

A Spectator's Guide to Water Polo "Quick Start"¹

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Field of Play

- In a 25-yard (meter), six- (or eight-) lane pool, the entire pool constitutes the field of play. In larger pools, the perimeter of the field of play may be indicated by lane lines. The maximum size of the field of play is 75 feet (25 meters) in length and 66 feet (20 meters).
- The pool (field of play) is divided into areas by colored cones (or markers) along the side of the pool. The colored cones are placed as follows:
 - Goal line – white cone
 - 2-meter line – red cone
 - 4-meter line – yellow cone
 - 7-meter line – green cone
 - mid-pool – white cone
 - 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.
 - 4-meter line: If a defensive player commits a foul inside of the 4-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 "4-meter").
 - 7-meter line: If an offensive player is fouled outside of the 7-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.

¹ Disclaimer: The information in this *Quick Start* is based on information published by the *National Federation of State High School Associations* in its *2004-2005 Swimming and Diving Water Polo Rules Book*. Rules for collegiate (NCAA, CWPA) and USWP-sanctioned events may be different. Moreover, this *Quick Start* does not cover all of the rules or circumstances that might arise in a water polo game. Readers interested in a more thorough discussion of the rules of water polo should consult the appropriate rule book or *A Spectator's Guide to Water Polo* (<http://www.biosci.ohio-state.edu/~parasite/waterpolo/guide.html>).

Fouls

- 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.
 - 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.
 - 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).
 - 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 4-meter line).
 - Walking on or pushing off the bottom of the pool (does not apply to the goalkeeper inside of the 4-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 play can commit during a game.
- Exclusion foul (a.k.a. ejection or kick-out)
 - For an exclusion foul, the referee blows the whistle several times, 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.
 - 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 play 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 + 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.
 - Splashing water in an opponent player’s face.
 - To commit an act of misconduct (e.g., obscene 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.
 - Brutality (a player who commits an act of brutality is excluded from the remainder of the game without substitution).
- Penalty Foul
 - For a penalty foul, the referee blows the whistle twice and then raises his/her hand above the head with four fingers extended.
 - It is a penalty foul to commit any offense within the 4-meter line that prevents a team from scoring a “probable goal.”
 - When a penalty foul is called, the offending player is charged with a penalty foul (a “personal foul”) and the opposing team is awarded a penalty throw (a “4-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 4-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-outs

- 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.

The “Advantage Rule”

The referees shall refrain from declaring a foul if, in their opinion, such declaration would be an advantage to the offending player’s team. The referees shall not declare an ordinary foul when there is still a possibility to play the ball. The referees shall apply this principle to the fullest extent. They should not, for example, declare an ordinary foul in favor of a player who is in possession of the ball and making progress towards the opponent’s goal, because this is considered to given an advantage to the offender’s team (NISCA Rule 7.3).

If a referee believes that a foul is an advantage to the player committing the foul, then the referee should not call that foul. There is an important caveat to this rule --- player safety. Any foul that endangers a player’s safety, especially fouls around a player’s head and neck, must be called.