage shots are not earned within the thirty-five second period, ejections might be awarded. Again, ball control is everything. When a team keeps the game close against superior opponents, anything can happen in the last several minutes. Look at it this way, the best of teams in the NFL and NBA cannot defeat the worst of teams if they keep turning over the ball. For young teams, there is a strong lesson to be learned here: CONTROL THE BALL!

Conditioning, ball handling and great individual and team defense will help young teams to become quickly competitive. And when it comes to the offense, BALL CONTROL is everything. Remember, feeding the other team's offense with constant turnovers is a sure way to a losing season. Conversely, ball control, coupled with conditioning, ball handling and defensive skills go a long way toward making for a successful season.

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CHAPTER TWO

The Swim Strokes and Water Polo



Monte Nitzkowski

Water Polo provides a wonderful complement to the sport of swimming. As a former Olympic swimmer (200-meter butterfly) and swim coach, never have I subscribed to the theory of some swim coaches that Water Polo is detrimental to the development of competitive swimmers. On the contrary, Water Polo helps build swimming strength and endurance and improves quickness. It provides an excellent opportunity to stay in shape for competitive swimming while providing a much-needed break from the rigors and boredom which can accompany swim training. If I have a criticism of some swim coaches, it would be overtraining, taking the fun out of swimming and leading to physical and mental burnout of some athletes. Water Polo can provide a welcome relief from this situation and help to maintain an interest in competitive swimming for some athletes who otherwise might quit the sport. As far as "re-tuning" stroke technique after the Water Polo season, I have found that, when needed, this can be accomplished very quickly.

All four competitive swim strokes plus elements of the sidestroke and elementary backstroke have application to the playing of Water Polo. Let's take a look at these strokes and analyze their place and importance in the training of the Water Polo athlete.

1 BUTTERFLY: Of the four competitive strokes, the butterfly has the least application to Water Polo. It is used primarily for **conditioning** Water Polo players. When used for conditioning, the flutter kick generally is substituted for the dolphin kick, and the head is kept in an upright, out-of-the-water position. (Illustrations #1, #2.) This puts the legs deeper than normal and puts a lot of pressure on the arms. The body is pulled through the water with a chest-up, "snowplow" effect. The "head-up flutter kick-fly" is an excellent conditioner. However, care must be taken with players who have experienced arm and shoulder problems. They should substitute front-crawl swimming while teammates are conditioning with the butterfly.

The dolphin kick is used by players executing the 90 degree, "square out" release during the counterattack. Other than that, it has limited application to Water Polo training although it certainly can serve as a general conditioner.



Illustration 1 – Head up, flutter fly



Illustration 2 – Head up, flutter fly

2 BREASTSTROKE: Other than moving to the wall during a time out, the complete breaststroke is seldom used as a part of game play. However, elements of the stroke are key to the development of important Water Polo fundamentals. Therefore, breaststroke conditioning should be incorporated into the Water Polo training program. (Illustration #3.)

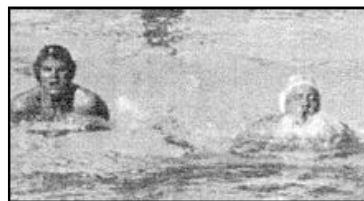


illustration 3 – Breaststroke

When shooting from the vertical position, the pattern of the breaststroke arm stroke is used with the non-shooting arm to provide body support and leverage for the shot. As an example, a right-handed shooter will extend the left hand and arm under water and follow the breaststroke arm pattern to provide balance while shooting. (Illustrations #4, #5)



Illustration 4 – Passing (three point stance). Illustration 5 – Shooting (from the three point stance).

The breaststroke kick (frog-type kick) is the most important kick for all Water Polo play. The circle-fashion, rotating of the lower legs outside the knees and the loose and circular rotating ankles provide the base for the "eggbeater" kick. All Water Polo players must perfect the "eggbeater" kick if they are going to have success with the sport. (Illustrations #6, #7, #8)



Illustration 6 - Breaststroke Kick (starting base for eggbeater).



Illustration 7 - Eggbeater Kick in position.



Illustration 8 - Eggbeater in vertical position

The frog kick also provides the base for the Lunge Block, an important defensive maneuver which will be discussed in a later chapter.

One can see the breaststroke has a number of direct correlations to playing Water Polo and must be practiced as a part of the training program.

3

SIDESTROKE: Of the non-competitive strokes, the sidestroke has the greatest application to Water Polo. The scissors kick provides the base for the "jump" or quick-start necessary for all Water Polo play. Quick starting ability allows players to move quickly for four or five meters in any direction and is the key to both offensive and defensive positioning. Players are constantly starting and stopping during a Water Polo game; therefore, the scissors (and frog) kicks must be taught, trained and conditioned.

And, since players start on different sides, the scissors kick must be perfected on both left and right sides. (Illustrations #9, #10.)



Illustration 9 - Scissor, jump start kick, right hip down with board.



Illustration 10 - Scissor, jump start kick, left hip down, no board.

A modified over arm sidestroke arm movement is used when "hooking" or "squaring out" for the ball. (Note: Both the hooking and squaring maneuvers are used to get away from opponents and to release for the ball. The square out is a ninety degree, right or left release for the ball, while the hooking maneuver resembles a fish hook in its configuration, with the player releasing to the side, then turning back for the ball. As both of these turns are common in Water Polo, the over arm sidestroke should receive some practice time. (Illustration #11.)



Illustration 11 - Over arm sidestroke position.

4 BACKSTROKE: The backstroke has great application to Water Polo. This is particularly true when players are counterattacking. In the counterattack, players completely free of their defenders should roll to their backs and establish eye contact with the Goalkeeper who, ninety percent of the time, will be fielding the ball.

Backstroking in Water Polo requires a high head position which forces the legs deeper in the flutter kick. The arm stroke must be shortened, with the arms rotating at a high rate of speed. (Illustration #12.)



Illustration 12 - Backstroke positions for Water Polo

Occasionally, when players roll to their backs to make a pass over a defender, they will employ a horizontal and inverted "eggbeater" kick. (Illustrations #13, #14.) This is similar to the elementary backstroke swimming position.

All Water Polo players need to practice going from their stomachs (front crawl) to their backs (backstroke) and back to the stomach again. This maneuver occurs often in Water Polo and needs to be included in conditioning drills.

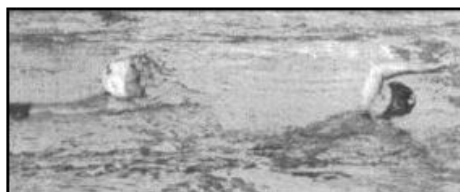


Illustration 13 - Elementary backstroke, eggbeater kick position.

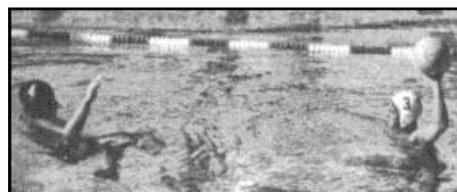


Illustration 14 - Elementary back position to receive pass.

5 FRONT CRAWL: As one might expect, the front crawl is the most important stroke for Water Polo. Players constantly shift from the vertical to the horizontal position and, when moving horizontally, they most often use the front crawl stroke.

The front crawl stroke in Water Polo is similar to the stroke used in ocean swimming and body surfing, where the head is held high so players can look and swim at the same time. All Water Polo players must know what is happening at every moment of the game—location of the ball, position of teammates, position of defenders and the referee's whistle and flag calls. All this can be accomplished only when the head is above water. Knowing all that information allows the player to anticipate all situations and to be moving quickly into proper offensive or defensive position.

Along with carrying the head high, the shoulders must be slightly raised, back arched, and greater knee bend applied to a deeper flutter kick. This resembles an exaggerated sprinter's body position. The arm stroke is shortened to give greater quickness for short distances. The key to successful front crawl swimming for the sport of Water Polo is being able to cover four or five meters very quickly, change directions (forty-five, ninety, and one-hundred-and-eighty degree turns) and still be able to swiftly cover twenty-five meters of continuous swimming in the counterattack. (Illustration #15.)



Illustration 15 - Front crawl swim position for Water Polo.

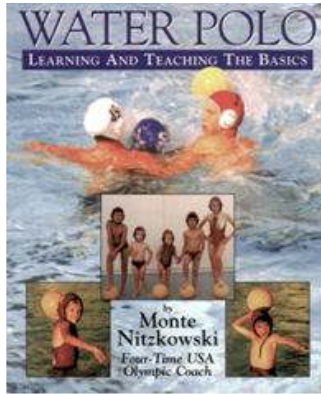
The head-and-shoulder-high position is a must for all the above mentioned considerations plus it is the key for controlling the ball while dribbling. (Illustration #16.) In Water Polo, the ball is advanced either by passing or dribbling. All players must be adept at both of these skills.



Illustration 16 - Front crawl,
dribbling position.

All the above mentioned swimming strokes are extremely important to the development of Water Polo players. They need to be included in both the conditioning and skill development phases of every Water Polo program.

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CHAPTER THREE

The Kicks of Water Polo



Monte Nitzkowski

Good legs and good leg conditioning are musts for the successful Water Polo player. The front and back flutter kicks should be extensively conditioned as they are constantly used in the sport. Breaststroke and sidestroke (scissor) kicks also find extensive use in Water Polo. They provide the thrust for what is commonly known as the lunge kick.

Of all the kicks, the EGGBEATER is far and away the most important kick for Water Polo players. It provides the base of support for vertical passing and shooting. The eggbeater is important for all Water Polo playing positions, but it is critical to the success of the Goalkeeper and the Two-Meter player. It must be taught properly and continually conditioned. Players should be introduced to the eggbeater kick on the first day of practice.

Simply speaking, the eggbeater is an alternating leg, breaststroke-type kick. A player using only the breaststroke kick will surge up, then drop down as the legs reposition for the next kick; this causes the player to "bound," creating a "kangaroo" effect. This is not good. To convert the breaststroke kick to the eggbeater, simply widen the kicking base and alternate the kicking motion of each leg (rather than kicking both legs simultaneously). This creates a stable base and eliminates the "surging" effect. Done properly, the eggbeater player will ride high and stable.

To be successful with the eggbeater kick, players must have ankle flexibility and good foot rotation. As each leg kicks separately, the lower leg (from the knee through the foot) must draw up, then kick down and out and back-in, in a circular fashion. The lower leg must rotate outside the knee with toes pointing out, and then back into the extended position with the inside of the leg and instep of the foot "grabbing and pressing" in on the water. (Illustrations #17, #18.) To get this circular, thrusting motion, the ankles must be loose and able to rotate. "Iron ankles" will destroy the egg beater kick.



Illustration 17 - Eggbeater kick from underwater.



Illustration 18 - Eggbeater kick from underwater.

Once the fundamentals of the eggbeater kick are understood, extensive conditioning of this kick should follow. (Illustrations #19, #20.) The coach should first put players on the wall, then kickboards. By so doing, the legs are elevated to a position where the coach can see if the proper technique is being followed.



Illustration 19 - Eggbeater kick while holding on to wall.

When players demonstrate proper fundamentals for the eggbeater, the kickboard can be turned sideways and lowered into the water to create a "snowplow" effect. (Illustration #21.)



Illustration 20 - Eggbeater kick, horizontal and on board.



Illustration 21 - Eggbeater kick, 'snow plow' position with board.

With the board in the snowplow position, greater resistance is created for conditioning the kick and the coach still can check for leg rotation. Finally, the eggbeater should be trained in the vertical position. Numerous drills can be used such as: vertical eggbeatering forward with hands clasped to the top of the head; vertical eggbeatering with upper arms held up and out of the water, elbows bent; vertical eggbeatering with arms aloft, elbows straight; vertical eggbeatering with ball clasped behind head, etc. The vertical eggbeater should be practiced moving forward, backward and to both sides. Care should be taken to ensure that players remain vertical. (Illustrations #22, #23.)



Illustration 22 - Eggbeater kick, ball clasped behind head.

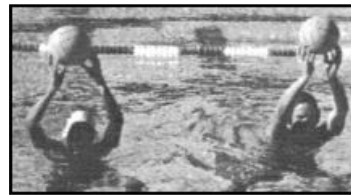


Illustration 23 - Eggbeater kick with arms and ball held high.

NOTE: Light weights can be used while training the Goalkeeper in the eggbeater. Weights should not be used while young players are still in their growth pattern; the eggbeater can be strenuous on the knees and weight adds to this stress. Even with adult Goalkeepers, weights should be kept light and should be added slowly as conditioning improves. (I've never been a great fan of conditioning the eggbeater with weights.)

The lunge kick is another important kick for the Water Polo player to master. It is the explosive kick which gets the player started toward the horizontal swimming position. It must be explosive in nature and provide the player with a quick start. Players who perfect an outstanding lunge kick most often will be able to gain body position on their opponents. A great lunge kick, followed by one or two aggressive swim strokes, can free an offensive player for the drive or properly position a defensive player. Many times this will prevent the need to chase an opponent the entire length of the pool.

The two kicks which provide the thrust for the lunge kick are the (scissor(sidestroke) kick and the breaststroke kick. When starting on their sides, players must be able to execute the scissor lunge kick from both the right and left sides. Therefore, coaches must condition the scissor lunge kick with players practicing with each side down. To ensure this, the coach can stand on one side of the pool and have players look toward that side while practicing the lunge scissor kick. This kick should be practiced from a dead stop (followed by several hard front crawl swimming strokes) until players reach the far end of the pool. When coming back with the same drill, have the players continue to look at the side where the coach is standing, thus ensuring they are practicing this kick on both sides of the body. (Illustration #24.)



Illustration 24 - Lunge kick from side position, left hip down.

When the hips are parallel and at the surface, players should use the breaststroke or frog kick, rather than the scissor kick, to lunge forward and start the positioning drive. (Illustration # 25.)

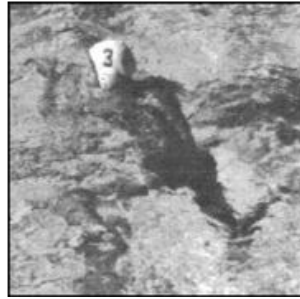


Illustration 25 - Lunge kick from horizontal, hips parallel position — breaststroke type kick used for lunge.

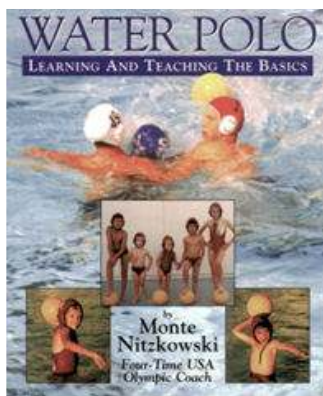
Extensive training and conditioning for the lunge kick, from both the side down and the horizontal positions is a must. Positioning is everything in Water Polo and the lunge kick enables players to gain advantage position.

The lunge block, another important Water Polo technique which incorporates the breaststroke lunge kick, is used against opponents rolling to their backs while attempting to pass the ball. To accomplish this while in the horizontal position, a player should execute the lunge kick then immediately move an arm into a ball blocking position. This should be practiced first with one hand and then the other, until players find the blocking position most comfortable for them. The breaststroke lunge kick, followed by the blocking motion with the arms enables the defender to cross over the body of an opponent in an effort to reach out and block the pass. (Illustration #26.)



Illustration 26 - Lunge block maneuver, started with lunge kick.

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CHAPTER FOUR

Picking Up the Ball



Monte Nitzkowski

All players must be able to pick up the ball from the surface of the water quickly and efficiently and bring it to a position where it can be passed or shot.

Throughout the country the coaches' cry of "pick it up from underneath" has echoed from the walls and ceilings of most swim facilities. However, under certain circumstances, the ball can and should be picked up from on top. This may not be welcome news to all, but it is a fact. Therefore, both underneath and on-top methods should be taught to young players and these players need to understand under what circumstances each method should be employed.

1 **PICKING UP THE BALL FROM UNDERNEATH:** Picking up the ball from underneath should be the first method taught to beginning players. Have players tread water and float a ball next to their passing arm. With the ball in this position, the player should reach underneath the ball with an open hand, fingers spread and the thumb positioned toward the outside, or away from the body. (The open hand should be positioned as if the player were preparing to "read" I the palm.) In this position, place the hand underneath the ball and lift it slightly above the surface of the water. At this point and while the ball is being lifted, the hand should begin to rotate (in a "rolling" fashion) back to the inside with the thumb finally pointing toward the ear and the ball cradled in the hand next to the side of the head. The ball is now positioned where it can be passed or shot. (Illustrations #27,#28,#29.)



Illustration 27 - Hand under ball, ready to pick up from underneath while in vertical position – thumb on passing hand pointed away from the players body.



Illustration 28 – Ball starting up, thumb begins rotation back to inside.



Illustration 29 – Ball up ready to pass or shoot.

Players should practice this maneuver in the vertical, treading water position until they can bring up the ball quickly and under complete control. Once players have mastered picking up the ball from underneath in the stationary, vertical position, they should practice picking it up from underneath while swimming (dribbling). To execute this maneuver, have players dribble the ball the width or length of the pool and practice picking it up while moving in a swimming fashion.

The technique for picking up the ball from underneath while dribbling is simple. In order, the player should shorten the overarm recovery motion on the passing arm and enter (catch) the water just behind (short of) the floating air.-As the hand enters the water and is placed underneath the ball, begin the same rotational movement as in the stationary position—rotate the palm so it is in the "up" position with the fingers spread and thumb positioned to the outside. Now lift the ball up and slightly out of the water. While cradling the ball in the palm of the hand, rotate the thumb back toward the inside, bringing the ball up and in close to the head. As the ball comes up, the player's legs drop down and the body moves from the horizontal to the vertical passing or shooting position. (Illustrations #30, 31, 32.)



Illustration 30 - Picking up ball from underneath while in horizontal, swimming position, showing early catch phase of stroke and hand entry position.



Illustration 31 - Ball starting up, thumb begins rotation to inside.



Illustration 32 - Ball up in tripod, shooting or passing position. Player has gone from horizontal to vertical, hips down position.

There are many arguments for picking up the ball from underneath. First, the ball comes up quicker that way and it can be released quicker, which are of particular importance in the counterattack where every second is critical to maintaining an advantage situation.

Second, when an offensive player places a hand on top of the ball, defenders are alerted to an impending action, giving them the advantage. But when an offensive player picks up the ball from underneath, the "picking up" action is disguised until the last moment. Defenders have no idea what is coming next, creating a greater element of surprise and a definite advantage to the offense. This is particularly true with an off the-water (drive) shot taken from a "wet" pass, which is far more effective when picked up from underneath. Additionally, picking up from underneath makes it very difficult for the Goalkeeper to know what's coming next.

A third advantage of picking up the ball from underneath has to do with control. After practicing this technique young players will find it much easier to control the ball.

