

# A QUICK GUIDE TO WATER POLO

## INTRODUCTION

Why is the whistle constantly blowing in a water polo match? What does it mean to “drive”? What are the roles of the wings and hole-set? These and other questions are at the heart of understanding water polo – a game that is similar in movement to basketball, but requires the strength of football and wrestling, and the endurance of cross-country running. (Players typically swim over a mile during a regular 28-minute match.) The purpose of this guide is to act as a primer for the rules and concepts of the game.

Water polo is a very physical sport. You will see a lot of contact among the players above water, and there’s a lot of contact below the water that you won’t see. Contact among players is the nature of the game, and actions such as pushing, pulling, grabbing, holding, and even sinking a player are likely to occur during a game, although most times it will be illegal. While this guide isn’t meant to be comprehensive, it should work well as a “cheat sheet”.

## FIELD OF PLAY

- In a 25-yard, six- (or eight-) lane pool, the entire pool constitutes the field of play. (In larger pools the field of play may be marked by colored lane lines.)
- The pool (field of play) is divided into areas by colored lane lines, tape, or cones along the side of the pool. The colored markings are as follows:
  - ⇒ Goal line to exclusion area – white
  - ⇒ 2-meter line to goal line – **RED**
  - ⇒ 6-meter line to 2-meter line – **YELLOW**
  - ⇒ 5-meter line - **RED**
- For each of the above lines (or areas of the pool), watch for the following:
  - ⇒ **Goal line:** A goal counts only when the ball goes completely across the goal line and into the goal (close does not count); the ball is out of bounds if it goes completely across the goal line and not into the goal.
  - ⇒ **2-meter line:** No offensive player is allowed to swim inside of the 2-meter line unless he/she has possession of the ball.
  - ⇒ **6-meter line:** If a defensive player commits a foul inside of the 6-meter line, which prevents a “probable goal,” the defensive player is charged with a penalty (personal) foul and the opposing team is awarded a penalty throw (a “5-meter”). If an offensive player is fouled outside of the 6-meter line, the offensive player may pick up the ball and take an immediate shot at the opponent’s goal (i.e., two players do not have to touch the ball before a goal can be scored).
  - ⇒ **Mid-pool:** After each goal is scored, play is re-started at mid-pool; the goalkeepers are not permitted to go across the mid-pool line.

## PLAYERS

- Each team must have seven players (six field players and one goalkeeper) in the water when the game starts.
- The visiting team’s field players wear white (or light colored) caps, the home team’s field players wear blue (or dark colored) caps. The goalkeepers wear red or “quartered” (red plus another color) caps.
- Either team may substitute players freely after a goal is scored, during a time-out, or between periods.
- During actual play, substitutions must occur through the team’s re-entry area (the corner of the pool in front of the team’s bench).
- If an illegal player (i.e., an 8th player or a player who has fouled-out of the game) enters the field of play, that player is excluded from the remainder of the game and the opposing team is awarded a penalty throw.
- **Positions:** There are six field player positions and a goalkeeper on each team. Unlike most common team sports, there is little or no positional play. Field players often will fill several positions throughout the game as situations demand. In high school most teams assign positions to certain players and it is less likely for the situations to switch due to the lower level of competitiveness.
  - ⇒ **Offense:** The offensive positions include: (1) center forward (a.k.a. hole-set), (2) wings/passers, (2) drivers, and (1) “point” man. The point man directs the attack, and on defense is usually known as “hole” defender, center-back, or 2-meter “D”, defending the opposing team’s center forward. The wings, drivers and point are often called the perimeter players. The most basic positional set up is known as a 3-3, due to the fact that there are two lines both containing 3 players. The center forward is the key player in many offensive schemes; he/she generally sets up in front of the opposing team’s goalie, and usually scores the most individually or contributes most often to initiating plays. This position typically takes the most physical strength and endurance, since a lot of physical play is allowed against the center forward. The five perimeter players often swim (“drive”) the most and interchange their positions several times during a single offensive play. They contribute to the actual execution of plays, and cumulatively score the most points for the team. The point player’s position provides opportunities to pass to teammates and communicate among the offense, like the point guard in basketball.
  - ⇒ **Defense:** Defensive positions are often the same, but just switched from offense to defense. Defense can be played man-to-man or zone. The opposing center forward (hole-set) is often double-teamed (front and back positions) because of his position closest to the goal. From the center forward position, a backhand shot is difficult to defend because these shots are explosive and directed into the corners of the goal. In zone defense, players defend an area of the pool. “Crash” is a term used to describe a simultaneous movement by the perimeter defenders towards the center forward. “Slough” is a term used to describe a defender leaving his man to help out with the defensive duties of another teammate.

