

# A Spectator's Guide to Water Polo

by: Peter W. Pappas, Ph.D.



**This document may be copied and distributed freely, without limitation, in either printed or electronic form, for “personal use.” This document may not be reproduced in any form and sold for profit without the prior, written consent of the author.**

Version: 5.0  
Released: August 1, 2006  
Copyright 2006 by Peter W. Pappas

**Preface**  
(Version 5.0)

In 2005, FINA (Federation Internationale de Natation) adopted a number of new water polo rules. These new rules have been adopted in their entirety by USA Water Polo (USAWP), and many of the rules have also been adopted by the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) and the National Federation of State High School Associations (NFHS). Thus, these new rules are now used in virtually all water polo competitions, and *A Spectator's Guide to Water Polo* has been re-written to conform with and include appropriate references to these new rules.

All rule numbers and figures in this version of the *Guide* have been updated to conform to the most current versions of the rules. These include the 2005-2009 USAWP rules, the 2006-2007 NCAA rules, and the 2006-2007 NISCA rules.

Finally, I have moved all files to a new server. An electronic file (.pdf) of Version 5.0 of the *Guide* can be found at:

**[oaa.osu.edu/coam/guide/home.html](http://oaa.osu.edu/coam/guide/home.html)**

This *Guide* may be copied and distributed freely, without limitation, in either printed or electronic form, for "personal use." This document may **not** be reproduced in any form and sold for profit without the prior, written consent of the author.

If you have comments or suggestions on how this *Guide* might be improved, please send them to me ([ppappas1@columbus.rr.com](mailto:ppappas1@columbus.rr.com)).

Pete Pappas  
Columbus, OH

August 1, 2006

**Preface**  
(Version 4.1)

Beginning in 2005, the rules regarding putting the ball into play after a “double-exclusion foul” were changed. Version 4.1 of this *Guide* includes these new rules (see Section 14).

Readers should note that citations to rules in this *Guide* have not been updated to confer to the most current edition (2005-2006) of the NISCA (“high school”) rules. Rather, these citations continue to refer to the 2003-2004 edition of the NISCA rules.

An electronic file (.pdf format) of Version 4.1 of the *Guide* can be found at:

[www.biosci.ohio-state.edu/~parasite/waterpolo/guide.html](http://www.biosci.ohio-state.edu/~parasite/waterpolo/guide.html)

This *Guide* may be copied and distributed freely, without limitation, in either printed or electronic form, for “personal use.” This document may **not** be reproduced in any form and sold for profit without the prior, written consent of the author.

If you have comments or suggestions on how this *Guide* might be improved, please send them to me ([ppappas1@columbus.rr.com](mailto:ppappas1@columbus.rr.com)).

Thank you.

Pete Pappas  
Columbus, OH

October 14, 2005

**Preface**  
(Version 4.0)

The only difference between versions 3.1 and 4.0 of the *Guide* is the addition of a new section, "The Referees' Perspective" (Section 19). I hope spectators will find this section helpful in understanding what the referees look for (or at) during a game and why certain fouls are (or are not) called.

Mr. Jim Silverman of Ann Arbor, Michigan, was kind enough to read and comment on "The Referees' Perspective."

An electronic file (.pdf format) of Version 4.0 of the *Guide* can be found at:

[www.biosci.ohio-state.edu/~parasite/waterpolo/guide.html](http://www.biosci.ohio-state.edu/~parasite/waterpolo/guide.html)

This *Guide* may be copied and distributed freely, without limitation, in either printed or electronic form, for "personal use." This document may **not** be reproduced in any form and sold for profit without the prior, written consent of the author.

If you have comments or suggestions on how this *Guide* might be improved, please send them to me ([ppappas1@columbus.rr.com](mailto:ppappas1@columbus.rr.com)).

Thank you.