This concept has great application for beginning Two-Meter players. When a player is being aggressively defended from behind, it's extremely difficult to hold and maintain the Two-Meter position. This problem is compounded when a young player trying to absorb the foul and make a release pass places a hand on top of the ball, oftentimes "pushing" or "pawing" it farther out and away from the Two-Meter area. This happens all the time. Two-Meter players end up at five to six meters, a position which quickly can destroy an effective offense. Valuable seconds are lost while Two-Meter players attempt to regain proper position. The best way for young Two-meter players to avoid this is to reach under the ball and, after lifting it from the surface of the water, make a wrist release pass. Picking it up from underneath will bring up the ball quickly and under control. This allows the Two-Meter player to make an accurate release pass while maintaining the correct Two-Meter position.

One can see that picking up the ball from underneath is an extremely important Water Polo fundamental and should be taught to all players during the early stages of their careers. This method has many applications for making the offense effective. It can't be stressed enough!!

2 **PICKING UP THE BALL ON TOP:** Although limited in its application, there are certain situations in Water Polo where the ball should be picked up on top. In reality, as players' skills improve and as young players' hands grow larger, many insist on picking up the ball only from on top. Any observer of the sport constantly hears the coaches' cry of "pick it up underneath" while actually seeing the ball picked up from on top. Experienced players tend to pick up the ball from on top. This is wrong and should be discouraged. Players must learn when the ball can and should be picked up from on top and when it should be picked up from underneath. Both skills must be applied and should be determined by the situation of the moment.

The question arises, "Why do experienced players want to pick up the ball from on top?" There seems to be a logical explanation: The ball floats and makes an excellent flotation device for players. They like to place their hands on top of the ball and lean on it before lifting it up to pass or shoot. Leaning on the ball becomes a bad habit. When players lean on the ball they will always pick it up from on top.

What situations call for the ball to be picked up on top? First, when "walking the ball" in for a shot (ball cupped in shooting hand and stroked through in preparation for an off the water shot) the ball should be picked up from on top. (Illustrations #33, 34, 35.)



Illustration 33 - Walking the ball, hand on top in swimming position.

Illustration 34 - Walking the ball, stroking through underneath the water with hand on top of ball.



Illustration 35 - Walking ball, recovery phase of stroke and ready to stroke again, pass or shoot the ball.

Second, when executing a push pass or shot (screw shot), the hand is placed on top of the ball prior to taking the shot. (Illustrations #36, 37, 38.)



Illustration 36 - Push pass, hand on top of ball.



Illustration 37 - Push pass, ball cocked and ready to throw.



Illustration 38 - Push pass, ball released.

Third, the Two-Meter specialist generally will need to place a hand on top of the ball prior to making a backhand shot or backhand release pass. For right-handed Two-Meter specialists, oftentimes the release pass will be to the right wing side, or to the one o'clock perimeter position. Usually this will call for the hand to be placed on top of the ball in preparation for the backhand pass.

Players should practice picking up the ball from on top in the same manner as when picking it up underneath. Float the ball on the passing arm side and while in the vertical, treading position, place the hand on top of the ball, press down, then release the pressure and allow the ball to spring upward. Slightly rotate the thumb down, forward and outward to cradle the ball as it is lifted to the passing position. (Illustrations #39, 40, 41.)



Illustration 39 - Picking ball up from on top, vertical position. Press ball down into water, fingers spread, thumb to inside.



Illustration 40 - Ball coming up out of water from top, pick up position.

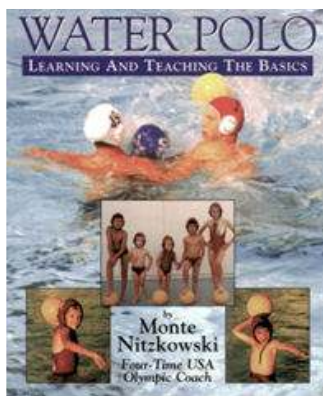


Illustration 41 - Ball now up and ready to pass.

Once mastered in the vertical, stationary position, this same hand and arm maneuver must be practiced in the swimming (dribbling) position.

So one can see, under certain playing conditions, the ball does get picked up from on top. Therefore, beginning players need to train both skills, remembering there are more situations where the ball should be picked up from underneath. Don't let the fact that the ball is sometimes used by offensive players as a flotation device be an excuse for always picking it up from on top. For coaches teaching young players, the rule of thumb should be: focus on picking up the ball from underneath under almost every circumstance but, remember, it's okay to nick it up from on top under certain specific situations.

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CHAPTER FIVE

Dribbling and Changing Directions



Monte Nitzkowski

1 DRIBBLING: As in basketball, the Water Polo ball is advanced down the field of play by dribbling and passing. From the first day of practice, beginning players must be taught the basics of dribbling. It's really quite easy.

While swimming the front crawl stroke, the player moves the ball along, floating it between the recovering arms. To accomplish this successfully, the front crawl stroke must be slightly modified: The head is carried high so the eyes and mouth are above water. The back arches to compensate for a deeper flutter kick. By arching the back, the kick elevates to near-surface positioning. The ball rides between the arms on a wave created by the slightly raised position of the head and shoulders. The arms are used as a guide to help keep the ball in front of the body, but the arms should not be used to hit or slap the ball back and forth with each stroke. From time to time, the arms should simply nudge the ball to keep it tracking between the shoulders, in front of the dribbling player. (Illustrations #42, #43, #44.)



Illustration 42 – Dribbling



Illustration 43 - Dribbling



Illustration 44 - Dribbling
from the side.

Once the fundamentals are learned, coaches need to design their own dribbling drills, working to build speed and control into the exercise. As soon as players can dribble under control, they should be taught to change direction by cupping the ball between the hand (wrist) and forearm, picking it up, moving to left or right, then continuing the dribble. (Illustrations #45, 46, 47, 48, 49, 50.)



Illustration 45 - Start of
ninety degree turn to left,
player with ball cupped
between hand and wrist.



Illustration 46 - Player half
way through ninety degree left
turn. Ball still cupped in
player's hand.



Illustration 47 - Left turn completed and starting into dribble.



Illustration 48 - Player with hand on top of ball preparing to pick up ball and start right turn.



Illustration 49 - Executing right turn, ball still in hand.



Illustration 50 - Finishing right turn and dribbling away.

Change of direction with the ball should be practiced with ninety and one-hundred-and-eighty degree turns. (Illustrations # 51, 52.)



Illustration 51 - Start of 180 degree turn with ball.



Illustration 52 - Executing 180 degree turn with ball cupped between hand and wrist.

Once young players have learned to move and turn with the ball, they should be taught to push dribble, pushing the ball in front by using an extended arm stroke and pushing the ball with hand and fingers. The push dribble is not a game tactic, but it improves a player's hand coordination, helping to "soften" the hand touch and giving young players a better feel for the ball. (Illustration #53.)



Illustration #53 - Push dribble.

Next players should learn to "dribble-walk" the ball. This is accomplished by cupping the ball between wrist and forearm and swimming with the ball in the front crawl armstroke. The dominant side arm should be used to practice this drill. The ball will actually go under water with the pull of each stroke, but this is all right so long as the player is not being tackled in a game situation. The ball can be passed and shot from the walking position. (Illustration #54.)



Illustration 54 - Walking the ball - notice ball being 'stroked through' underwater.

2

STOPPING AND CHANGING DIRECTION: While playing the game of Water Polo, players constantly need to change direction. Young players should be taught to stop and change direction at an early stage of their Water Polo careers.

To come to an abrupt stop, simply lift the head, drop both arms approximately twelve inches below the surface of the water and push forward with open, slightly cupped hands. By lifting the head, the legs will immediately drop to a deeper position. At this point, to aid in the braking action, players should spread their legs in breaststroke fashion. (Illustration # 55.) To start forward again, have the player drop his/her head back into the water, give an explosive lunge kick, and return to front crawl swimming.



Illustration 55 - Applying the brakes to complete a quick stop.

To turn ninety degrees to the left, the underwater pulling arm (in this case the left arm) should interrupt its pull approximately half-way through the normal pulling action and thrust to the right across and underneath the body. The elbow is further bent to aid with this explosive, thrusting motion. The right, or recovering arm, is thrown ninety degrees across the front of the body and toward the left side. The head turns in the same direction and follows the arm around in the turning motion. The legs gather behind the buttocks to allow for a quick and tighter turn; they then thrust downward to execute the lunge kick. (Illustrations #56, 57, 58.) This will increase acceleration as the player completes the turn. To turn to the right, simply reverse the action.



Illustration 56 - Preparing to start a 90 degree left turn.



Illustration 57 - 90 degree left turn with right arm (recovery arm) thrown across front of body.



Illustration 58 - Finishing off the 90 degree turn.

To completely reverse direction (one-hundred-and-eighty degree turn), the player generally will start the turn on the side more comfortable to him/her. Even though young players will favor a side, they should practice to develop the one-hundred-and-eighty-degree turn to each side. To execute this turn on the left side, shorten the arm recovery and pulling motion of the front crawl stroke, forcibly reverse the direction of the left or underwater pulling arm, and thrust it toward the front of the body in a scooping, underhand motion. Draw the legs up tight and under the body, swing the head and right arm over the water, to the left rear. This will change position of the upper body so it is facing in the opposite direction. The drawn up legs then execute the lunge kick and the player momentarily drops his/her head back into the water to aid with acceleration and a return to the front crawl stroke. (Illustrations #59, 60, 61.) To practice this turn to the right, simply reverse the actions.



Illustration 59 - Start of 180 degree turn to left side.



Illustration 60 - Head turned, legs drawn up, right arm swings while left arm scoops.



Illustration 61 - Finishing off left 180 degree turn.

The one-hundred-and-eighty degree change of direction turn also can be executed directly from the stomach to the back. To complete this movement, scoop forward with the pulling arm, lift the head, draw the legs up behind the buttocks, reverse direction with the recovering arm stroke and change from the front crawl to the backstroke recovery motion. The head is forcibly thrust straight back, as in the backstroke wall start maneuver. As the legs emerge from underneath the body, they execute a lunge kick (elementary back inverted breaststroke-type kick) and resume the flutter kick. As the player comes off the reverse turn, he/she can stay on the back or roll to the stomach to continue in the opposite direction (Illustrations #62, #63, #64, #65.)



Illustration 62 - Start of 180 degree turn, stomach to back.



Illustration 63 - Reversing direction, legs dropping while arms scoop in breaking action.

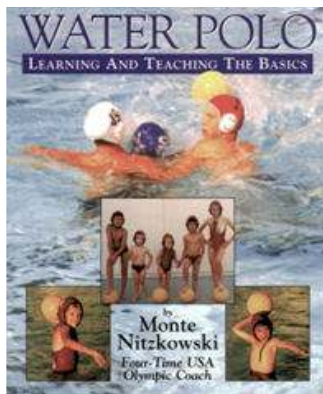


Illustration 64 - Crossing to back, 180 degree turn stomach to back.



Illustration 65 - Finishing 180 degree stomach to back turn by rolling back to stomach and starting front crawl stroke.

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WATER POLO

Learning and Teaching the Basics

CHAPTER SIX

Passing the Ball: Part 1



Monte Nitzkowski

The ball is advanced in Water Polo by dribbling and passing. Obviously the quickest way to position the ball is with the pass.

Few coaches would argue with the statement "passing is the most important technique for the Water Polo player to learn and master." Passing competency improves a player's shooting ability. Shooting incorporates all passing fundamentals. The fact is, a shot is simply a pass thrown hard at the goal.

To be successful on offense, teams must control the ball. To control the ball, teams must be able to pass accurately and safely. Players need to spend hours learning to pass. When the ball is "turned over," it is most often the result of a poor pass. Teams which constantly throw away the ball seldom find success.

One of my favorite Water Polo statements is "a pass is a goal"— meaning, a well-thrown pass can out position both Field Defenders and Goalkeeper, thereby making it easier for the shooter to score the goal. In my estimation, the passer making the assist to a score is a far more important statistic than the score itself. A player receiving a well-placed cross pass should be able to quick release (shoot) the ball into the goal. It's the well thrown pass which creates the high percentage shot.

Passing is critical to every part of the game. The pass thrown away in the counterattack oftentimes will result in a goal for the opponents. While a player is in the frontcourt offensive structure, good passing is critical to success. The Two-Meter offensive specialist turns over the ball more than my other player. He/she must be trained to throw accurate and correct passes to both Drivers (wet and dry), and to releasing perimeter players (dry). It is necessary to spend a great deal of time teaching Two-Meter specialists to pass. The player advantage offense succeeds or fails with the passing game. The easiest six-on-five score comes after the defense is first committed to ball position, followed by a firm and accurate cross pass—a pass which a teammate catches and shoots into the goal. With the twenty-second player advantage rule, one poor pass can use up all the advantage time.

Players must learn to pass in both the vertical and horizontal positions. Circumstances vary, so players must learn to make a variety of passes. They must understand whether the ball should be passed wet (on the water) or dry (to the player's outstretched arm and hand). Passes always must be thrown to positions which complement their teammates' positioning. This concept is particularly true when passing from the perimeter to the Two-Meter specialist. Most often the ball will be passed wet to this position, and always to a spot which will out position the Two-Meter Defender. In the counterattack, the proper application of either "early wet" or "late dry" passes are key components to success.

Coaches must design drills to teach the when, how and why of passing technique. All players should buy their own ball and take it home. They should handle, cradle, bounce and caress it during every free moment. It's hard to get too much ball handling time and a lot of this familiarization can take place out of the water.

VERTICAL PASSING

Beginning players should first be taught correct passing technique while in the vertical position. The ball should be cradled in the palm of the hand, fingers spread with only the thumb and little finger applying pressure to keep the ball held comfortably. The middle three fingers are in contact with the ball and are used to help steer the direction of the pass.

(Illustration #66.) Remember, don't tightly squeeze the ball or it will pop out of your hand. Again, simply keep a firm but comfortable grip with the thumb and little finger while letting the three inside fingers serve as a guide. When properly seated in the hand, a small amount of air space will exist between the palm and ball.



Illustration 66 - Thumb, little finger and three middle fingers position for passing and shooting the ball.

There are certain key elements to successful passing:

1 THE WRIST: Proper use of the wrist is critical. When passing the ball, the wrist must bend forward and back, not twist to the side. When the wrist twists to the side while passing or shooting, accuracy of the pass is affected; any side spin makes the ball difficult to catch.

To pass correctly, a small amount of backspin should be placed on the ball. This is accomplished by snapping the wrist forward and letting the ball "ride" off the three middle fingers. A ball with backspin is far easier to catch and control.

2 THE ELBOW: The elbow must be raised well above the surface of the water. When the elbow drags in the water, the pass is "shoveled" forward. Shoveling slows the speed of the pass and affects accuracy. With the elbow properly raised, players are throwing from "on top" and accuracy is greatly improved. When throwing short passes, the elbow should be up and slightly forward. When throwing longer passes the elbow should be up and drawn back.

3 THE SHOULDERS: The shoulders must rotate with the pass. To accomplish this, players must lead with their opposite, non-throwing shoulder. Players should not pass with their shoulders square (parallel). When passing the ball, they must rotate with both the lead and throwing shoulder. In other words, righthanded players should lead with their left shoulder. (Illustration #67.) As the ball is being passed, the left shoulder should forcibly rotate to the left; the right shoulder (throwing shoulder) should rotate forward and slightly to the left.



Illustration 67 - Ball raised to pass, left shoulder forward.

4 THE HIPS AND UPPER TORSO: As the ball is being passed with shoulder rotation, the hips and torso rotate accordingly. The legs generally will be slightly forward or slightly to the side of the vertical passer. Therefore, as the ball is being released, the passer must properly balance the body and rotate with the hips and upper torso. A variety of passing drills should be designed by the coach to assist the player in learning basic body balance, turning, and proper shoulder, hip and upper torso rotation.

5 THE LEGS: The legs are the base for vertical passing. They are the support system and must be in great shape. A strong eggbeater kick is a great aid to passing. Passing is more than just good legs, but good leg shape will always help passers to develop their skills.

When learning to vertical pass, players should practice one on one (two players to one ball), concentrating on catching and ball delivery. When catching the ball, the hand and fingers should be outstretched and relaxed (no "iron hands"). The ball should be "looked" into the palm, and the receiving player's hand and arm should "give" slightly as the ball contacts the palm and fingers. When catching, players should concentrate on holding their vertical position. Don't let each successive pass force greater distance between the two passing players. Use the legs to hold position and, after catching the ball use the legs to get up and make the next pass.

To properly focus, players must restrict their conversation and totally concentrate on the task at hand. By starting to pass with a single partner, it's easier to concentrate on the basics and the coach can quickly observe the technique of partner.

When starting to pass, partners should be a short distance apart allowing for the warm-up of both shoulder and arms. It is a tendency of young players to get into the water without proper warm-up and start throwing the ball the distance of the pool. It's no wonder so many older players experience shoulder problems. This can be avoided through proper on-deck stretching, in-water stretching and swimming, and, after picking up the ball, easy short-distance passing. Only after shoulders and arms are properly warmed up should passing distance and velocity be increased.

As partners begin passing practice, and while still warming up their arms and shoulders, each should initially concentrate on the key ingredients for becoming a good passer: "Am I properly catching the ball?"; "While releasing the pass, do I have the correct grip on the ball?"; "Am I properly using my wrist, avoiding side spin, and putting a slight backspin on the ball?" "Is my elbow up?" "Am I properly rotating with my shoulders and following through with the arm after the ball is released?" "Am I using my legs to get up for the ball and make the next pass?" There is a lot to think about and, initially, players should isolate on each on each of these fundamentals as they begin their passing practice. Believe me, when young players follow this thinking pattern (concentrating on simple fundamentals and slowly moving to the next), they will be quick to understand what it takes to be a good passer and great results will follow.

HORIZONTAL PASSING

Players also need to be able to pass from the dribbling, horizontal position. This is accomplished with both "wrist" and "push" passes.

1 WRIST PASSES: The wrist pass should be used to pass the ball short distances to the immediate right or left of the dribbling player. While dribbling, players should practice wrist passing to both sides. This is accomplished by reaching under the ball and lifting it slightly above the surface. For righthanded players passing to the left, the raised ball is snapped off the palm by a quick wrist release (snapping the wrist forward and releasing the ball off the palm and fingers). (Illustration #68)

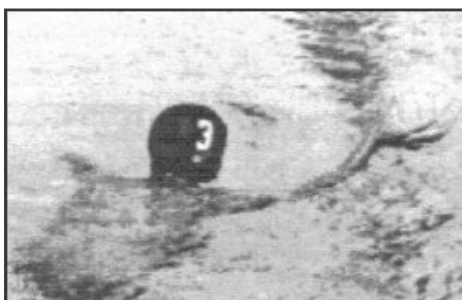


illustration 68 - Hand position for wrist pass to left.

For righthanded players passing to the right, the hand is placed on top of the ball. The ball is pressed slightly down and into the water, then the pressure is released, allowing the ball to spring upward. At this point, the wrist rotates to the right (thumb rotates down and under the ball). The ball is backhand passed to the right with a forward snap of the wrist and fingers. (Illustrations 69, 70.) When wrist passing to the left or right, lefthanded players simply reverse the process.