## FOULS (This is the reason there are so many whistles during a game!)

- **Ordinary foul:** The most common type of foul called is the “ordinary foul.”
  - ⇒ For an ordinary foul, the referee blows the whistle once and points in the direction of the attack (i.e., the direction that the offensive team is moving).
  - ⇒ The player who was fouled (or a teammate) puts the ball into play by taking a free throw, or “free off”, at a point equal to or behind the place of the foul.
  - ⇒ If the ordinary foul is against a defensive player, the offensive team retains possession of the ball and takes the free throw. If the ordinary foul is against an offensive player (an “offensive foul”), the defensive team takes possession of the ball and takes the free throw.
  - ⇒ If a defender interferes with the taking of the free throw, the defender is excluded (ejected or “kicked-out,” see below).
  - ⇒ In most cases, a player taking a free throw cannot take a shot at the opponent’s goal.
    - When an ordinary foul is committed outside the 5-meter mark, the offensive player may look at the goal and shoot immediately.
  - ⇒ During the period of time between the referee’s whistle and the taking of the free throw (“dead time”), players may continue to swim and strive for position (i.e., play does not stop).

## Fouls (cont'd)

- ⇒ *Examples* of some common ordinary fouls include (but are not limited to):
- ☞ Touching the ball with two hands (does not apply to goalkeeper inside of the 5-meter line).
  - ☞ Holding the ball under water (even if the defensive player is holding the player's arm down.)
  - ☞ Walking on or pushing off the bottom of the pool (does not apply to the goalkeeper inside of the 5-meter line).
  - ☞ Impeding a player who is not holding the ball.
  - ☞ Throwing the ball out of the field of play.
  - ☞ Failing to take a shot within 35 seconds (letting the shot clock expire).
  - ☞ There is no limit to the number of ordinary fouls that a player can commit during a game.

### ■ **Exclusion foul** (Commonly called an ejection or kick-out)

- ⇒ For an exclusion foul, the referee blows the whistle several times (usually 2 quick tweets, followed by a longer blast), points in the direction of the attack with one arm, and with a sweeping motion of the other arm signals the player to the team's re-entry area (the corner of the field of play immediately in front of the team's bench).
- ⇒ The player who was fouled (or a teammate) puts the ball into play with a free throw. As above ("ordinary foul"), play does not stop during "dead time."
- ⇒ The excluded player must swim to the team's re-entry area without interfering with play.
- ☞ If an excluded player interferes with play, that player is charged with a penalty foul and the offended team is awarded a penalty throw (taken from the 5-meter line in front of the goal.)
  - ☞ An excluded player may re-enter the game when:
    - There is a change in possession.
    - A goal is scored.
    - 20-seconds of playing time elapses.
    - The referee signals a change in possession.
- ⇒ When re-entering the game from the re-entry area, a player may not push off the side or bottom of the pool.
- ⇒ An exclusion foul is a "personal foul."
- ⇒ If a player receives three personal fouls (exclusion and/or penalty fouls), he/she is excluded from the remainder of the game with substitution.
- ⇒ *Examples* of exclusion fouls include (but are not limited to):
- ☞ Holding, sinking, or pulling back a player who is not holding the ball.



- ☞ Interfering with the taking of a free throw, or splashing water in an opponent player's face.
- ☞ Raising two hands outside the 5-meter area to block (or attempt to block) a shot.
- ☞ To commit an act of misconduct (e.g., foul or abusive language) or disrespect.
- ☞ If a player exits the pool from anywhere other than the re-entry area during actual play (i.e., climbs out of the water along the edge of the pool), it is considered disrespect. The player would be excluded from the remainder of the game with substitution.

### ■ **Penalty Foul**

- ⇒ It is a penalty foul to commit any offense within the 5-meter line that prevents a team from scoring a "probable goal."
- ⇒ **Brutality** is the most serious foul committed in the game and usually involves the deliberate (or attempted) hitting, kicking, or biting of a player. A player who commits an act of brutality is charged with a penalty foul, excluded from the remainder of the game with substitution, and is suspended from the next scheduled game. Additionally, a penalty throw is awarded, and the team granted the "5-meter" is then given the ball back at mid-pool.



- ⇒ For a penalty foul, the referee blows the whistle twice (usually two long blasts) and then raises his/her hand above the head with five fingers extended. The offending player is charged with a penalty foul (a "personal foul") and the opposing team is awarded a penalty throw (a "5-meter").
- ☞ If a team is awarded a penalty throw, any player on that team, except the goalkeeper, may take the penalty throw.
  - ☞ The player taking the penalty throw must take the throw from the offensive 5-meter line.
  - ☞ With floating goals, the defending goalkeeper must be entirely inside of goal (i.e., inside of the goal and behind the goal line). With wall-mounted goals, the goalkeeper's hips must be on the goal line.

## TIME OUT

- Each team may call three time-outs during the four quarters of regular play.
- A team may call only one time-out during any overtime periods.
- All time-outs are 2-minutes long.
- When the ball is in play, only the team in possession of the ball may call a time-out.
- If the offensive team calls a time-out, the defensive team may call a time-out before the ball is put into play.
- Either team may call a time-out after a goal is scored or before the taking of a penalty shot.

## "ADVANTAGE" RULE

- The "official" rule says "Referees shall refrain from declaring a foul if, in their opinion, such declaration would be an advantage to the offending player's team . . . [if] there is still a possibility to play the ball. The referees shall apply this principle to the fullest extent." Similar to soccer, continuation of "advantage" by the attacking player should NOT be taken away by a called foul/whistle. However, any foul that endangers a player's safety, especially a foul around a player's head and neck, should be called.