

WATER POLO RULES



The Object of Water Polo

The object of water polo is to score more goals than the opponent by throwing the ball into the opposing team's net. Water polo teams approach this task in two ways:

1. Attacking on the offensive end and scoring as many goals as they can.
2. Applying heavy pressure on defense to prevent the other team from scoring.

How Water Polo Teams are Structured

The standard number of players allowed in the playing boundaries at any given time is seven. This number includes one goalie and six field players, who work to pass the ball to each other and take shots on the nets at either end.

There are usually 13 players on the team altogether. Teams can substitute reserve players into the game during the following situations:

- during a timeout
- during the intermission between quarters
- after a goal has been scored
- after a player has been injured

How to Tell One Team from Another

The uniform in water polo is much different than other sports, with there being no set jersey. Instead, athletes play in streamlined bathing suits to prevent opponents from snagging or pulling at their clothing. Players also wear lightweight caps for protection, but they also serve another purpose: *team differentiation*.

The caps' colors determine which team a player is on, with one team's color being light and the other's dark. A team's cap color must contrast with the other team's color, the goalie's cap color, and the ball's color.

Aside from protection and team differentiation, the caps also bear the player's number for identification purposes, which is especially helpful to referees when a foul has been committed.

How the Scoring Works in Water Polo

Every shot that successfully travels into the net is worth one point, regardless of how far away you shoot.

Offensive players must pay close attention to the shot clock since a goal will only count if the shot is released before the shot clock hits zero and fully passes through the goal bars. Teams have a maximum of 30 seconds to shoot on any given possession.

The presence of the shot clock promotes a fast-paced style of play. For this reason, it is common for games to finish with scores of over 20 points for both teams.

Points Needed to Win

There's no specific amount of points is needed for a team to win the game. A team can win the game with as little as one point if the opposing team never scored. In addition, you do not need to be a set amount of points ahead of your opponent either. A one-goal lead is sufficient for a team to win the game once the regulation time ends.

What Happens if a Shot Misses?

The ball must pass into the opponent's net, within and below the bars of the goal, for a goal to count. If a shot doesn't successfully enter the net, the current score will not change. However, there are a few different scenarios that could result.

If the shot bounces back into the playing area, a fight for possession ensues. In the event that the offensive team repossesses the ball, the team is awarded an additional twenty seconds to get a shot on goal. If the defensive team gathers possession, the shot clock resets and play shifts toward the other end of the pool.

If a shot bounces out of the playing area, the defensive team takes possession and gets a goal throw.

Rules Governing Player Movement

Field players—meaning any player that’s not the Goalkeeper—are only allowed to tread water during games. They are prohibited from touching the bottom of the pool or holding onto its side.

Players can swim up and down the length of the pool as possession shifts from one team to another. On offense, players attempt to maneuver themselves into open areas where they have the best chance to score. On defense, players position themselves between their opponents and the goal they’re defending to disrupt any potential scoring opportunities.

Rules Governing Ball Possession & Movement

Only the goalie may ever touch the ball with two hands. Every other player can only catch, pass, and shoot with one hand.

To move with the ball, the possessing player must push the ball in front of them with a single hand and swim forward. Players are forbidden from holding the ball underwater, regardless of whether they’re stationary or moving.

Though, pushing the ball forward is not the primary means by which players move the ball. Offensive players move the ball by passing the ball between teammates, above all else.

The player in possession of the ball is allowed to pass backward, forward, and sideways without restriction, so long as they are only holding the ball with one hand.

The minimal restrictions regarding passing allow offenses to quickly exploit any defensive vulnerabilities and uncover opportunities to score.

Offensive players cannot venture within two meters of the goal without the ball. If they cross this imaginary 2-meter line and disturb the play, the possession will be voided. In contrast, players in possession of the ball can venture past this 2-meter line to improve their scoring chances.

Another important imaginary plane in water polo is what's called the 5-meter line. As the name suggests, this imaginary plane is located 5 meters away from the goal. Any offensive player that's fouled beyond the 6-meter line may shoot the ball in an attempt to score, so long as they do so quickly and in one fluid maneuver.

How Players are Positioned in Water Polo

While hockey, basketball, and soccer have set positions for players, the water polo players shift between positions as necessary, depending on an offensive or defensive play.

In an offensive play, the positions include a "point" that stays back around the 5-meter line, a "center-forward" that leads the play, and two "wings" that flank the approach.

In a defensive play, only the "set D" position is necessary. This player's goal is to defend the goalie and snatch the ball away from the offensive team. All other players without assigned positions are referred to as utility players that float wherever they are needed.

How Fouls Work in Water Polo

There are four fouls in water polo, the two most common being minor fouls and major fouls. The other two fouls are the misconduct foul and the flagrant misconduct foul, otherwise known as the brutality foul. But, first, let's dive into the details of how referees call these fouls.