Illustration 69 - Start of wrist pass to the right. Hand on top of ball and pushing it slightly down into water.

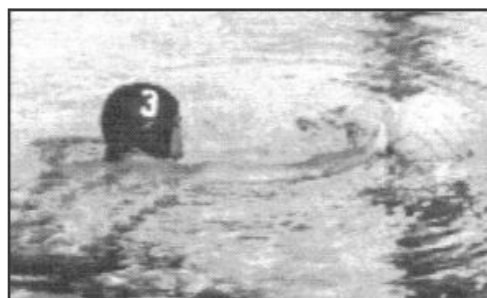


Illustration 70 - As ball 'rises' from water, hand rotates to thumb down position and ball is backhand, wrist passed to the right.

2

PUSH PASSES: The push pass is used to pass the ball forward from the dribbling position. The push pass has advantage over the wrist pass in that the ball can be passed far greater distances.

To push pass while dribbling, place the hand on top of the ball and press slightly downward. (Illustration #71.) Next, remove the pressure and allow the ball to spring upward. For righthanded players, as the ball rises, rotate the wrist to the right (outside) allowing the thumb to rotate down toward the water. In this position, and with the ball lifted and cradled in the palm (held in place by thumb and little finger pressure), draw the arm back toward the shoulder. (Illustration #72.) This is accomplished by moving the elbow to the outside. From the drawn position, drive the arm forward by pushing forward with the hand while straightening the elbow and rotating thumb back to the left or inside. While the player is still in the horizontal or semi-horizontal position, the ball is released off the palm with the forward pushing and unwinding movement of the arm and wrist. (Illustration #73.) When this maneuver is executed properly, the ball can be push passed ten to fifteen meters with good accuracy.



Illustration 71 - Start push pass. Hand is on top of ball and ball is slightly pressed into the water.



Illustration 72 - Push pass, thumb rotated down, ball drawn back.

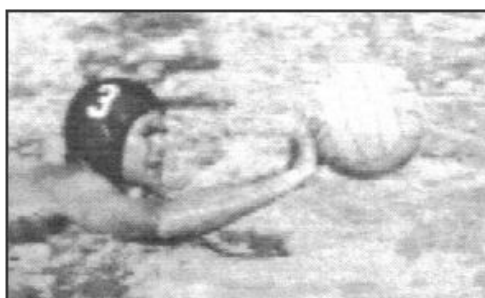
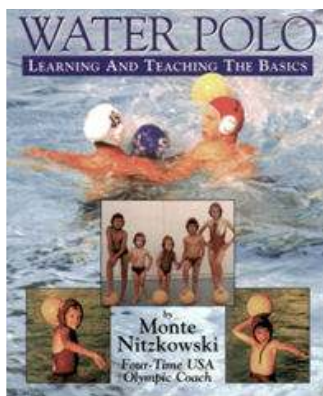


Illustration 73 - Push pass, arm coming forward
and ball releasing from hand.

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WATER POLO

Learning and Teaching the Basics



Monte Nitzkowski

CHAPTER SIX

Passing the Ball: Part 2

PASSING DRILLS

There are a number of basic structures which can be used for passing drills. To meet the needs of the moment, coaches should vary structures as well as types of passes. Players should spend some time each day practicing their passing skills. With younger players, a great deal of time should be spent on passing. No matter what the age and experience level of the team, once players have warmed up and conditioned, they should begin to pass. (Only after shoulders are sufficiently warmed should shooting drills begin.) Passing drills should be designed to teach both vertical and horizontal passing.

Drill Structures:

VERTICAL PASSING

1 TWO-ON-TWO STRAIGHT-LINE STRUCTURE: The most basic of all passing structures, Two on Two Straight Line Passing is a must. To start, players should face each other a goal width apart. As a warm-up, begin simple, dominant arm dry passing. See Diagram #1. (Illustration #74.)

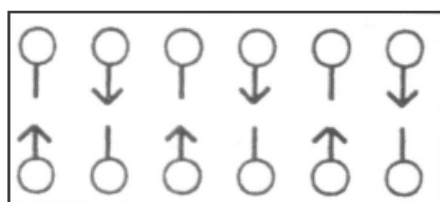


Diagram 1



Illustration 74 - Goal width apart, two line right hand passing drill

Water Polo programs should have enough balls to provide one ball for each two passers. Two-on-Two-Straight-Line Passing allows the coach to monitor each pair carefully and make necessary individual corrections. Virtually every imaginable vertical passing drill can be worked into this structure dominant side, dry passing; off-hand passing; right-to-left, left-to-right passing; turn shoulder to the inside, catch and spin; (Illustration # 75.) stroke away, pass wet or dry, etc. (Illustrations #76A, 76B.) As arms loosen, the distance between partners can be increased to allow for more difficult passing sequences. If the Two-on-Two-Straight-Line Passing Drill is used as a prelude to vertical shooting drills, players can finish their warmup by faking, then shooting the ball hard into the water in front of the partner. The partner simply helps block the ball, picks it up, fakes and shoots back toward the other partner.



Illustration 75 - Right shoulder turned in, catch and 360 degree spin.



Illustration 76A - Two lines, stroke away, roll to back and pass wet to partner.



Illustration 76B - Stroke away passing drill.

2 TRIANGLE STRUCTURE: The Triangle Structure for passing is extremely useful both for the number and types of passes which can be created and for its practicality. Triangle passing drills are a great way to go. To accommodate teams with large numbers, many triangles can be fit into limited water space. See Diagram #2 (Illustration #77.)

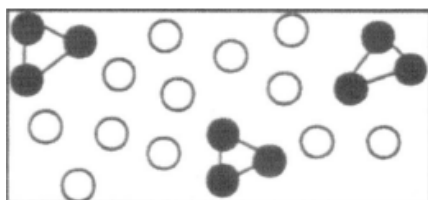


Diagram 2



Illustration 77 – Triangle passing drill.

3 **CIRCLE STRUCTURES:** Personally, I spend most of my passing practice time in either Two-on-Two-Straight-Line or Triangle Passing Structures. On occasion, and to break the monotony, coaches should insert Circle Passing Structures. I use Circle Patterns to add fun and competition to passing practice. Circle patterns can be run with or without a player in the middle of the circle.

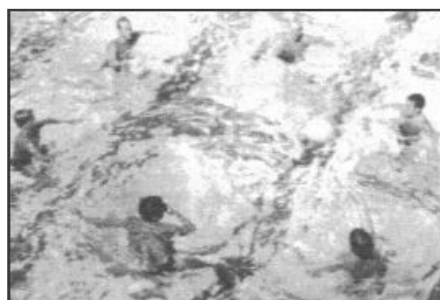


Illustration 78 - Circle Passing.



Illustration 79 - Circle passing drill, player in middle of circle.

Examples of several competitive passing drills which can add fun and excitement to practice are: First Team to Reach 100 Passes (circles compete against each other to see which group can make 100 "clean" passes first); The Last Team to Drop the Ball—This is a variation where the team which keeps the ball "dry" for the longest period of time (not letting it touch the water) is the winner. Both of these drills fit well into circle patterns and can be a lot of fun. Losing teams can swim extra laps or "pull" the goals at the end of practice. See Diagram #3. (Illustration # 78, 79.)

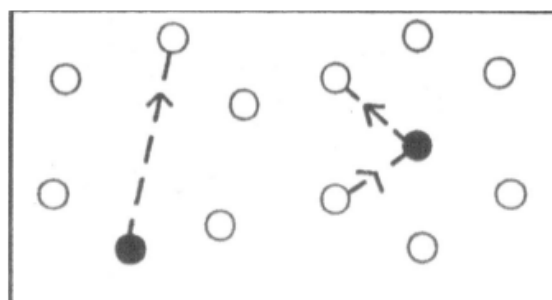


Diagram 3 - Circle pattern with player in the middle to direct passing

Before concluding the discussion on vertical passing, let's look at a number of fundamental passing skills which young players need to develop. Although any of the vertical passing structures can be used in this learning sequence, for purposes of discussion let's use the Triangle Structure to demonstrate sequential passing skill development. The Triangle Structure puts three to a ball and allows for quick and repetitive action. Players in a triangle should start two to four meters apart.

- 1** **WARMUP:** All players should get their shoulders and arms warmed up with simple, short dry passes. As most players are righthanded, start clockwise, using the dominant side arm to receive and pass the ball.
- 2** **LEGS:** Follow the same passing direction as in (1.) but concentrate on the legs, kicking up high to receive and pass the ball.
- 3** **OFF HAND PASSING:** Practice passing lefthanded (counter clockwise) around the triangle. With young players, every effort should be made to develop passing skills with both arms.
- 4** **CATCH AND SPIN:** Back to the right hand, and staying counter clockwise, turn the right shoulder toward the passer, catch, spin and pass to the next player.
- 5** **WET PASS:** In either direction, pass wet, forcing players to pick up the ball from underneath, rebalance the body and pass. This also can be accomplished by passing dry, dropping the ball, then picking it up from underneath and passing.
- 6** **CHEST FAKE:** Clockwise and righthanded, fake, chest lift, lock aim then wrist pass the ball.
- 7** **FADE AND PASS:** Fade left or right while faking, then make the pass.

8 TIP PASS: Tighten triangle then reach and tip (hot potato) ball around the triangle. Tip drills are good to soften hands for receiving the ball.

9 CATCH, STROKE AWAY, LAYOUT THEN PASS: Try this drill with both right and left hands and in each direction.


10 MOVING TRIANGLE: Triangle pass but with players all moving in a given direction around the triangle. Do this first to the right, then to the left.

11 BACKHAND PASSING: Counter clockwise, backhand pass with right shoulder turned toward passer to receive and pass the ball.

12 PUSH PASS: Clockwise, push pass dry, catch and drop ball to water's surface, then make the next push pass. This should be practiced in both directions around the triangle, working the right hand push pass first, followed by

the left hand push pass.

13 RANDOM PASS: Pass goes anywhere in the triangle.

 **CATCH LEFT, PASS RIGHT:** Catch the pass with the left hand, swing ball over to the right hand and make next pass. This drill should start counter clockwise, then reverse to clockwise, concentrating on passing with the left hand.

Create your own drills. Remember, drills need to be designed to teach players to practice passing from a number of different body positions and with both hands.

PASSING DRILLS WHICH INCLUDE SWIMMING

There are many different passing-swimming drills and structures which coaches can initiate. The coach is limited only by the imagination. Let me list a few which might be used:

1 RECTANGLE PASSING STRUCTURE: With rectangle passing, set up four players, two to a side. See Diagram #4.

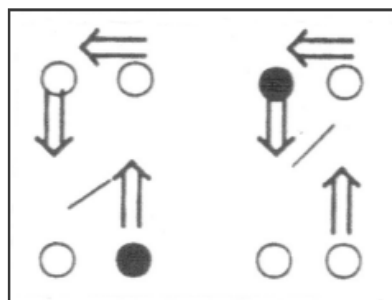


Diagram 4

The rectangle structure is ideal for passing while dribbling and swimming. countless passing sequences can be used. Examples: Layout away and wet pass; dry timing passes; hook and/or square-out passing, etc.

2 FISH POND PASSING: Fish Pond Passing is another fun drill. Two to a ball, players spread out throughout the pool. The first drill calls for one of the partners to pass, then immediately break and prepare to receive the ensuing pass from the partner. The pass is taken wet and while in the swimming mode. The player receiving the ball balances his/her body, then makes a pass to the breaking partner. All passes in the first drill must be thrown wet. Partners can play four to six meters apart, thereby forcing short passes or they can spread out to get greater range on each pass. The Fish Pond Wet Drill should be run for four or five minutes then switched to the Fish Pond Dry Drill. With the Fish Pond Dry Drill, after throwing the pass, the player should break following the pass, then release and take the return pass dry. The Fish Pond Drill teaches a number of important techniques such as wet and dry passing, body balance to pass and pass-and-break philosophy. (In Water Polo, a great way to get free of a defender in the pass-and-beak move.) See Diagram #5.

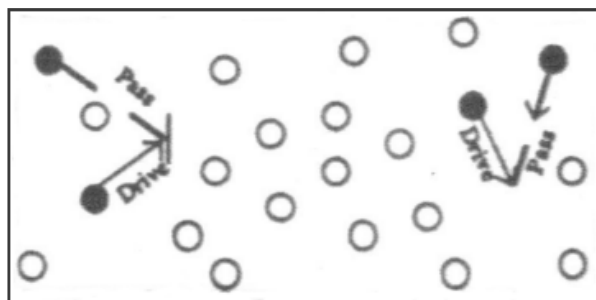


Diagram 5 - Partners working in the Fish Pond Drill.

SIX-ON-THE-LINE PASSING DRILL: More advanced, this drill also can be fun and challenging. Line six players across the four-meter line at one end of the pool, Goalkeepers in both goals, each with an extra ball. On the coach's whistle, all six players start to drive

3 down the pool. After several strokes, the player on the far left squares or hooks and takes the pass from the Goalkeeper. The player to the far right times his/her release to take the ball dry from the player receiving the Goalkeeper's pass. The second player in from the left side makes the next square and times the release to take the ball dry. After passing, each player making the pass **MUST** break at full speed to get back into line. The drill continues down the pool with a number of diagonal, dry passes until the ball is caught and shot at the opposite end goal. With this shot, the defending goalie grabs whichever ball is most convenient and passes to the releasing player to his/her far left as the drill continues back in the same manner toward the end from which it started. With the shot, players must immediately break in the opposite direction and the drill continues until the ball is caught dry and shot at the end where the players started their original drive. Six new players now line up and the drill begins again. See Diagram #6.

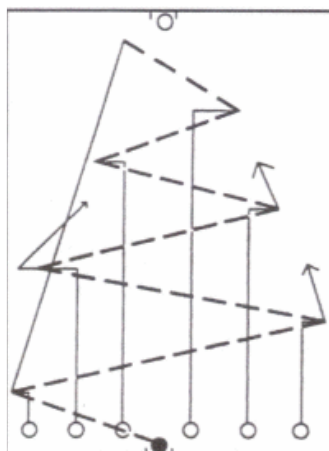


Diagram 6

There are several variations to this drill. (1) Random Squares—Instead of diagonal, cross-pool releasing, any player can release for the ball. This forces creative, shorter and quicker passes. It can be a challenge. (2) When the ball touches the water, the drill continues. In this sequence, all passes must be caught dry as the team goes up and back. Any pass which touches the water negates that directional drive

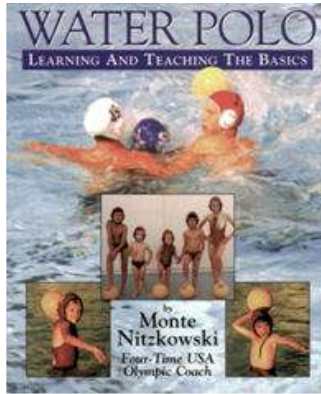
Players must continue the drill until they successfully get up and back with all dry passes. (3) Miss the shot and the drill continues until a goal is scored at each end. This may force a great number of trips up and down the pool. Remember, regardless of the variation, as soon as the ball is passed each player must break quickly back into line. This is important for proper operation of the drill.

In addition to passing drills for improvement of individual passing fundamentals, tactical passing drills are critical to team success. If the offensive game is to be developed properly, coaches must incorporate counterattack, frontcourt and six-on-five tactical passing drills into their practice schedules.

Tactical passing drills are presented in great number and detail in my recently published book, *United States Tactical Water Polo*.

To maintain player interest, fundamental skills passing drills constantly need to be changed. Coaches must be creative, inventing different drills to meet their practice needs.

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WATER POLO

Learning and Teaching the Basics

CHAPTER SEVEN

Shooting: Part 1



Monte Nitzkowski

All players love to shoot. It's the fun part of the game. Crowds cheer and your name gets in the paper. In our game of Water Polo, the challenge of beating the Goalkeeper lends additional excitement to the sport.

Shooting falls into two major categories—vertical and horizontal (drive, off- water) shooting. Both vertical and horizontal shooting skills need to be learned by all field players.

Vertical shooting skills should be taught first. Vertical shooting is the next step after players have learned to pass. In reality, a shot is simply an accurate pass thrown at a greater speed, and toward the goal. Most Water Polo shots take place in the vertical and semi-vertical positions. Most perimeter shots, penalty throws, player advantage shots, Two-Meter shots and counterattack shots take place in the vertical or semi-vertical positions. Even when drive shooting, the rear back (RB) shot puts the player in the vertical position. It is easy to see why all field players need be well versed in vertical shooting skills.

Horizontal (drive, off-water shooting) has its place as well. Once the front court offensive structure is set and players begin to attack six against six, offensive game plans come into play. If the defense is dropping back, most shots are taken from the perimeter and in the vertical position. However, if the defense decides to press, offensive players will attack the goal from two meters, the perimeter and the drive game. Driving players will need to master horizontal, off-water shooting skills.

Great shooters are born, not made. Good shooters are made, not born. To become a good shooter, a player must first learn proper shooting techniques and then train to improve his/her shooting skills. This takes time.

The first step for young players is to work long and hard to develop shooting accuracy. Development of power should come later. Most beginning players want to reverse this process, shooting for power and disregarding accuracy. This is a big mistake. Many young arms are ruined by trying to power the ball, oftentimes before properly warming up the arm and shoulder. Young players tend to think that throwing hard IS good shooting— "The harder I throw, the better the shot." Two major factors have helped create this false theory. First, inexperienced goalies are easier to beat when the opponent is shooting to power. Sometimes they will even dodge the ball when it comes hard at the cage. It's easy for strong shooters to throw the ball "through" an inexperienced Goalkeeper. Second, in the United States, many goals are wall mounted and have canvas backs. When the ball is thrown hard, a loud noise is generated as the ball strikes the back of the goal. The noise becomes even louder when indoors. I believe it was Ricardo Azevedo who coined the phrase "Kaboom Theory" — Kaboom being the noise made as the ball strikes the back of the cage at a high rate of speed. The louder the noise, the better the shot — at least in the mind of the young shooter.

These two false factors quickly lose credibility when goalies are experienced and the goals are netted and floating. First experienced goalies block inaccurate power shots. It's no different from baseball: A high school pitcher with a 95 mph fastball often will over-power young hitters. In the major leagues, a pitcher who throws only 95 MPH fastballs will soon be in trouble. You'd better have several other pitches and be able to locate the ball. The same is true in Water Polo—as players reach the higher levels of our sport, accuracy and a wide range of shots become necessary to get the ball past the Goalkeeper. Second, the "Kaboom Theory" comes to a fast halt with float goals and net backing. The ball striking a net makes little sound. Most club, NCAA and international championship matches are played with float, net-backed goals. The only sound of the ball being scored is the sound of silence.

The lesson here is—young players first must learn to shoot with accuracy—this is critical to getting the ball into the goal. Once accuracy is gained, players can work to build power. The final steps in the "learning to shoot chain" are: develop a variety of shots; create methods to disguise the delivery of those shots. Just like Hall of Fame baseball pitchers, a combination of accuracy, power and variety of pitches (shots) is required to succeed. Young Water Polo players must take the time to develop all the components of good shooting technique.

THE WRIST

Strong wrists are key to great shooting. This is true for both vertical and horizontal-drive shooting. Young players need to work to strengthen their wrists. Consult any strength coach for advice on exercises which can be done in both gym and home to improve wrist strength. Some simple wrist exercises I have used in the past are: Secure a light-free weight (two to five pounds) to a twelve-inch metal bar with approximately two feet of cord. In a standing position with shoulders bent slightly forward and holding the bar with both hands, rotate the wrist to roll the weight up to the bar and back down. Repeat four to six times or until tired; increase the number of lifts as strength is increased. Another good wrist exercise: While using counter-weighted hand weights (dumb bells), rotate the weights back and forth using only the wrists. The athlete should be in a standing position with the arms outstretched. A third exercise can be done with a short strip of surgical tubing: Tie the tubing to a door, fence, etc. Secure some sort of a hand grip to the other end and pull, changing positions of the pull so the wrist is worked both vertically and horizontally. Squeezing a rubber ball also can help increase wrist and hand strength.

Let's look at places where strong wrists make Water Polo players better shooters. First, in vertical shooting, strong wrists help with the quick release of the ball. Quick-released shots are extremely difficult for the Goalkeeper to defend. It is much easier to beat an experienced Goalkeeper with quickness than power. Strong wrists contribute to quickness. Also, faking is a key ingredient to disguising the shot when shooting from the vertical. Breaking a fake—faking then halting the fake, followed by a quick release of the ball is one of the most effective ways of scoring the ball with a vertical shot. Breaking a fake throws off goalie timing. A quick shot following the break can be extremely effective. To excel with this type of shot, players need strong wrists. Second, in horizontal-drive shooting, the wrists play a key role. The OffThe-Water wrist shot is all wrist and quickness. The Power Wrist shot lifts the ball from the water before shooting, the player "locking" the goalie then using wrist strength to quick-release the ball. (See Drive Shooting later in chapter for more information on these shots.)

Wrists are important to our game and all players should work to build strong wrists.

VERTICAL SHOOTING

If most perimeter, counterattack, two meter, and virtually all player advantage shots take place in the vertical position, it behooves players and coaches alike to spend a great deal of time developing this area of the game.

PERIMETER SHOOTING

Accuracy must be emphasized from the very beginning—put the ball where you want it to go. Power should be trained only after players start improving the accuracy of their shots. All players can learn to shoot with some degree of accuracy. However, not all players will be able to shoot the ball with great speed and power. You can improve power but, like baseball pitching, not everyone will have a ninety-five mph fast-ball. Body size and strength have much to do with power.

Timed on a radar gun, a few of the world's best players will throw the ball between fifty and fifty-four mph. Most top international players are in the forty-five to fifty mph range. Generally, good high school players will shoot the ball between thirty-seven and forty-five mph, with only a few "guns" approaching or exceeding fifty mph.

Actually, many of the world's greatest shooters are not the most powerful. Some of the very best players shoot the ball between forty-two and forty-five mph. Their secret is accuracy and a quick release of the ball. Quick release shots at forty-two mph are more difficult for good goalies to stop than fifty-two mph, slow release, power shots. The secret to great shooting is quick release, good accuracy, a wide range of shooting techniques and the ability to "read" the goalie's position in the cage.

ACCURACY: To learn to shoot accurately, players must practice shooting the ball at a slower speed, trying to place it exactly where they want it to go. These shots should be taken between six and eight meters out from the goal line. Don't worry if the Goalkeeper stops the ball. The most important thing is to have the ball go exactly where you want it to go. Hanging towels at the corners of the goal to provide targets can be a help. (Actually there are commercially designed cage targets now available which can be purchased from swim-water polo shops. These can be a great help to young shooters developing their fundamental skills.) As they work on their accuracy, players should practice sighting and visualizing the ball into the goal.

To improve accuracy, players need to learn to react to the shot—don't think too long before shooting. Know the Goalkeeper and his/her position in the goal. Receiving a good pass and being willing and able to deliver a shot quickly is a skill all young shooters must master. Too many young players want to fake before taking a shot, no matter what the situation. Oftentimes this destroys the advantage gained over the defense from a good cross pass.

POWER: After accuracy is improved, players can start working on power. (Realistically, most young players will have been thinking about power from the time they first picked up the ball and threw it at the goal.) Power should be introduced only after proper shoulder and arm warmup. Power is built into shooting by developing good leg strength combined with coordinated hip, back, torso and shoulder rotation.

Young players should be taught to follow through with their throwing motion, actually having the arm and hand strike the water in front of their body. (Illustrations #80A, 80 B.)



Illustration 80A - Start of vertical shot showing eggbeater leg support, left arm and hand providing balance, left shoulder forward.



Illustration 80 B - Follow through after ball is passed or shot.

All these motions can be practiced without a ball, the coach carefully observing the entire shooting motion. As is the case with most important fundamentals, some players will demonstrate good shooting motion from the very beginning, while others will need a number of corrections before developing proper throwing technique. As players mature, their strength, power and quickness will increase. If, from the very beginning, young players have worked to develop accuracy and a quick release of the ball, they can become "premier" shooters. A variety of controlled shooting drills must be introduced to improve player accuracy, power and all facets of the shooting game.

DELIVERY: Players soon learn that Goalkeepers will study their individual shooting techniques and shot preference in an effort to improve their chances of blocking the ball. Shooters must learn that they can't deliver each shot from the same point. To improve overall shooting skills, field players must develop a variety of ways to deliver the ball. There are a number of points (locations) from which the shooter can deliver the ball—side, front, back, up, down, etc. In addition, some shots should be delivered quick, some slow and others with a quick stop (hesitation, broken delivery)—all to throw off the Goalkeepers and prevent them from concentrating on just one delivery position. Coaches need to design drills to practice different delivery points and release timing. To allow for maximum repetitions when practicing delivery, set up triangle passing and have players work on their delivery points without actually shooting the ball. Once the coach sees that players are developing the proper delivery skills, move into actual shooting with players concentrating on various points of delivery.

DISGUIISING THE SHOOTING MOTION: To make the Goalkeeper's job even more difficult, shooters must learn additional methods of hiding their shooting intentions.

1 FAKING: Knowing how and when to fake the ball is important to all vertical shooters. When to fake is as important as how to fake. Once the ball is received, young players tend to want to fake, no matter what the situation. This is wrong. If the defense is out positioned, generally the ball should be caught and shot immediately. More goals are scored from a cross pass followed by a quick release shot than any other method. Following a well thrown cross pass, when players start faking rather than immediately shooting, they allow the Goalkeeper and field defenders to recover defensive position. Why do inexperienced players always seem to

want to fake with the ball? First some feel they look better as players if they throw in a lot of fakes; it's a "style" mentality. Second, when receiving a cross pass, many young players have difficulty catching the ball. They start faking to get the ball under better control. (This is a good argument for extensive work on the passing game. Before players start to work on shooting, learning proper handling of the ball is an absolute necessity. Only then can they become good shooters!!)

When should players fake? As aforementioned, if the ball is received cleanly and the defense is beaten, an immediate shot without faking, should be considered. That doesn't mean players always must shoot off the cross pass, but it should be a strong consideration. If the defense is not beaten, a pass to two meters generally will be the next consideration. If that is not available, faking is now introduced. The player should start faking and penetrating in toward the defense. If time on the shot or game clock is running out, or if the Goalkeeper's positioning is not good and a shooting lane exists, the shot should be taken. However, while attacking in toward the defense and with plenty of time remaining on the clock, if no shooting lane exists and the Goalkeeper is in good position to block the ball, the penetrating shooter should continue faking. Once his/her defender is committed to the ball, this player has two considerations—first, do I have a good passing lane in to Two-meters? If not, secondly the offensive player should finish the ball faking penetration with a chest lift fake (thrust hard with the legs and lift the chest in the shooting motion, thereby locking the goalie to the position of the ball) and make a cross pass to a teammate. (Illustrations #81A , 81B.) The teammate receiving the pass should first consider an immediate shot. If not available, this player should follow the same sequence of action as his/her predecessor.



Illustration 81A - Ball up and in faking position.



Illustration 81B - Ball up and in chest lift, faking position.

Shooting from the fake can be difficult for inexperienced players. Oftentimes they don't have enough leg strength to stay up while faking. Most often they will fake and fake, but not penetrate with the ball. Because of this, valuable seconds disappear from the shot clock as the ball "stalls" with the fake. Finally, after they have faked the defense into good position, and as they slip deeper into the water as their legs weaken, they will attempt a shot. Generally this is a big mistake. The shot comes against well-positioned defenders and from poor body position. A turnover most often results.

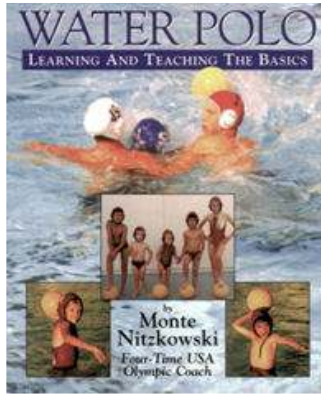
How should players fake? First, faking should be crisp and generally short in duration (3-7 seconds). Second, fakes must be varied to help destroy the timing of the Goalkeeper. Stay away from rhythm faking (always using the same number of fakes in a set rhythm—one fake, two fakes, shot). Shooters need to change the rhythm of their fakes as well as types of fakes and ball delivery points. This approach presents the goalie with far greater defensive problems.

Players must practice faking. Shooting drills should be set up to practice this aspect of the game. Coaches should encourage players to practice different types of fakes: ball fakes; head and eye fakes; shoulder fakes, etc. Also, different release points need to be emphasized. When faking, timing of the release of the ball also must be worked into practice sessions.

Remember, faking can help create a shot, but other considerations prevail, including the amount of time on the shot or game clock. If time is running out, a well-placed shot may be advisable (in this situation, if the player does not have a high percentage shot available, he/she should practice shooting the ball high and hard in hopes of an "out-of-bounds" deflection, or simply "dumping" it to a safe area). If plenty of clock time remains and the defense is set, a shot should not be taken. As aforementioned, in this case, faking should be used to lock the defense, not to shoot the ball. In this situation, a pass must follow and shooters must learn the importance of this concept.

- 2 MOVING THE BALL:** This is the simplest of ways to improve shooting percentages. Move the ball to a better shooting position with the pass. Again, remember the cross pass should come only after the defense has been locked to the ball. This is accomplished by good ball faking followed by a chest lift fake. The chest lift fake properly executed will lock the goalie to the ball ninety-nine percent of the time.
- 3 BREAKING:** While faking, simply break the motion (stop), then shoot off the break. This is a wonderful way to disguise a shot and is very effective against most goalies. The shot should come immediately after the faking motion is broken. This move must be practiced and shooters should have quick release ability. When shooting off a broken motion, strong wrists are critical to success.
- 4 WORKING:** Coaches have different interpretations of the term "working." My definition is as follows: while faking and penetrating with the ball, the shooter moves laterally (left or right) to create a better shooting lane. While working with the ball in the faking mode, players should consider a shot if a shooting lane (alley) opens to the goal.

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WATER POLO

Learning and Teaching the Basics

CHAPTER SEVEN

Shooting: Part 2



Monte Nitzkowski

VERTICAL SHOOTING – TWO-METER SHOTS

Most shots taken by the Two-Meter Player are from the vertical or semi-vertical position. The only exception to this is the Layout Shot which is taken while the Two-Meter Player is releasing on the back.

Once the Two-Meter Player has received the ball and decided to shoot, he/she must be able to judge which is the best shot to take. Most often this will be determined by the position of the Two-Meter Guard and the type of individual and team defense being used by the opponents. I recommend that three basic shots be learned by Two-Meter players. Each of these shots is taken from the vertical position.

- 1 LEFT AND RIGHT HAND SWEEPS:** Perfecting the sweep shot is a must for all Two-Meter players. They must learn to sweep with both the left and right hands so the defense cannot effectively take away the shot by overplaying one side or the other. The sweep should be taught in shallow water with the Two-Meter player standing on the bottom. (Illustration #82.)



Illustration 82 - Standing on bottom while practicing hole forward right hand sweep shot.

Once the correct arm positioning and body rotation have been mastered, the player will move to deep water in front of the goal to continue practicing. The dominant arm side should be taught first, but always have the player begin practicing with the weak arm at an early stage. Once the player starts getting off the shot properly, place a "light" defense behind him/her, making sure the defender keeps his/her face away from the sweep side. The defender should overplay one side, then the other, while the Two-Meter player practices the sweep shot against light defense. When the shot is perfected, the defense can toughen up and force the Two-Meter player to find which arm or side should be used.

Fundamentally, in shooting the sweep, I stress a straight arm release (if the elbow is bent when sweeping, the ball will carry high and will come within range for the defender to block). The shot should sweep low and with force. Rotation (in the direction of the shot) of the head, chin, shoulder and hip will put velocity into the shot. When releasing the ball from the rotation, the player's position should resemble that of a discus thrower. (Illustrations #83, 84, 85 and 86.)



Illustration 83 - Sweeping ball right handed, shoulder and head rotated, arm straight.



Illustration 84 - Right hand sweep, ball released.



Illustration 85 - Standing on bottom practicing left hand sweep.



Illustration 86 - Left hand sweep, ball ready to release.

2 BACKHAND SHOTS: The backhand shot is relatively easy to learn and can be used to counter the defender when he/she is overplaying the sweep. It's a spectacular shot and the fans love it. But, unfortunately, some players will go for the backhand when another shot is needed, simply because the backhand looks good. This shot has its purpose, but should be used only when required. To be especially effective, players should learn to shoot the backhand with both right and left hands.

Physically, the backhand is easier to teach than the other hole shots, and it takes less time to perfect. It is definitely a "muscle" shot and, as aforementioned, should be used when defenders are overplaying a side. (The decision for the Two-Meter player will be whether to take the backhand, try an offhand sweep, or try to turn the defender and go for the "turn shot.")

For righthanders, the backhand shot is most often used when the defender is over-playing the left shoulder, leaving a left-hand sweep or right-hand backhand as the best shooting options. Most righthanders will prefer the backhand in this situation.

The backhand can be taken with the arm either bent or straight. Players working for power tend to cup the ball between palm and wrist, bend the elbow and, using the defender for leverage, muscle the ball to the goal. (Illustrations #87, 88.)

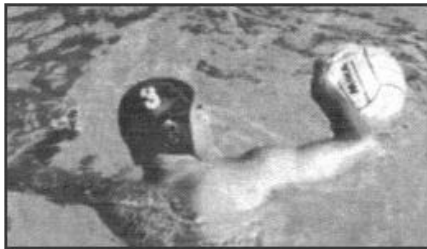


Illustration 87 - Power backhand shooting position.



Illustration 88 - Power backhand.

This type of backhand shortens the range between defender and shooting arm but still provides enough distance to get off the shot. Definitely the ball will travel with great velocity and generally will bring an "ooh" from the crowd. The other type of backhand is thrown from a straight-arm position. The ball is wrist shot (not cupped between wrist and palm), sacrificing power for quickness and surprise. (Illustration #89.) Both shots can be effective, but each must be used at the proper moment.

Backhands and sweeps come at the goal with a lot of velocity but are hard to direct. However, as Two-Meter players gain in experience, they will learn to get the ball low and to the corners with their sweeps, and to time the release of the backhand to get better ball direction.

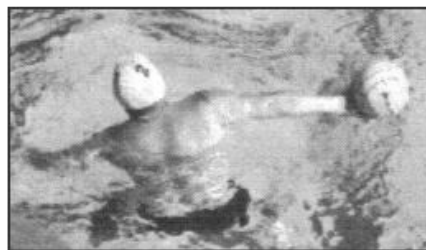


Illustration 89 - Straight arm backhand.

3 TURN-AROUND SHOTS: All Two-Meter players must learn to shoot turn-arounds. This shot is used when the defender is overplaying a shoulder. If the ball is passed in properly from the perimeter (pass placed so the Two-Meter player can turn the defender), the turn-around can be a high percentage shot—much higher percentage than sweeps and backhands. (Illustrations # 90, 91, 92, 93.)



Illustration 90 - Start of turn shot to left. Player passing ball to two meter player for start of turn.



Illustration 91 - Turn shot to left, ball at two meters.



Illustration 92 - Ball up, defender turned, two meter player ready for wrist shot.



Illustration 93 - Completion of turn shot to left with ball being wrist shot.

The key is proper ball placement with the inbound pass. In my opinion, the in-bound pass to the Two-Meter player is one of the most important passes in Water Polo. Too often, young players will put the ball safely to the Two-Meter player, but not in a place to out position the defender. When the ball is properly placed, many times the Two-Meter player will be in position to turn the defender and set up a shot, ejection, or possible four-meter call. It creates what I term high percentage front court offensive Water Polo. As the Two-Meter player turns toward the goal, he/she lifts the ball from underneath, holds it in palm of hand, reads the Goalkeeper's position then power wrist shoots the ball into the goal. The perimeter pass to the Two-Meter player helps out position the defender. The Two-Meter player simply uses leg and body strength and size to finish the turn and shoot. No "hooking" the defender with leg or arm is required. Young players tend to want to hook the defender. Not only is this not necessary, but hooking most often leads to an offensive foul, taking away a great scoring opportunity.

4

OTHER TWO-METER SHOTS: Although I don't personally recommend them, there are several other shots which can be taken from two meters. The most often used probably would be the "layout shot," where the Two-Meter player lays out, away from the goal and on his/her back. This move generally will put some distance between the Two-Meter player and the defender. The ball is released by the shooter when he/she is on the back in the layout position. (Illustrations #94, 95.)



Illustration 94 - Layout shot.

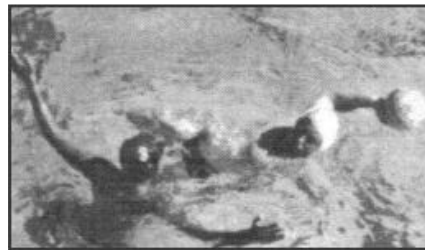


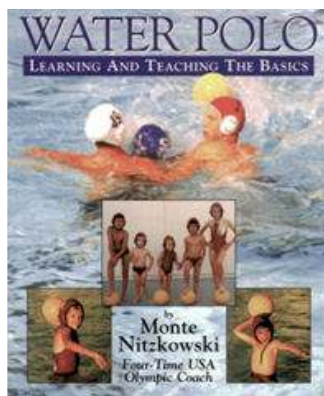
Illustration 95 - Layout shot with defender.

For three reasons, I don't recommend spending a lot of time teaching the layout: Frequently the Two-Meter player gets called for "pushing off" when laying out (sometimes, the more effective the layout, the quicker the offensive foul is called, which is particularly true at the international level of play); with the Two-Meter player moving back, away from the goal, a "dropping defense" makes the layout shot doubly difficult to achieve; it's difficult to get a lot of velocity on a ball shot from the back and, because of the position of release, the ball will tend to carry high.