Minor Foul

Minor fouls, or ordinary fouls as they are often called, are very common in water polo. They are so common that most leagues have removed any limit on minor fouls, meaning there are no player-removal punishments for repeated fouls.

A few of the ways to commit an ordinary foul include ([source](#)):

- putting a ball into play (usually more than three seconds)
- holding the ball with both hands (does not apply to the goalkeeper)
- keeping the ball underwater
- performing an incorrect penalty throw
- shot clock expiration

The most prevalent minor foul called in water polo is when a player restricts the movement of an opponent that does not have possession but is near the ball.

Another frequently called ordinary foul is when a player reaches over an opponent to knock the ball away. A minor foul would also be issued in a similar scenario, where a player pushes another opponent out of the way to clear up an open shooting path.

With an ordinary foul, possession is awarded to the offended team. The offended team has three seconds to resume play. Otherwise, they will forfeit possession.

The clock does not stop for this type of foul. If you've ever had the privilege of witnessing a water polo game, the high frequency of ordinary fouls is the underlying reason why referees are seemingly always blowing their whistle during the game.

Major Foul

Major fouls are compounding penalties that can lead to exclusion from the game. In the event of a major foul, the player who committed the violation is issued a 20-second penalty. Any player that receives three of these will be banned from play for the rest of the match.

A major foul is most commonly issued for “holding” another player. This includes grabbing an opponent with two hands, sitting on their legs or back to “sink” them underwater, or physically restricting another player’s movement in general. It is up to the discretion of the referee what constitutes an ordinary foul versus a major foul.

Other ways to commit a major foul include:

- blocking a pass or shot with two hands when closer than 6 meters to the offensive player
- disrupting or blocking a free throw
- hitting or kicking an opponent
- not leaving the field of play immediately after being penalized
- purposefully splashing an opponent in the face
- re-entering play before the referee’s signal
- taking a seat on the pool’s side (or steps for that matter)

Any foul committed within the 5-meter line may warrant a penalty throw. Under these circumstances, the offensive player must have had a realistic prospect of scoring had the foul not occurred. The offensive player is only awarded one single throw, not multiple.

Misconduct Foul

A misconduct foul applies to any generally disruptive and disrespectful behavior, such as cursing, spitting, violence, or any unacceptable demeanor.

A misconduct foul will draw a red card, meaning that the player who committed the misconduct is disqualified for the duration of the current game, as well as the next. The penalized team can replace the player after 20 seconds of game time.

Brutality Foul

Brutality fouls are elevated misconduct fouls that involve hitting a player with intent to injure them. This action must be successful in hitting the player, with the clear and deliberate intent to hurt the player.

A brutality foul of this nature will draw a red card, which will exclude the player from the rest of the current game and the next game. In addition, their teammates will be forced to play with one less player for the ensuing four minutes. To further discourage this type of behavior, the opposing team is also awarded a penalty shot on top of the aforementioned punishments.

What Physical Contact is Allowed in Water Polo

Physical contact is fairly common in water polo. Naturally, though, the referees take great pains to discourage it.

The institution of the 30-second shot clock also helps to slow down excess physical contact. When players know that possession will come back to them shortly, they don't have to be nearly as aggressive in trying to cause turnovers through physical play. Instead, they can focus on the more technical aspects of the game.

For example, talented defensive players typically focus the majority of their effort on proper positioning to block passes and shots instead of wrestling the ball away from opponents.

Violent physical contact in water polo is therefore limited, but physical contact still occurs regularly. As athletes block each other from getting off a shot or pass, contact is bound to happen at some point.

How Water Polo Games are Formatted

Water polo games are broken down into four different periods, with each period consisting of 7(Varsity)/6(JV) minutes of actual gameplay.

In theory, a game should only last 32 minutes. The only problem is that multiple time stoppages occur throughout the game, which causes the games to run much longer

than 32 minutes in real-time. For instance, referees issue time stoppages when a foul has been committed or when the ball has been thrown out of play.

We touched on it earlier in the article, but you should expect games to last anywhere from 45 minutes to an hour because of these numerous time stoppages.

How Overtime Works in Water Polo

If the score is tied once regulation time has ended, an overtime period ensues. However, rather than continuing with normal play, a special kind of playstyle called a shootout occurs, or “sudden death”.

Shootouts - Water polo coaches select five players and a goalie from each team to participate in the shootout. Players that have received three personal fouls or a red card are not eligible to participate.

Players from each team take turns shooting against the opposing goalie from the 5-meter line. Whichever team has the most points after everyone has shot wins. If the teams are tied, they continue to rotate through the shootout until one team misses.

Sudden Death – first team to score.

Final Thoughts

Water polo may seem difficult to comprehend at first, but it’s relatively easy to get the hang of once you familiarize yourself with the fundamentals.

So don’t let yourself be intimidated by the rules of the sport!

Enjoy the sport and your time on deck!

GO RAVENS!!!