Another shot taken from the hole is what I call the over-the-shoulder wrist shot. Rather than sweeping or backhanding the ball, the Two-Meter player will try for the surprise, quick shot over the shoulder on the side away from the defender. Although a "cute" shot, it allows for little velocity or control of the ball's direction. The shot relies entirely on quickness and surprise; the problem is, your own team may be more surprised than the defense and be out positioned by the counterattack!

My motto is: Keep shooting simple at two meters. Rely on selection of the correct shot based on positioning, quickness and strength. Remember, the Two-Meter player is there for other reasons as well. Water Polo is a game of six field players and if the Two-Meter player is to orchestrate the offense, he/she must be playing the "total" game at all times. Only then will a team have consistent success.

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WATER POLO

Learning and Teaching the Basics

CHAPTER SEVEN

Shooting: Part 3



Monte Nitzkowski

DRIVE SHOOTING

There are a number of names used to describe this type of shooting, Drive Shooting being the most common (and correct) term. Horizontal Shooting and Off-The-Water Shooting are other terms often used.

Drive shooting is an important part of the game and young players need to master Drive Shooting techniques. Ninety-five percent of drive shots come from a pass from the two-meter position to a driving player. For drive shooting to be effective, a special passing relationship must be developed between the Two-Meter player and the Driver.

Over the course of a game, a number of passes will be made by the Two-Meter player to the Driver. The location of the pass is dependent on the position and the angle of the drive and the positioning of the defensive players. It is critical for teams to develop a disciplined driving philosophy. Otherwise, offensive turnovers will be numerous and scoring opportunities lost. In our sport, most turnovers come from the Two-Meter player's pass to either a Driver or releasing perimeter player.

SHOOTING FROM THE DRIVE

The Driver, once inside the defender, oftentimes will get the pass from the Two-Meter player. At this point, the Driver must be well versed in what type of shot should be taken.

Over the years, coaches have worked with four basic drive shots (or what I might call "off the water shots"). (Basically, any shot taken from the horizontal position can be termed a drive shot. About fifty percent of the shots taken from the drive will be "wet," or "off-the-water shots," while the other fifty percent will be "dry" in nature.) The four drive shots which have received most attention are the rear back, the "T" shot (also known as the scoop and bat), the push or screw shot and the pop shot. Each has its place but, in my opinion, they are limited in effectiveness and have been overrated as the answer to drive shooting. Let's first take a look at each of these four drive shots then, later, discuss what I feel to be a superior array of drive shots.

1 THE REAR BACK: This is the most taught and used drive shot in American Water Polo. It definitely has a place in drive shooting and, again in my opinion, is the most valuable of the four commonly taught drive shots. The idea of the rear back is to drive hard, get the defender moving hard in an effort to guard the drive, then rear up and back away from the defender and take the ball dry from the Two-Meter player. (Illustrations #96, 97, 98.)



Illustration 96 - Start of drive preceding rear back shot.



Illustration 97 - Driver rearing up and ready to receive pass from two meter player.



Illustration 98 - Player reared up with ball and ready for a quick release shot

When received, the ball should be shot immediately, beating both the defender and the goalie with quickness. Seldom should faking take place with the rear back. Quickness is the answer with this shot.

The rear back is an exciting move and can create an excellent shot. But when executing a rear back, the player has not gotten inside the defender on the drive. If a team runs only rear backs on their drives, it's an admission that the Drivers are not capable of getting inside water on their defenders. Each drive should start with the idea of beating the defense to the inside; the rear back should be used only when this, in fact, does not happen. Once inside, the Driver must use something other than a rear back. Seldom will European players be seen executing the rear back. Their intention is to create inside water and, if that is impossible, to move through and clear the two meter area for the next Driver or the two-meter shot. I've seen American Drivers get inside water then rear back into the defenders they have beaten. The players simply did not know, under the circumstances, what other type of shot to take. The rear back is an excellent drive shot, but should be taken only when the situation requires its use.

2

THE 'T' SHOT: Another popular and commonly taught drive shot, is the "T" shot. When successful, it can look spectacular. While the Driver is swimming, the ball is "Teed" (like a golf ball) on one palm and batted or pushed off the "T" with the opposite side hand. (Illustrations #99, 100, 101.)



Illustration 99 - 'T' shot with ball teed on players' hand.



Illustration 100 - 'T' shot — finger tips meeting ball.



Illustration 101 - 'T' shot with ball in flight.

This is done in full stroke and the shot, properly taken, can be difficult for the goalie to see. It's an easy shot to learn but difficult to perfect. With the Bronze Medal 1972 United States Olympic Water Polo Team, there was only one player I felt comfortable letting take this shot (Russ Webb). With the 1980 and Silver Medal 1984 Olympic Teams, only Joe Vargus used it to any great extent.

The problem with the "T" shot is finding the occasion for its effective use. At the end of a counterattack, in one on no one situations, the angle of approach to the goal may be such that the "T" shot can be used, but accuracy cannot be guaranteed. If you are one on no one with the breakaway in a counterattack, percentages will tell you to pick up the ball, come to the vertical or semi-vertical, and move the goalie before taking the shot. If there is time, a player always should come to the vertical and put away the ball. Otherwise, the player should stay horizontal, move the goalie, and wrist shoot the ball from in front of the body.

The three best driving locations are the eleven, twelve and one o'clock positions. If the defense is playing well (most teams will be playing proper position defense on Drivers), scoring angles to the goal will be greatly reduced. (See Diagram #7.)

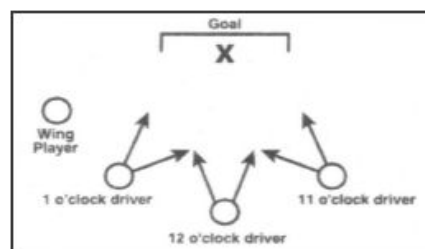


Diagram 7

With a cross drive from the one o'clock or eleven o'clock positions, the angle to the goal makes the "T" an impractical shot. In fact, when the defense is playing well in the half court, there are few places where the "T" shot will be effective. Remember, as they approach the goal, Drivers must contend with the angle the defense has given. In addition, they must deal with a defender on or near their back or side; the defender on the Two-Meter specialist who may switch; and the Goalkeeper. Since the "T" shot requires time and space to set up, its effectiveness is extremely limited. Although I teach the shot, little time is spent with it during shooting drills.

3

THE PUSH OR SCREW SHOT: This shot has many of the same limitations as the "T" shot. Pushing the ball while swimming or driving is a great way to make a pass and it can be used to shoot as well. The problem here is that when the defense is beaten, bringing the ball back to the shoulder (the position from where this shot is started) may be a big mistake. Once inside on the defender, the Driver probably will want to keep the ball as far away from the defender as possible, particularly if the defender is larger than the Driver. The push shot brings the ball back toward the defender. Also, in narrow spaces it may be a difficult shot to place in different parts of the goal, away from the Goalkeeper. As with the "T" shot, players should have an understanding of the push shot. When practicing pushing the ball, I prefer to work on it extensively during passing drills but only a limited time during shooting drills. (Illustrations #102, 103, 104.)



Illustration 102 - Start of push shot



Illustration 103 - Ball drawn back, ready to take push shot.



Illustration 104 - Ball being shot from push shot position.

4 THE POP SHOT: This shot is used commonly and with some success when the Driver is quite close to the goal. With the pop shot, the Driver lifts the ball into the air with one hand, then reaches with the other hand and tries to direct (steer) the ball around the Goalkeeper and into the goal. (Illustrations # 105, 106, 107.) (I usually describe it as "When all else fails, there is always the pop shot.") The problem with the pop shot is, as soon as the ball is popped into the air, it's anyone's ball. The tall mobile Goalkeeper oftentimes can reach up and steal the ball. Again, as with the other commonly taught drive shots, players should know the shot, but not be encouraged to use it past a few limited circumstances or situations.



Illustration 105 - Ball being positioned for pop shot.



Illustration 106 - Ball in air with player ready to take pop shot.



Illustration 107 - Ball being caught and shot from pop shot positioning.

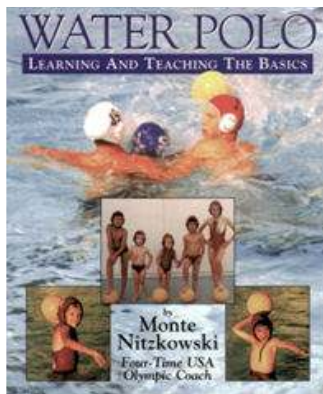
The method of off-the-water (drive) shooting taught to my teams is quite different. In the early 1980's, I searched for a method which would improve our driving game, allow for greater ball control and lead to high percentage drive shots. Ball control is the key to successful front court offense but we found that our Two-Meter specialists were getting too many turnovers, usually not their faults. Drives were starting too late; perimeter releases were slow and incorrect; Drivers were driving with no discipline in their patterns. I developed a system of Two-Meter player and Driver "readouts" which greatly simplified the life of the Two-Meter specialist. First, this player (Two-Meter specialist) was trained to get to the ball and get it up and ready to play within one-and-a-half seconds. With this accomplished, Drivers could time their drives based on distance away from the face of the goal.

Once the timing between the Two-Meter player and the Driver had been disciplined into a consistent pattern, we learned to "read" the position of the defender on the Driver—the location of the defender trying to guard the Driver. This had to be understood by both the Two-Meter player and the Driver. With the timing of the drive, and knowing the exact position of the defender guarding the Driver, all Drivers reacted to what was being given by the defense. As a result, the Two-Meter player always knew where the Driver was going. Once this was established, if the pass were to be made to a Driver (providing the Driver was up on the defender and no other outside defenders were dropping back to help), the Two-Meter player would locate the ball to this Driver. I use the word "locate" because this is

exactly what we did. Each pass to the Driver was placed or located in a position which was determined by the angle of the drive, the side on which the drive was taking place, and the position of the defender attempting to guard the Driver. Although it sounds complex, the system is really quite simple and quickly learned by both Driver and Two-Meter specialist. Once this is mastered, turnovers are greatly reduced and percentage drive shots become available.

To further explain, let's start with the Two-Meter player's pass to the Driver. On all drives moving to the Two-Meter player's left, the ball will be placed wet (on the water) to righthanders and dry to lefthanders. The procedure is reversed with drives going to the right (the ball will be dry to righthanders and wet to lefthanders). Immediately, recognition between the Two-Meter player and the Driver has been simplified.

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WATER POLO

Learning and Teaching the Basics

CHAPTER SEVEN

Shooting: Part 4



Monte Nitzkowski

DRIVING POSITIONS

Now let's take the three main driving positions (eleven, twelve, and one o'clock) and see how the Two-Meter player locates the ball to the Drivers.

1 ELEVEN O'CLOCK DRIVES: A number of driving angles can be achieved from the eleven o'clock position. Let's look at a few. The Driver fakes his/her head left, then power drives toward the near post of the goal. The defender is to the inside and slightly beaten. The Two-Meter player locates the ball wet and to the outside on the right arm. The ball must arrive near the three meter line so the Driver has the entire cage available to place the shot. The Driver now reads the position of the goalie in the goal (all young players must learn to recognize where the goalie is in the goal and what he/she is attempting to do—called "reading" the goalie). Once the goalie's position is ascertained, the ball can be wrist shot strong side, cross cage, or lobbed cross cage. All Drivers must have good strong wrists and need to know how to wrist shoot. There are two types which can be used: First, the QUICK-RELEASE WRIST SHOT finds the shooter simply swimming through, placing the hand under the ball while in stroke, and snapping the ball off the palm of the hand with a wrist release. The ball is not lifted up, then shot, but is shot from the water, with the wrist, while in the swimming motion. (Illustrations # 108, 109, 110.)



Illustration 108 - Approach for quick wrist shot — ball on water to right side of shooter at approximately three meters.



Illustration 109 - Hand under ball preparing for quick wrist shot.



Illustration 110 - Ball released for shot at goal from on water, quick wrist shot position.

Wrist shots come very quickly and are difficult for the goalie to stop. Second, the POWER WRIST SHOT is similar, but the player lifts the ball up from the water, holds the ball out in front of the body, allows the goalie to make his/her move, then directs the ball into the goal with a power wrist release. (Illustrations # 111, 112, 113.)



Illustration 111 - Power wrist shot —hand positioned under ball in preparation for lift.

Illustration 112 - Ball up and ready for release from power wrist shooting position.



Illustration 113 - Shot taken from power wrist position

Big power Drivers have great success with the power wrist shot, while smaller players generally are more successful with the quick release.

In another drive from eleven o'clock, the Driver starts cross cage with the drive and there are two situations which might occur. First, the defender anticipates that the drive is going cross cage and stays ahead of the Driver. In this case, the Driver might want to cross back to the original side with what I call a reverse turn or "worm turn" (drive with the right arm and pull the left arm back and out of the water). (Illustrations #114, 115, 116, 117, 118.)



Illustration 114 - Worm turn – while driving cross cage, driver (in whites hat) find defensive player over committed to the inside.



Illustration 115 - Driver starts turn to release from defensive player. Driver's body follows left arm which recovers over the surface of water.



Illustration 116 - Coming off the worm turn and free of defender. Left arm still scooping and right arm preparing for over the water recovery and positioning to receive wet pass.



Illustration 117 - Ball passed wet to outside right of offensive player as he prepares for quick wrist shot.



Illustration 118 - Worm turn completed and ready for quick wrist shot.

This allows the Driver to rotate quickly back to the eleven o'clock side and to be up (free) if the defender has overplayed the middle. The Two-Meter player places the ball wet on the righthanded Drivers outside hand as he/she comes off the reverse turn. The Driver then reads the goalie and places the correct wrist shot. In the second scenario, we imagine the Driver has beaten the defender with the cross

drive—the Driver is up and free. The righthanded Driver is now moving to the right side of the Two-Meter player. This calls for a dry pass. Timing is essential.

The pass should begin when the Driver "slides" over his/her left arm and raises the shooting hand. (The slide is similar to a sidestroke move and keys the timing of the pass.) (Illustrations #119, 120, 121.) Because the defender is trailing, the Driver should not rear back (this would allow the defender to catch up) but simply slide and let the trailing legs help fend off the defender. The ball should be passed dry and over the ear of the Driver. This allows for a short range of motion and a good opportunity to keep the arm free for the shot.



Illustration 119 - Driving cross cage and preparing for slide positioning, pass and shot.



Illustration 120 - Offensive player in slide position on side and over extended left arm. Ball being passed from Two Meter player to Driver.



Illustration 121 - Ball ready to be shot from slide position.

2 TWELVE O'CLOCK DRIVES: The same rules apply to twelve o'clock drives. For the righthander, once inside, if the drive moves to the Two-Meter player's left, the ball will be placed on the water (at about three meters). If the twelve o'clock drive moves to the right of the Two-Meter player, the ball is passed dry. The only difference will be the location of the dry pass. Because the angle of the drive is steeper from the twelve o'clock position, the Driver will not slide, but rather pops up at about a forty-five-degree angle and takes the ball dry from the Two-Meter player. With the angle of the drive from twelve o'clock, the defender will be in a position to slip through if the Driver slides. If the Driver pops and takes the ball dry, there is an opportunity for either a good shot or a penalty throw award. The pop up should take place near the four-meter line.

3 ONE O'CLOCK DRIVES: Driving from one o'clock presents the Driver with a number of shooting possibilities. One of the best drive situations from one o'clock finds the Driver "head faking" toward the right, then power driving toward the near post of the goal. If the Driver springs free, the Two-Meter player will "hit" the righthanded Driver with what is called a "timing pass": The Two-Meter player determines when the shot will be taken. As the Driver is driving (swimming) toward the post, the Two-Meter player passes the ball when the Driver's right arm is pulling (stroking) under water. The pass is thrown above and in front of the Driver's right shoulder. (Illustrations # 122, 123.)



Illustration 122 - Timing pass to shot. Two meter player passes ball dry when right arm of driver is pulling underwater.



Illustration 123 - Ball ready to be shot as right arm rotates out of water and catches ball for shot.

In full stroke, the Driver shoots the ball as his/her arm recovers above the water. This is an excellent shot from the one o'clock drive position. Again, it's important to emphasize that the Driver does not stop and rear up for the shot. This shot is taken in the full stroke position.

Another popular drive from the one o'clock position is the cross-cage drive. This should start with a head fake to the left, followed by the right, cross-cage drive. When the Driver moves past the Two-Meter player, the ball will be placed wet to righthanders and dry to lefthanders (slide). For the righthander in this drive position, two shots should be considered. If the defense is trailing, the ball should be wrist shot. The Driver needs to know the position of the Goalkeeper and wrist shoot either near or far side. If the goalie is "crashing" to the near side, the cross-cage lob is an excellent possibility. If the defender is even-up on the cross-cage one o'clock Driver, the Two-Meter player can locate the ball a little wider and allow the Driver to throw the crossover backhand. In this situation, if the Driver is to shoot the backhand, he/she should shoot it "in stroke" (don't drop the legs) and should release the ball early in the shoulder rotation. This will allow the ball to go cross cage to the far corner of the goal. (Illustrations #124, 125, 126, 127, 128.) Properly thrown, this is an excellent shot from the one o'clock, cross cage drive.



Illustration 124 - Start of one o'clock, cross cage drive leading to either a right hand wrist shot or crossover backhand.



Illustration 125 - Two meter player ready to make pass to driver who is cross cage driving from one o'clock position.



Illustration 126 - Hand pressing ball down into water to start motion for a crossover backhand shot.



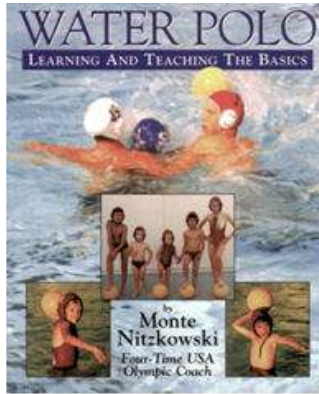
Illustration 127 - Wrist rotating as player starts to throw crossover backhand shot.

Finally, two important points need to be made regarding "shooting from the drive": First, players should throw the backhand only from two meters (the Two-Meter specialist) or from the one o'clock, cross cage drive. Many athletes want to throw the backhand from the other drive positions. This should not be encouraged. The angle of attack from the eleven and twelve o'clock-drive positions is not conducive to backhand shooting. Second, it is important to mention again, in my drive readout system, the Two-Meter specialist throws the same pass to the lefthander as to the righthander but the wet and dry rules are reversed: The righthander receives the ball wet to the Two-Meter player's left and dry to the right, whereas the lefthander receives the ball dry to the Two-Meter player's left and wet to the right.



Illustration 128 - Looking from other side as driver releases crossover back hand shot

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WATER POLO

Learning and Teaching the Basics

CHAPTER EIGHT

Player Positions



Monte Nitzkowski

Like all team sports, Water Polo has certain playing positions for which individuals must be trained. By title, these positions are: Goalkeeper; Defensive Specialist; Driver; and Two-Meter Specialist. Goalkeeper techniques and skills differ greatly from those required for field position players. Therefore, Goalkeeper's responsibilities, techniques, skills and training will be considered in a separate chapter.

No matter what a player's position specialty, there are certain general fundamentals, skills and techniques in which all field players must be trained.

Briefly, field players must be strong swimmers (well versed in the front crawl and backstroke), have good leg support (eggbeater and flutter kicks) and be able to pass and shoot the ball. No matter what the individual specialty may be, all field players will have numerous opportunities to pass and shoot the ball.

DEFENSIVE SPECIALISTS

Generally, these are players who have primary responsibility for defending against the opponent's Two-Meter specialist. Where possible, Defensive specialists should be tall players with good leg support, long arms, individual toughness and good swimming ability. They must be able to counterattack, taking the opponent's Two-Meter specialist down the tank with each offensive turnover.

Defensively, they must be taught how to defend against the opponent's Two-Meter player. They must learn to defend both from in front and behind this player. When defending from behind, Defensive specialists must keep their hips up and, where possible, play slightly off the Two-Meter player's body, closing quickly when the ball arrives at the two-meter position. They must learn to play behind and to the side (not directly behind) the Two-Meter player and, as best as possible, take away the shooting side. (Illustration #129.)



Illustration 129 - Defending two meter player from behind and slightly to side position.

When the ball reaches the Two-meter position and is controlled by the Two-Meter specialist, Defensive specialists generally need to foul, taking care to play the ball (not the Two-Meter player) and being careful not to sink or pull back on this player. Defensive specialists must be mobile and, depending on the location of the ball and the Two-Meter player's position, take away one side or the other. They must be able to move quickly from one side to the other. As much as possible, they should avoid playing directly behind the Two-Meter player. When defending directly behind, it is difficult to reach the ball and the Two-Meter player is given greater shooting opportunities. Also, from this position, it is difficult to reach the ball without first making major contact with the Two-Meter player's body. When caught behind and wanting to move to a front or side position, the Defensive Specialist should commit a safe and early foul and attempt to refront as the ball is being passed by the Two-Meter player.

Knowledge of the opponent, attainable only through scouting, is of utmost importance to the Defensive specialist. In order to defend successfully against the Two-Meter player, the defender must learn as much as possible about that player's skills (preferred types of shots, ability to turn defenders to either side, speed in picking up the ball, ability to hold position, etc.). SCOUTING IS CRITICAL!

When guarding the Two-Meter player from in front, most defenders prefer to face-guard (face toward the Two-Meter player). (Illustration #130.)



Illustration 130 - Fronting the two meter player from a face to face position.

When taking this position, Two-Meter defenders should constantly turn their head outward in order to monitor the position of the ball on the perimeter and anticipate the incoming pass. As much as possible, the Defender should front in an effort to prevent the incoming pass reaching the Two-Meter player. Some Defensive specialist with great leg support will front the Two-Meter player while facing to the outside. (Illustration #131.)



Illustration 131 - Fronting the Two-Meter player from a "facing out" position — back pressed into Two-Meter player.

To do so, the defender will pressure back into the offensive player, keeping complete physical contact with the back against the Two-Meter player while monitoring the ball on the perimeter. When a pass is made to try to out position the defender, he/she should turn toward the Two-Meter player and move quickly to a non-ejection position.

A Defensive specialist who chooses to defend from in front should do so only out to the four-meter line. At that point, a side position should be taken. If a Defensive specialist attempts to front outside the four-meter line, there is danger of being outpositioned and a proper placement pass to the Two-Meter player will put this defender in position to be ejected or commit a penalty-throw foul.

Coaches must spend time with their Defensive specialist, teaching them how to foul effectively without being ejected, how to position against certain Two-Meter players and how to reposition when necessary. Special drills for defending against the Two-Meter player need to be developed and taught. Proper preparation of Defensive specialists will reduce both the number of goals scored from two meters and the number of ejections. Preparing the team to limit the opponent's two-meter game is an important consideration and will go a long way toward creating a winning program.

Offensively, Defensive specialists should be good vertical shooters. Most of their shooting opportunities will occur on the perimeter. They must be adept at faking, cross passing and "quick release" shooting. They need to know how to shoot from the drive, but most often these shots will be taken by the smaller and quicker Driver specialists.

DRIVER SPECIALISTS

Playing this position requires individuals with good hands, quick-start ability and great amounts of tenacity. Along with the Two-Meter specialist, Drivers will be leading the offense. Generally, they are smaller in stature than Defensive and Two-Meter specialists, making for explosive starts and quickness in changing directions. They must love to play offense and never want to quit in their effort to get free, receive the ball and score a goal.

Drivers need to know all the drive shots (See Chapter Seven) and practice them daily. Many of their shots will come from a position close to the goal and "inside" their defender (between the defender and the goal). Drivers must be adept at off-water, wrist shooting. Also, they should be good vertical, semi-vertical, perimeter and counterattack shooters.

In addition to working on all their shots, Drivers need constant practice in quick-start and change-of-direction movements. Their job is to get free of defenders, receive the ball and take the shot. To do so, they must be constantly alert and focused. They need to practice all methods of getting free of defenders. These should include rear back, pass and go, stop and go and change of direction maneuvers.

Defensively, Drivers should try to matchup with their opponent's Drivers. They also can defend against Defensive specialists but should take special care not to have to guard the opponent's Two-Meter player. When occasionally caught in the position of guarding a Two-Meter specialist, Drivers should be taught to foul early and call for a first-foul switch. There can be exceptions to any rule, but generally it is a good idea to keep Drivers away from guarding Two-Meter players.

When guarding their counterparts, Drivers should use their swimming and change-of-direction abilities to maneuver with the opponent. While swimming, they should attempt to keep the body to the inside, between the driving opponent and the goal. They should expect "stairstep" help from fellow defenders when their opponent Driver is moving between seven and four meters. Defensively, they should use their arms to position their bodies, and refrain from hand checking and guarding with the arms until the opponent stops and comes to the vertical or semi-vertical position.

When talking defense, as a general rule of thumb (because of their size and quickness), Drivers tend to do a good job against swimming, driving opponents. They are at their defensive best in this type of situation. Conversely, because of size, they can get into trouble when trying to defend the big, vertical opponent, particularly the Two-Meter specialist.

TWO-METER SPECIALIST

Once the counterattack ends and the offense moves into position to begin their attack on the opponent's goal, the Two-Meter specialist becomes the key offensive player. He/she will move in front of the opponent's goal, between goal posts, at two to three meters out from the face of the cage. From here they will be stationed to direct the offense.

The Two-Meter position must be fielded by one or two of a team's best athletes. Where possible, they need good size, great leg support, good swimming ability and brains. They need to be stable individuals who will not "lose their cool" when being fouled. Their first order of business is the ability to reach the two-meter position. Then they must be able to gain position on their Defender, hold position as long as possible, recognize if a two-meter shot is available, absorb fouls and get the ball up and ready to pass to either a Driver or a releasing perimeter player. It's easy to see why this player must be one of your team's best and smartest athletes.

Two-Meter specialists must be able to shoot sweep shots, backhands and turn shots. (See Chapter Seven—Two-Meter Shots.)

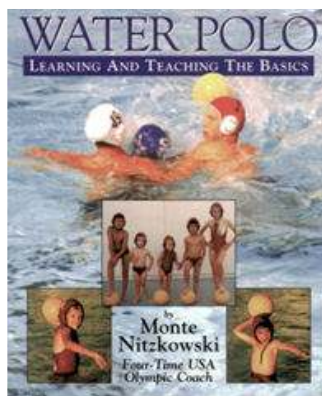
Two-Meter specialists must be good wrist passers, with the ability to get the ball up quickly and make the correct pass. They are the "quarterbacks" of your offense.

Defensively, Two-Meter players generally matchup well against the opponent's Defensive specialists. Also, because of strength and overall physical ability, they generally can do a good job defending the opponent's Two-Meter specialist. The problem with this matchup is that Two-Meter defenders tend to be ejected more often than other field players. Coaches will need to think twice before asking the Two-Meter specialist to guard their counterparts. In the later stages of the game, when time is running out, this may be a defensive match-up worth considering.

Two-Meter specialists should receive extensive training in defending against Drivers. This matchup will occur often and the Two-Meter specialist must learn intelligent defense against Drivers. They should use a swimming, body positioning defense (the same as described for Drivers) when guarding Driving specialists.

Two-Meter specialists are so important to the team's offensive strategy, that they must be protected as much as possible from needless ejection fouls. Also, as their position is difficult to play effectively for the entire game, it's important to train several players for this position so each can have an occasional rest. With rest, they will stay strong and do a much better job of running the offense.

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WATER POLO

Learning and Teaching the Basics

CHAPTER NINE

The Goalkeeper: Part 1



Monte Nitzkowski

The selection and training of a Goalkeeper is critical to the success of your team. In past history, the best athletes were picked to play in the field, while Goalkeeper candidates were most often weaker swimmers who wanted to play the game. Many times, coaches chose breaststroke swimmers as they had good leg support and could be trained to learn an eggbeater kick. Over the years, coaches began to understand that the two most critical positions for successful play in Water Polo were the Two-Meter player (hole forward) and the Goalkeeper. All great teams were built around these two key athletes. As coaches came to realize this, better athletes were picked to play the goal.

PHYSICAL AND MENTAL CHARACTERISTICS

Coaches must search for good athletes to play the goal. Expert swimming ability is a help, but not a necessity. However, great leg support and quick-start ability are musts. Body size is important and players who will achieve a height of six feet plus should be a part of the coach's search. Where possible, prospective Goalkeepers should have good arm length and quick-twitch fibers. Upper body thickness can be a help in absorbing the impact of hard perimeter shots, but it is not as important as leg support and arm and hand quickness. Offensively, the Goalkeeper must possess a good passing arm. Their passes are key to the success of the counterattack.

Mentally, goalies should be leader-type individuals willing to communicate with their teammates. Many game situations call for the Goalkeeper to shout instructions to fellow players.

When it comes to blocking the ball, Goalkeepers need to demonstrate mental toughness. They must be somewhat fearless when it comes to shot blocking, willing to take the ball "head on" when required. They need to be self-confident and stable. Like quarterbacks in football, Goalkeepers are in a "fishbowl." Everyone is watching the shot and what happens with the shot. Goalkeepers cannot hide. Everything they do is easily seen. Field players can sometimes get lost in the flow of the game, staying out of the fan's "critical eye." Not so with the Goalkeeper. Those watching know if the Goalkeeper is having a good or bad day. When things are not going well, the Goalkeeper may have to take verbal abuse from friend and foe alike! They must be mentally tough, strong enough to shut out criticism. They must remain focused through all phases of the game. Goalkeepers cannot dwell on a shot scored by opponents, but must be concentrating on the next save. They must be individuals who do not have a tendency to get down on themselves. Mentally, Goalkeepers must possess many of the same traits required for divers and gymnasts.

THE GOALIE GAME

The Goalkeeper's chief responsibility is to defend the goal. The secondary responsibility is to direct the counterattack.

The six field players are the first line of defense, but the Goalkeeper is the critical, all-important last line of defense. When a shot is taken, the goalie must be in position physically and mentally to attempt a save. Great goalies are great because of their physical expertise and the expertise of the six field defenders in front. Coaches must train field players to play outstanding individual defense (guarding the Driver, perimeter and Two-Meter player), good team defensive skills (foul and drop, stair stepping, etc.) and team tactical skills (press, dropback). Scouting plus great team defense by field players will allow shots to be "channeled" to the goal, thereby giving the Goalkeeper a much better chance of making the save. Goalkeepers don't want to be surprised. When field defense breaks down, shots come quickly from ball movement which outpositions the Goalkeeper and makes for easy scores. Even great Goalkeepers can be embarrassed when their field defenders are failing. Poorly defended shots from two meters are difficult for even the best of Goalkeepers, and perimeter shooters given time to fake and set their shots make life miserable for even the most capable Goalkeeper. For a goalie to give his/her best performance, field defense must be good. When field defense is good, there are few surprises. Shots will come from anticipated locations, thereby giving the Goalkeeper a better opportunity to get into position and block the ball.

Every good Goalkeeper would like to become a great Goalkeeper—and that certainly is possible for the Goalkeeper who will follow one simple but fundamental rule: Study (scout) the opposition. Learn the skills and preferences of their players. Know the types of shots and fakes they like to use; and a goalie certainly needs to know whether a shooter is left or right handed. Many shooters are predictable and keeping records on individual shooters can be very helpful to a Goalkeeper. As well as knowing about the individual shooters, the goalie needs to learn about the opposition's team tactics. The Goalkeeper who knows the opponent's offense can better anticipate from where the shots will be coming at him/her. All of this information, obtained through scouting, allows for better focus and anticipation—suddenly good Goalkeepers become great Goalkeepers. Physical skills are important, but mental skills and preparation provide the "razor's edge."

Offensively, Goalkeepers must be trained to find "open" players in the counterattack. They must become proficient in throwing accurate passes between fifteen and twenty-five meters. The shortest pass a Goalkeeper should ever make in the counterattack is to mid-court, and the greatest advantage in the counterattack will be achieved through much longer passes. The deeper and earlier the Goalkeeper can deliver a pass, the greater the opportunity of beating the defense. In my opinion, the goalie counterattack pass is the single most important pass in all Water Polo. It must be accurate if offensive advantage is to be maintained. Also, when executing the counterattack pass, goalies need to understand the "early wet" and "late dry" principle (see goalie ball handling drills).

GOALIE BASICS

LEGS: A great eggbeater kick is a must. In the past, many Goalkeepers were breaststroke-type swimmers who had a good frog kick, which provided a strong body lifting motion but NO BASE. Goalkeepers using the breaststroke kick tended to surge then sink. Shooters needed only a good fake followed by an accurate shot to score. To create the eggbeater, the goalie alternates legs while frog kicking. (See Chapter 3, The Kicks of Water Polo.) The eggbeater gives the Goalkeeper a solid base and the ability to stay up in a stable position until

the ball can be blocked. Goalkeepers must be trained in the eggbeater until they have great leg strength and the ability to ride steady in the upright position. This involves a great deal of leg conditioning in both the horizontal and vertical positions.

UPPER TORSO: Beyond quickness and flexibility, Goalkeepers must have strength. Therefore, they should spend time in the gym working to build upper body strength and thickness. Complete stretching exercises should be included in the regimen. The perfect combination of upper body characteristics for the Goalkeeper is adequate thickness to absorb the perimeter power shot, and quickness to help block drive, two-meter and quick-release shots following a cross pass. Successful Goalkeepers work to develop both upper body strength and quickness.

ARMS AND HANDS: Long arms and quick hands are advantageous to any Goalkeeper. It's difficult (sometimes impossible) to teach quickness. Therefore, it's advantageous to find goal candidates with quick-twitch fibers. Quickness can be improved with individual athletes, but much must be inherent—that's why it's advantageous to find those with native quickness, then train them to become even quicker. Playing other sports which call for quick hands is good for goalie training. Volleyball, racquetball, handball, team handball and table tennis are all good activities for Goalkeepers. Hitting a boxing speed bag (punching bag) is excellent training for hand quickness. All Goalkeepers should own a water polo ball and continually handle it. Quick wrist ball bouncing while standing next to a wall is good training.

SOME CARDINAL RULES FOR THE GOALKEEPER

- 1** As much as possible, maintain good position in the goal relative to the position of the ball and tendencies of the shooter. Anticipate shots and passes. Know where you are in the goal at all times.
- 2** Watch the ball, not the shooter—concentrate on the triangle formed by ball, arm and head of shooter. React as the ball leaves hand of shooter.



Illustration 132 - Goalie Lunge — reaching with head, shoulder, arm and hand.

- 3** Goalkeeper's head should help move body in direction of ball. Lead with the head followed by arms and hands. Get as much body as possible to location of the ball. (Illustration #132.)
- 4** Whenever possible, block with two hands, moving both hands in direction of ball. Try to absorb impact of shot with hands and arms, bringing the ball down in front of the body. Don't swing at the ball. Reach, absorb and pull down. (Illustration #133.)



Illustration 133 - Blocking and pulling ball down with two hands.

5 Goalkeepers can fake to lure a shot, but never lose position on the shooter. Remember, the goal is ten feet wide and three feet high. Position to make angle of the shot difficult, positioning to block ball or force it into the bar or over the cage. Don't give away position. Percentages are in favor of a blocked or missed shot if optimum position is maintained. Don't jump at ball or overcommit.

- 6** On perimeter shots, keep hands light on water (not deep) and be ready to react. (Illustrations #134 A and 134 B.)



Illustration 134A - Hands light on water preparing to raise body and hands for block.

Illustration 134B - Legs churning, starting to come up for block

- 7** On inside (Drive) shots, get hands and arms up, follow ball until shooter releases. Force shooter to go to most difficult angle. (Illustration #135.)



Illustration 135 - Hands up preparing to block drive shot.

- 8** Defending Lob Shots: As Goalkeeper moves across cage for lobs going toward the left, scoop with the left hand and reach across body with the right arm and hand. Reverse action for lob shots going to the right. Keep eye on the ball and keep reaching with offside arm. Don't give up on the ball. Keep legs churning. (Illustrations #136, 137.)



Illustration 136 - Moving left, goalkeeper in crossover lob blocking maneuver.



Illustration 137 - Crossover position while moving right to block lob shot.

- 9** On penalty shots, try to frustrate the shooter. When ready, on the whistle, come up and out with arms spread wide, trying to block anything within reach with arms and hands, and anything overhead with head and shoulders. (Illustrations # 138 A, 138 B.) Scout penalty shooters to learn tendencies. Sometimes it's a good idea to give the shooter slight space toward their scouted shot tendency, then take it away as the referee whistles the shot.



Illustration 138A - Penalty throw blocking position.



Illustration 138B - Penalty throw blocking position.

- 10** When defending against a free opponent in the counterattack, communicate with teammates, letting them know who they should defend and who you want to take.

- 11** Communicate to let the defender know if they are out of position in five-player defense. Let them know where you want them to move.

- 12** Don't overcommunicate when playing six on six, back court defense. Concentrate on the ball. (If defenders are constantly out of position, your team has a major problem. This can be remedied only by the coach during practice sessions.) When the game is underway, constantly trying to correct teammate defensive positioning is distracting. Focus on ball and take care of yourself.

- 13** The Goalkeeper is the prime passer in the counterattack. He/she should first look deep right, left or center to make longest and safest possible pass. There are only three things which can happen between the Goalkeeper's countering teammates and their defenders. First, the countering player will have beaten the defender. In this case, the countering player, after three or four hard strokes, should get to the back and continue swimming while establishing eye contact with the Goalkeeper; Goalkeeper will pass the ball only after making eye contact. The pass will be wet or dry (or no pass), all depending on the situation of the moment. The second possible scenario between the Goalkeeper and his countering teammate is that the countering teammate is barely up on his/her defender. In this case, the goalie does not pass the ball to this player. The third situation is created when the offensive player is unable to

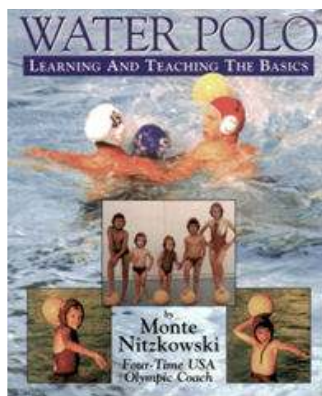
get up on the defender. In this case, the countering player will execute a square-out (a ninety-degree turn to get free of defender) and the Goalkeeper can make a safe wet (on water) pass to this teammate. In most cases, square outs should not be executed short of half tank. Goalies cannot afford to make bad passes in the counterattack. This is disastrous. The Goalkeeper should have clear eye contact with his/her countering teammate or a safe square-out pass. Otherwise, he/she should hold the ball until all teammates are in front court and a perimeter player safely comes back to take the pass.



Illustration 139 - Ball held high for start of counterattack.

The Goalkeeper should have the ball held high so teammates know where ball is while countering. When the ball is held high, it is ready for an immediate pass. (Illustration #139.) Every second counts in the counterattack if you are to gain and maintain a player advantage at the far end of the pool. Also, as the defense retreats, the Goalkeeper should move forward toward the four-meter line to shorten the pass.

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WATER POLO

Learning and Teaching the Basics

CHAPTER NINE

The Goalkeeper: Part 2



Monte Nitzkowski

TRAINING THE GOALKEEPER

Training for the Goalkeeper differs from that of the field player. Goalkeepers are specialists and should be handled as such. Where possible, an assistant coach should be responsible for the Goalkeeper. As their training needs to vary from those of field players, having someone in charge will greatly enhance their development. A minimum of thirty minutes a day of quality time should be devoted to their special training needs. Believe me, quality time will be extremely beneficial to their development. Unfortunately, too many programs throw the Goalkeeper in with everyone else, and then allow them to fend for themselves when the training plan does not specifically relate to an activity which involves the Goalkeeper. If your program does not have someone who can assist with the Goalkeepers, try to bring them in a half hour before regular practice so they can get some "special" time.

Goalkeepers need to be in shape to go four strong quarters; therefore, there is nothing wrong with having them spend some time with field players during the general conditioning period. However, the goal position does not call for them to swim more than four to eight meters at any one time. When they do swim in a game, it needs to be explosive, so when spending quality time with an assistant coach, goalies should do a lot of head-up, sprint-type work. They should spend a lot of time practicing quick starts, going from the vertical to the horizontal and back to the vertical. They need a lot of sprinting and side-to-side type of work.

Obviously, leg support is paramount to success in the goal. A variety of eggbeater drills should be introduced and practiced daily. Light weights can be used, but coaches need be careful when using weights with young players who are still in their growth pattern.

Also, it's important to remember that Goalkeepers need to rest some before regular season games and to taper and rest going into the championship part of the season. When every game counts, to be quick and mentally focused, you don't want an over-trained, fatigued Goalkeeper.

Before getting into the water, all goalies should go through dryland stretching exercises, concentrating on shoulder flexibility and stretching the knee and groin areas.

A good weight training program starting with high school age athletes also can be beneficial to the Goalkeeper. A strength coach should be consulted before putting goalies on any weight program. This will help guarantee that they are working on exercises which will be beneficial to them based on their individual strength and maturity levels.

GOALIE DRILLS: Swimming and Kicking Drills

When goalies are swimming on their own (away from general conditioning with field players), they should follow dry-land stretching with in-water, swim stretching for proper loosening. Easy front and back crawl swimming, flutter and breaststroke kicking should be included. Also, while warming up, goalies should go easy walking sets (eggbeater) both forward and laterally. When properly warmed up, following are some of the swimming and kick drills which can be employed:

SWIMMING:

- 1** Bursts of Four—Four hard head-up strokes, stop, start again until reaching opposite side of pool.
- 2** Burst of Two—Same as Bursts of Four only going two quick strokes before stopping and starting again.
- 3** Two on Stomach and Two on Back—In bursts of four strokes, go two strokes on stomach and two on back before stopping, rolling over to stomach and jump-kick starting the next two and two.
- 4** Four Strokes Out and Four Strokes Back—From front of the goal, sprint four strokes out on stomach with head up and four strokes back on the back. Do in sets of five, constantly shifting angle of sprint.

Example: While simulating the face of a clock, first sprint should be to the ten o'clock position, second to the eleven o'clock, following across until the final sprint is toward the two o'clock position.

KICKING:

- 1** Sprint flutter kicking both front and back crawl kicks.
- 2** Sprint breaststroke kicking.

3 Eggbeater sprint in semi-vertical with kick board.

4 Snowplow position with kickboard for more resistance. (Illustration #140.)



Illustration 140 - Eggbeater kick with kick board in snow plow position.

5 Forward eggbeater kicking in vertical position. Light weights can be added with older players.

6 Forward eggbeater while varying arm positioning to mimic different blocking positions.

A great deal of swim and kick conditioning for Goalkeepers should feature quick and explosive repetitions.

Therefore, proper warmups are important before starting specialty training. Field players are working constantly whether on defense, countering, playing front court offense, etc. Goalkeepers go from rest cycles (when teammates have ball and are attacking in the front court) to high moments of energy output when opponents attack in the counterattack, front court and player advantage offenses. As such, goalies need to be in the type of shape where they can expend maximum energy in bursts of twenty to forty- five seconds, during the entire four quarters of play.

MISCELLANEOUS SWIMMING AND KICKING DRILLS:

1 While breaststroking length of the pool, on whistle from coach, goalkeeper lunges left (as if blocking the ball with two hands), lunges right and lunges straight up before continuing breaststroking down the pool. Repeat each time coach blows whistle.

2 While walking vertically with eggbeater kick, move laterally to left on whistle, straight forward again on whistle, to the right on next whistle, then forward again. Continue to repeat until reaching far end of pool.

3 Eggbeater in stationary position: On first whistle, come up higher (kick harder) for five seconds, then full height on next whistle for as long as possible. Sink back to original treading position and repeat when ready. Complete five to a set.

TECHNIQUE DRILLS

Goalie technique drills are done in the goal with close surveillance by the coach.

1 **LATERAL WALK ACROSS FACE OF GOAL:** Start goalkeeper on post of goal. On whistle, Goalkeeper eggbeaters into up position and "walks" laterally across face of goal with arms extended overhead and hands "fingering" top bar of goal. Stop when player reaches opposite post. Rest, then repeat in opposite direction. (Illustration #141.)



Illustration 141 - Lateral 'walk across face of goal, fingers touching cross bar.



Illustration 142 - Ball roll drill across face of the goal.

2 **LATERAL WALK ACROSS FACE OF GOAL, BALL ROLL:** Same as above only roll ball along upper bar while walking with arms fully extended. (Illustration #142.)

3 **SIDE TO SIDES, HIGH CORNERS:** Start by facing the goal, center cage. On whistle (whistle not necessary), lunge to left high corner, settle back into water, slide back to center position and explode to right high corner. Keep hands light on the water, lunging with legs. Throw head and arms in direction of lunge, trying to cut off the high corner. Keep legs working while positioning, lunging and repositioning. Run drill in sets of ten or fifteen. (Illustrations #143, 144, 145.)



Illustration 143 - Positioning to start side to side, high corner goalie drill.



Illustration 144 - Lunging left, high corner.



Illustration 145 - Lunging right, high corner.

- 4 SIDE TO SIDES, LOW CORNERS:** Same as above but lunge and reach to block low corners. Remember head, arms and hands must all be a part of the lunging motion. Move entire body toward the block, not just the arms and hands. (Illustration #146.)



Illustration 146 - Lunging right, low corner.

- 5 SIDE TO SIDES, FACING OUT:** Same as above but Goalkeeper faces out rather than in toward the goal.

- 6 PARTNER SHOOTING AT GOALKEEPER:** Have shooter and Goalkeeper both center cage. Shooter should be four to five meters out from face of goal. Start by shooting ball at one-quarter speed in range where Goalkeeper can make two-hand, pull-down saves. Gradually move ball outside goalie's body, working both left and right sides at one-quarter speed. Slowly extend lateral shooting range until Goalkeeper is forced to extend to the corners. Repeat after rest and increase speed of shot.

- 7 DEFENDING THE LOB, NO BALL:** Move Goalkeeper to one post and then have him/her practice going from vertical to horizontal, layout position while sculling with inside arm and hand (arm nearest center cage) and reaching across with outside arm in full stretching position while lunging with legs. Finish by reaching and playing like you are reaching and swimming ball out of trouble. Repeat drill from opposite post, crossing back to original position.

- 8 DEFENDING THE LOB:** When Goalkeepers have mastered positioning and body movement for defending the lob, add ball with teammate making lob pass to opposite corner of goal. (Illustration #147.)



Illustration 147 - Defending lob with partner lobbing ball.

NOTE: To aid young Goalkeepers with their blocking techniques, make sure they get a chance to block the ball during shooting drills. Too many young Goalkeepers are "thrown to the wolves." Shooters move in and "blaze away" with their best stuff and the young Goalkeeper never gets a save; players shoot before Goalkeepers can regain blocking position. Just as bad is the macho shooter who moves in too close, then throws the ball (notice I didn't say "shoot") as hard as possible and strikes the Goalkeeper in the face. There is no excuse for this type of action and young Goalkeepers quickly can become disenchanted with this position. Just as with field players, young Goalkeepers need to experience early success. Success in the goal is: Making some blocks! Therefore, when doing regular team shooting drills, occasionally instruct the shooters to take some shots which can be blocked. (I don't tell the Goalkeeper this is what is being done, so that he/she will feel successful. Blocking some shots does just that.) From time to time, goalies need psychological, positive reinforcement. They must learn to play with confidence and not be overwhelmed by negatives. There always will be some negatives in a Goalkeeper's career. It's the nature of the position. Opponents will score goals, and every goal is a negative to the Goalkeeper. Goalies must learn to deal with negatives and constantly strive to become stronger persons. As such, they must be trained both physically and psychologically. This training must start from the first day of practice. Having a chance to block shots is a great confidence builder and needs to be built into the goalies training regimen.

9 BLOCK AND CHASE: In this drill, the goalie starts center cage. Place a shooter at six meters, center cage. Shoot the ball to a position where the goalie can make the save and control the ball. Goalie then throws ball back to shooter who, in turn, throws the ball onto the water to the left or right of the Goalkeeper. Ball should be placed from one to two meters out from face of goal and approximately one to two meters wide of the goalpost. The Goalkeeper reacts to the ball, sprinting to and controlling it, followed by returning to the goal with ball in hand. He/she then passes ball back to shooter who immediately takes another shot, positioned so Goalkeeper can make the save. Ball is returned to shooter who again throws a placement pass for the goalie to chase. Repeat this Block and Chase Drill five to eight times. (Illustrations #148, 149.)



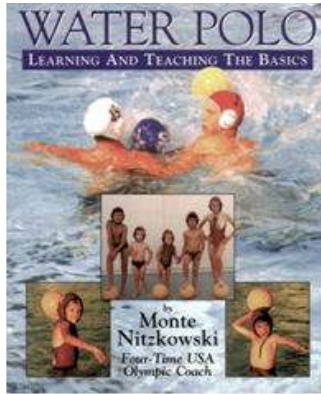
Illustration 148 - Block and chase drill with partner shooting ball and goalie making block.



Illustration 149 - Block and chase drill with goalie chasing ball.

NOTE: Young Goalkeepers must learn to be aggressive and to defend the goal both by blocking and by stealing the ball. They must be able to come quickly out of the goal and pick off the over pass or rebound. To do this, they must be trained to react to the ball when it's floating out in front of the cage. They must learn to judge distance and know which balls are reachable and those that are not.

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WATER POLO

Learning and Teaching the Basics

CHAPTER NINE

The Goalkeeper: Part 3



Monte Nitzkowski

BALL HANDLING DRILLS

Goalkeeper's should participate in all team ball handling and passing drills. When team passing begins, goalies should join the drill. This is not a good time to be doing something else.. Both Goalkeepers and field players must spend a great deal of time learning how to pass. Drills should include both stationary and movement passing drills. Goalkeepers cannot get enough passing practice.

1 PULL DOWNS: Goalies pair off, face each other four meters apart and block shots thrown by the partner. Shots should be within reach and taken both overhead and to each side. Goalkeepers should try to block the ball down and into water in front of them. Where possible, the body should be moved in front of all shots. Once the ball is blocked and controlled, the goalie should pick it up and shoot at partner. (Illustration #150.)



Illustration 150 - Pull down drill, partner placing shot.

2 GOALIE READ-OUT DRILL: This is an important drill in teaching the Goalkeeper what to look for and whom to pass to in the counterattack. The greatest passing opportunities for the Goalkeeper occur during the counterattack. The Goalie Read-out Drill allows the goalie to read the intentions of the field players as they counter down the field of play. (Illustration #151.)



Illustration 151 - Goalie with ball held high ready for start of goalie readout drill.

Remember, only three things can happen with field players in the counterattack. In order, these possibilities are: The player gets completely free of the defender and then rolls to back and gets eye contact with the Goalkeeper; secondly, player is barely up and then works to get the tight defensive player ejected. The tightly covered offensive player should not get ball from goalie in this situation; thirdly, offensive player is not up and, depending on location within the field of play, the individual in this situation either squares as a leadbreak player or squares at mid-court to help goalie move the ball downcourt. In all cases, players who are being well defended in the counterattack are prime candidates for the square-out maneuver. Remember, only in the first situation and in the third situation do the field players receive the ball from the Goalkeeper.

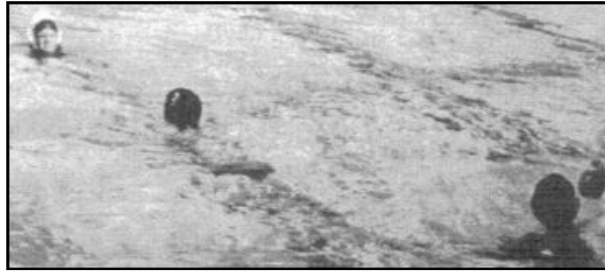


Illustration 152A - Player positioning for start of goalie readout drill — goalie with ball, offensive player facing out, defensive player facing in.



Illustration 152B - Player up and on back, goalie prepares to make the pass.



Illustration 152C - Player up, goalie ready to make lead wet pass.

To set up the Goalie Read-out Drill, place six defenders across the pool at approximately five meters. They should be facing back toward the goalie with the ball. Place a line of six offensive players at approximately three meters, facing toward the goal they attack. (Illustration #152A.) Put a goalie in the opposite cage for defensive purposes. This arrangement makes for six pairs of two players, the offense facing out, the defense facing in. The coach starts with one of the pairs of players nearest the wall (side of the pool). On the coach's whistle, the offensive player starts the counterattack and the defensive player makes one of three decisions—let the player go completely free before chasing (Illustrations #152B, 152C.); let the player be barely up (Illustration #153.); or defend the countering player thereby forcing a square-out. (Illustrations #154A, 154B.)



Illustration 153 - Player barely up, goalie doesn't pass!!

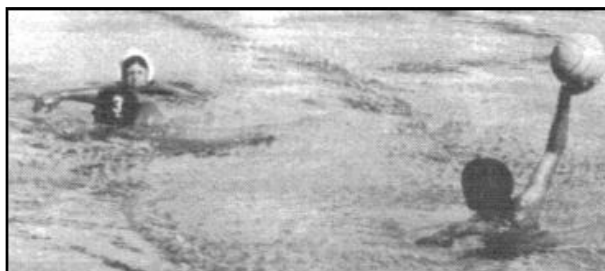


Illustration 154A - Player not up, starts square out.

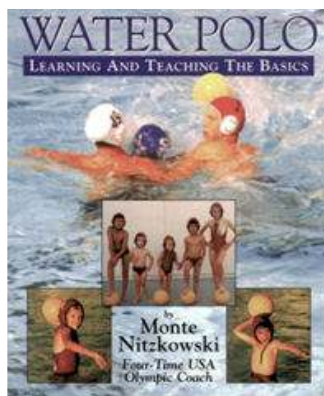


Illustration 154B - Ball passed wet to squaring offensive player.

The Goalkeeper has six balls in the goal. On each whistle, the goalie raises a ball, reads the defense and, depending on the "unfolding" situation, makes the appropriate pass. If the countering player is barely up, the Goalkeeper does not pass the ball, but simply hangs onto it until the next situation presents itself. It is wise for the coach to walk through this drill first, demonstrating each of the three situations for all to see.

The Goalie Read-out Drill is important both for teaching the Goalkeeper where he/she should throw the ball in the counterattack and the type of passes to be thrown. For example, when the countering player is free from the defender and has gone to the back and established eye contact with the Goalkeeper, the Goalkeeper must decide whether the ball should be thrown "early wet" or "late dry." "Wet" means to place ball on the water; "dry" means it is thrown to the extended hand of the breaking player, who catches it before it touches the water. The wet pass should be thrown when the player is totally free and has room to receive and attack with the ball; this allows the countering player to keep moving at full speed as he/she attacks the opponent's goal. The dry pass is thrown when the player can safely receive the pass, but the defense is closing in. Example: When the opposing Goalkeeper is attacking out toward the countering player, the ball should be thrown dry, alerting the offensive player to danger approaching. The "early wet" and "late dry" principle provides "read-outs" among offensive players and allows the counterattack to move faster and be better informed of defender positioning and movement.

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WATER POLO

Learning and Teaching the Basics

CHAPTER TEN

Conditioning Players: Part 1



Monte Nitzkowski

AUTHOR'S NOTE: This chapter deals specifically with in-water conditioning of the Water Polo athlete.

In order to play the sport effectively, it is critical for all Water Polo players to be in top water shape. Conditioning is an ongoing process and, once committed to the sport, Water Polo athletes should train to stay in top shape year round. As such, the marriage of Water Polo and competitive Swimming is a successful one, producing good results at both ends of the continuum. Few sports are more difficult to play out of shape. Believe me, it's no fun to compete out of shape against well-conditioned opponents in either sport.

I encourage all young Water Polo players to swim competitively through their high school years. This is a must. You can't improve your swimming ability on your own. Young players must have the discipline and education provided by a coach-directed, scheduled swim team program. Many high school age-Water Polo players want to quit swimming and just play Water Polo. It's very difficult to play Water Polo above the high school level without having competed in swimming through the high school years. Competitive swimming improves strength, size, mobility and quickness—all paramount to becoming an outstanding Water Polo player. Athletes need to "pay their dues" during the younger years to build the swimming speed, strength and stamina required to succeed as senior level players.

Once in college, Swimmer/Water Polo athletes tend to specialize in one or the other sport. However, some Swimmer/Water Polo athletes continue to train and compete in both sports. This is particularly true at the Division II and III NCAA levels. A few continue to compete in both sports at the Division I level (Matt Biondi, Pablo Morales, Tim Shaw to name a few who have succeeded) but it takes an exceptionally talented athlete to accomplish this. Water Polo serves as a great physical and mental conditioner for swimming but Division I level swimming is tough enough by any standard. Few swimmers, with or without a Water Polo background, have the ability to score points at the Championship Level of Division I Swimming.

In many ways, in-water conditioning for Water Polo parallels swim training. Pre-season and early season training should build a strong base. Over-distance swimming, high mileage, middle distance repeats and extensive kicking should be included. Because athletes are not then mentally tired or worn down from the successes and/or failures of the competitive season, it's a good time for the coach to give a great deal of practice time to basic swim conditioning. As the competitive season approaches, the emphasis on conditioning change from middle and distance-type swimming to more sprint repeats—200s, 150s, 100s and 75s. After the base of pre-season and early season training, players need to start picking up their stroke turnover. Remember, Water Polo requires both speed and quickness for the player to be successful. Leg drills (flutter, back flutter) should accompany the repeat swims. Eggbeater drills must be a part of daily practices. Dribbling and movement-oriented ball handling drills should now become an integral part of the conditioning regimen.

As the season evolves from early to mid-season training, conditioning should pyramid during the week. For example, start with overload on Mondays and taper the pyramid to sprints by Thursday and Friday.

One of the great mistakes Water Polo coaches make in the training of their athletes is failure to work enough quickness into conditioning drills. Quickness is critical to the success of the Water Polo athlete. American players tend to be fast (from their age group and high school swimming experience), but not always quick. Quickness must be trained, starting heavily with mid-season training. Start, stop, change of direction—all these must become a part of the daily conditioning program. World class sprinters are fast, but not always quick when it comes to Water Polo. It helps to be the world's fastest in fifty meters, but water polo players also want to be the fastest for six meters. Being quick for even two or three meters can give players an offensive or defensive positioning advantage. Offensively, quickness can get a player free on a drive for a shot or ejection and, defensively, put him/her in position to prevent the necessity of chasing an opponent for twenty meters. **POSITIONING IS EVERYTHING IN WATER POLO AND QUICKNESS ALLOWS ATHLETES TO OBTAIN PREFERRED BODY POSITIONING.**

Water Polo quickness is not a natural trait even when an athlete has "fast-twitch fibers." Swimming coaches teach athletes to become faster—Water Polo coaches need to teach players to become quicker.

DRILLS

Conditioning drills should be run early in practice, following a good warmup. Athletes should begin their warmups by arriving early for practice and doing on-deck stretching drills. After adequate stretching, players should enter the water and, on their own, begin stretch-out type swimming. Individuals will vary the amount of stretch-out swimming they do, but it should be adequate before the coach whistles the start of organized, team conditioning. I prefer letting the team warm up on their own (under close observation). Mature players know how important it is for the body to get a proper warmup and will do a good job of getting ready for organized conditioning. Immature players will do as little as possible, forcing the coach to take over their warmup program. The reason I like individual warmup versus team warmup is that I expect so much thinking and discipline from players during the training session, that I feel they should be on their own until formal practice begins. If too many individuals are not taking the warmup seriously, I will run a regimented, loosening out warmup which includes the entire team.

PRE-SEASON AND EARLY SEASON CONDITIONING DRILLS

This is the time that Water Polo practice most closely resembles swimming practice. Generally, I like to work on front and back crawl swimming and kicking. Eight hundred repeats, five hundred repeats can be included here. Head-up, flutter-kick fly should be added after several weeks. (Illustration 155.)



Illustration 155 - Flutter kick, head up fly conditioning drill.

Obviously, butterfly distances should be short. Note: A player with sore or bad shoulders should not do butterfly repeats—have the player swim front crawl during this period.

Eggbeater kicking should begin early in the season and I recommend starting in the horizontal position both with and without a kick board.(Illustration 156.)

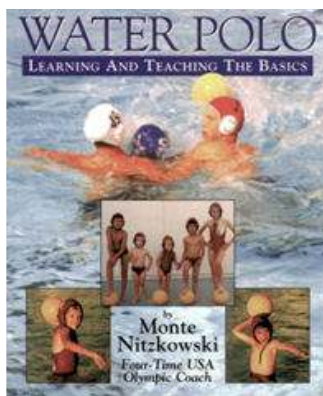


Illustration 156 - Horizontal eggbeater drill,
with ball for board.

Turning the board into the "snow plow" position will increase resistance. When players eggbeater in the horizontal position, it is easier for the coach to see what they are doing and make necessary changes in the kick. Once players have their eggbeater kick fundamentally sound, ninety percent of eggbeater kicking should be in the vertical position.

During pre-and early season conditioning, some coaches like to add shoes, pants T-shirts, etc. to make the conditioning workout more difficult. Some use bungee cords to work increased resistance into stroke and kick conditioning. Personally, I prefer conditioning in positions which replicate what must be done when playing the game. I prefer a lot of repeats without the use of other tools. Note: Caution must be observed in early eggbeater training so that weight or resistance techniques are not used to the extent where knee joints can be damaged. This can happen particularly with younger athletes. Therefore, I don't recommend the use of weights or heavy resistance training. If a coach feels it is necessary, I would encourage him/her not to resort to this type of training before consulting with the individual athlete as to joint tenderness, and this type of training should never be used in the early part of the season or with heavy weights.

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WATER POLO

Learning and Teaching the Basics

CHAPTER TEN

Conditioning Players: Part 2



Monte Nitzkowski

MID SEASON TRAINING

This is where I begin to pyramid the week, cutting the distance-type of repeats each day. A lot of 100, 75, 50 and 25 repeats should be employed during this time of the season. Short butterfly repeats are continued. Kick conditioning continues, with emphasis on flutter, eggbeater and jump start (breaststroke and sidestroke kicking). Eggbeater kicking is now more in the vertical, with forward, side and back movement eggbeater featured. Changes in arm position can be used to make eggbeater drills more difficult. Examples: Eggbeater with ball clasped behind or on top of head (Illustrations #157, 158.); eggbeater with arms stretched overhead, elbows straight; ball tipped on finger tips while eggbeating with arms held straight overhead.

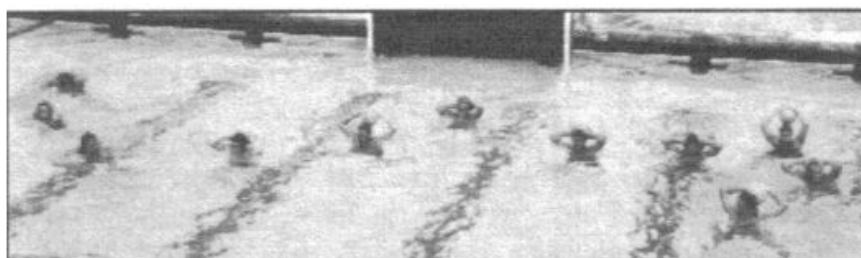


Illustration 157 - Vertical eggbeater drill, ball clasped behind head.



Illustration 158 - Vertical eggbeater drill, ball clasped on top of head.

Swimming-ball handling drills now can be featured. They break up the monotony of swim repeats while improving ball handling skills. Have the players count off by threes; put the twos at one end of the pool and the ones and threes at the other end, with each of the ones holding a ball. The coach starts the drill by blowing the whistle for the ones to dribble to the other end. The coach should allow most dribblers to reach the other end before starting the twos on their dribble lap. Next the threes go, and the drill continues for four to six sequences. (Illustration #159.)



Illustration 159 - Team dribble drill.

Once enough sequences have been completed and the balls are back to the ones, the drill can be changed to a push dribble (ball pushed with finger tips in an extended arm position). Although this skill is seldom used in games, push dribbling is a good hand conditioning drill. It does give players a better feel for the ball and softer fingers and hands. (Illustration 160.)



Illustration 160 - Team push dribble drill.

Once the three groups have completed push dribbles they can (by the numbers) begin walking the ball. This is a useful skill where the player cups the ball between palm and wrist and strokes the ball through in swimming fashion. (Illustrations #161A, 161B.)



Illustration 161A - Walking ball drill.

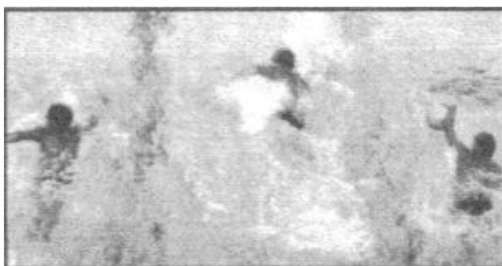


Illustration 161B - Walking ball drill.

Next, the players can carry the ball, penetrating forward in the vertical position and using the eggbeater kick while carrying the ball in the vertical, passing and shooting position. (Illustration *162.)



Illustration 162 - Carrying ball drill.

Players can exchange the ball from one hand to the other as they progress forward. The hand-to-hand exchange should be done on the coach's whistle. Countless ball handling, conditioning drills can be run with the three group drill. Eggbeater conditioning with the ball also can be included as a part of this drill.

Coaches should improvise and create all kinds ball handling and conditioning exercises for this drill.

During the mid-season I like to add a lot of relay conditioning drills. Players are reaching the "dog days" of the season and it's always good to add a little excitement to a practice. Relays will do that, as well as adding speed to the workout. Relays should be run with and without the ball. It's good to have prize incentives such as winners don't pull the goals, etc.

MID AND LATE SEASON CONDITIONING

Quickness now must become a major part of your preparation plan. As you pyramid the week, quickness should be built each day. High turnover stroke drills must become a part of the conditioning schedule.

DRILLS:

HIGH ELBOWS: Starting vertical, players do high elbow, quick turnover drill. The coach keeps players in a straight line, facing the near wall and completely in the vertical position. After fifteen to twenty seconds with players turning over their strokes as fast as possible while remaining in the vertical, the coach blows the whistle and players turn and sprint to other end. High Elbows build turnover speed. (Illustrations 163 A, 163 B, 163 C.)



Illustration 163A - Start of high elbow drill.

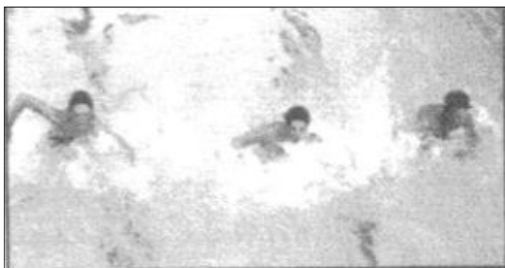


Illustration 163B - High elbow drill close up.

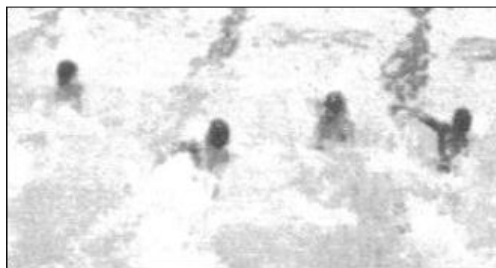


Illustration 163C - Sprinting away after high elbow drill.

BURSTS OF FOUR: Another good quickness drill is bursts of four followed by bursts of two. Players in a straight line and starting by the numbers lunge kick and sprint four explosive strokes with the head up. They drop back to the semi-vertical and start another burst of four when ready. The coach whistles only the start of the first burst. After that, players continue down the pool, starting themselves and concentrating on an explosive start and four quick strokes. Bursts of Two are done in the same fashion.

IN AND OUT QUICKNESS DRILL: The coach numbers off players by threes. With all three sets of players at one end, the number ones move to the four-meter line. On the coach's whistle, they sprint out eight meters and back in as fast as they can start, swim, turn and return to the starting position. At this point, the twos are whistled and they follow the same routine, followed by the threes. Next, the ones go and so on until each group has sprinted five to ten sequences. (Illustrations #164 A, 164 B, 164 C, 164 D.)



Illustration 164A - In and out sprint drill — 'heading out'.



illustration 164B - In and out drill — 'heading in' on stomach.



Illustration 164C - In and out drill, 'heading out'.



Illustration I 64D - In and out drill, returning on back.

No time is allowed between sprints—when one group arrives, the coach whistles the start of the next group. After five to ten sequences, the distance is cut to six meters and the drill is repeated. After five to ten more sequences, the three groups are moved so they are spaced four or five meters apart and the coach shortens the distance where it's just two strokes out and two strokes back.

One whistle follows the next as players, by the number, lunge out and back. Many variations can be designed for the "In and Out" Drill. Example: Have players sprint eight meters out, come to the vertical and eggbeater until the coach whistles for their return.

TWENTY-FIVE YARD RAPID TURNOVER DRILL: This is simple. To add turnover quickness, have players lift their heads, shorten their strokes and sprint sets at the twenty-five yard distance.

MAXIMUM EFFORT DRILL (AS FAST AS YOU CAN GO FOR AS LONG AS YOU CAN GO): Number players by threes. Number ones start from the wall with heads up, sprinting at 110% effort. They are to hold this effort for as long as possible, then stretch swim on toward the end wall. The idea is to go all out for as long as possible. Players should be able to last from fifteen to thirty-five yards before backing off. After the twos and threes have their turns, start over, working until each group goes all out five different times. Done properly, the maximum effort distance generally will be shorter with each turn.

FOLLOW THE FLAG DRILL: Players spread out throughout the tank and, with each whistle, sprint in direction the coach is pointing the flag. Drill should feature rapid changes of direction, short distances, lots of whistles and should last approximately ten minutes. (Illustrations #165 A, 165 B.)



Illustration 165A - Follow the flag drill.

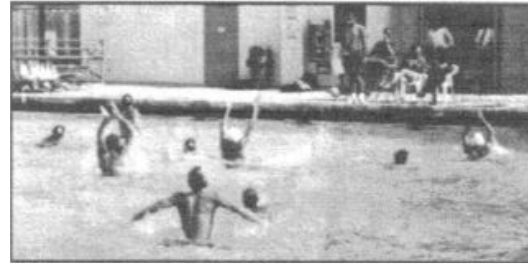
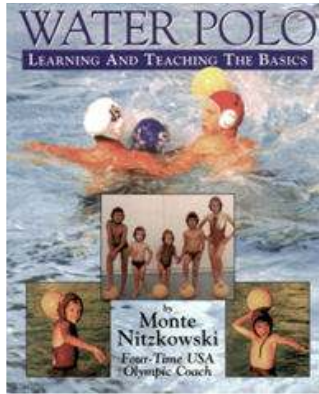


Illustration 165B - Follow the flag drill.

Coaches should create their own quickness drills to accomplish the needs of the team. Be creative and make it work.

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WATER POLO

Learning and Teaching the Basics

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Designing a Practice Schedule



Monte Nitzkowski

Water Polo is a game of strength, mobility and conditioning. Coaches should combine some strength building exercises (weight room) with in-water conditioning.

A simple daily practice schedule should include stretching, strength exercises, in-water conditioning (arms and legs), ball handling (passing shooting), tactical game plan work (defense, counterattack, front court offense and player advantage situations) and general scrimmage to improve gamesmanship. Scrimmages should not always be general in nature. Half-court scrimmaging in defensive and offensive patterns plus full court counterattack scrimmages are all important to preparing the team but, I spend far more time in tactical scrimmage than in general scrimmage. Players want to general scrimmage all the time. Water Polo is fun to play and players want to have fun.

General scrimmage should be for gamesmanship (time on shot clock, game clock, transition, substitution, etc.) but should not be the dominant part of your tactical training program. Repetition is critical to learning. Passing, shooting and tactical scrimmaging should be designed to create repetition. When learning from scrimmaging, it's much easier to create repetition with half court, tactical practice. So, be sure when designing your daily practice plan to include more of the former (tactical scrimmage) and less of the later (general scrimmage).

To cover all of the practice areas mentioned above, teams should practice twice a day. On game days, the first practice should be a warmup followed by a walk-through of key defensive and offensive plans to be used against that day's opponent.

On regular practice days, I like to get conditioning out of the way during early morning workouts. Players generally are not thinking as clearly as they will be later in the day. I save the tactical and "polish" elements of practice for afternoon workouts when player concentration should be at its best.

When setting up practice schedules, I believe in pyramiding both the work week and the season. What I mean by this is the heavy work (over-distance swimming, etc.) will come in the early-season and the early mid-season work week. Training distances will get shorter as the work week progresses and as the main part of the season approaches.

By mid-season, the conditioning program should include extensive work on quickness. By then, all Water Polo technique and skill drills should be a part of your offensive or defensive strategies so not a second is wasted. As far as pyramiding the work week, I get the heavy work out of the way on Monday when players are sluggish from weekend activities. I like to **THEME COACH** so, after heavy Monday conditioning, I'll work tactically on defensive drills and scrimmage. This works well for Mondays since defensive training requires less handling of the ball. As minds and hands get "crisper" by Tuesday, I'll work with the counterattack, eliminating the rote conditioning drills (players have been overloaded on Monday with these exercises) and featuring counterattack drills. Counterattacking requires all-out swimming and moving from one end of the pool to the other. These drills require as much swimming as a simple conditioning practice. I want players to be moving at "flank speed" during these drills and the ensuing counter scrimmages. Therefore, all conditioning for Tuesday takes place in actual game drills. By Wednesday and Thursday, the theme will be front court offense. Practice will feature a good deal of shooting drills and tactical offensive scrimmage. Conditioning will feature a lot of quick starts and explosive swimming. If game day is Friday, the morning session will start with a team meeting to stress the objectives for the afternoon's game, followed by a loosening and walk-through practice. If game day is Saturday, Friday will include a regular two-a-day practice, featuring a lot of shooting and defensive and offensive half-court walk-through drills.

During late season practice, I coach each theme (defense, counterattack, front court offense, player advantage offense and special situations) daily. The team manager should keep a stop watch on each section of practice. No matter where we are with defensive drills, counterattacking drills, etc., when time is up (fifteen or twenty minutes) and the manager's whistle blows, we move to the next tactical area to be practiced. As you near the end of the season, players have enough knowledge to deal with a lot of different tactical concepts daily.

Earlier in the season, this will not work as players must learn with constant repetition in specific areas of the game. (We all know about spending a day working on a certain part of the game only to return to this area three days later and find players have forgotten most of what they previously learned.) Learning is critical. It's difficult to make corrections when players have no idea what they have done wrong. Players must learn to understand what is expected. Hopefully, with a well-designed seasonal practice schedule, this will be the case as you approach the late season.

Finally, in late season and when your team is contending for a playoff berth, let the players get rested. If you have done a thorough job with your conditioning program, players will be ready. Time has run out. They are not going to get in better shape. With proper late season work, they will retain their base through the last fourteen to twenty days. Short quickness conditioning, crisp passing and shooting drills, moving practice along in a "snappy fashion"—are all important.

Mentally, positive reinforcement is vital at this point of the season. Coaches tend to see the negatives. This is natural and should be a big part of helping players improve during the early and mid-season period, but when playoff time arrives, coaches must stress positives and eliminate the negatives. Get everyone thinking they are winners. Players "love" this game. If you, as the coach, have done a proper job of preparation, players will respond and the results will reach all expectations.

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