Pete Pappas  
Columbus, OH

October 6, 2004

**Preface**  
(Version 3.0)

Since the release of version 2.0 of this *Guide* in December, 2002, new versions of the NISCA, NCAA, and USWP rules have been released. This new version of the *Guide* is based upon these most recent editions of the rules. For the most part, the differences between Versions 2.0 and 3.0 of the *Guide* are minor; a rule number changed or a few words added or deleted here and there!

However, in response to suggestions by several readers and as a reaction to some situations that occurred during last year's water polo season, I have added a new section to the *Guide* (Section 9), "Legal and Illegal Entries and Exits, and Illegal Players."

An electronic file (.pdf format) of Version 3.0 can be found at:

[www.biosci.ohio-state.edu/~parasite/waterpolo/guide.html](http://www.biosci.ohio-state.edu/~parasite/waterpolo/guide.html)

This *Guide* may be copied and distributed freely, without limitation, in either printed or electronic form, for "personal use." This document may **not** be reproduced in any form and sold for profit without the prior, written consent of the author.

If you have comments or suggestions on how this *Guide* might be improved, please send them to me (ppappas1@columbus.rr.com).

Thank you.

Pete Pappas  
Columbus, OH

January 10, 2004

**Preface**  
(Version 2.0)

Since becoming available, Version 1.0 of *A Spectator's Guide to Water Polo* seems to have become very popular among water polo enthusiasts. The electronic file for Version 1.0 has been downloaded over 1,300 times!

Other than a few minor changes in grammar and syntax and the correction of a few typographical errors, all of the information included in Version 1.0 of this *Guide* remains in Version 2.0. Version 2.0 also contains additional information and/or changes as follows:

- Changes made in the 2002-2003 NCAA Water Polo Rules are included in this version.
- Version 3.0 of the *Water Polo Officiating Manual* was released August 1, 2002. References to the *Manual* have been changed accordingly to correspond to Version 3.0
- Based on the suggestions of several readers of Version 1.0, this version includes more information about the types of fouls that might be called during a water polo game and the referees' signals for these fouls. This information is contained in Appendix 1.

An electronic file (.pdf format) of Version 2.0 can be found at:

[www.biosci.ohio-state.edu/~parasite/waterpolo/guide.html](http://www.biosci.ohio-state.edu/~parasite/waterpolo/guide.html)

This *Guide* may be copied and distributed freely, without limitation, in either printed or electronic form, for "personal use." This document may **not** be reproduced in any form and sold for profit without the prior, written consent of the author.

If you have comments or suggestions on how this *Guide* might be improved, please send them to me (ppappas1@columbus.rr.com).

Thank you.

Pete Pappas  
Columbus, OH

December 1, 2002

## **Preface**

(Version 1.0)

My son played water polo in high school, and even though I had little idea of what was going on, I loved watching the games. During my son's four years in high school, I saw at least 100 water polo games, but when he played his last high school game in his second State Championship ('93), I didn't know a whole lot more about the rules than when he played his first game. I think this was typical of a majority of the spectators at these games, almost all of whom were players' parents. The game was new to us. We all enjoyed the action, especially when our kids were playing, but most of us knew only a few of the basic rules (and some of us knew none).

A few years after my son graduated, I had an opportunity to start refereeing water polo games, but this meant that I needed to read (finally!) and understand the rules of the game. Now that I have refereed for a few years at the high school and collegiate levels, I see that many of the spectators at these games are no different than when I was a player's parent. They are typically parents who love watching their kids and the games, but many of them don't know the rules of the game. There is a National Hockey League franchise in my city that has a TV ad campaign that teaches some of the basic rules of ice hockey. At the end of each ad one of the team's star players comes on camera and says, "The game is a lot more fun when you understand hockey rules." Based on my experiences as a player's parent and referee, the same goes for water polo; it's more fun to watch water polo when you know the rules.

But, how do spectators learn the rules? The answer to this question seems obvious: read the rules. But spectators (players' parents) may not have access to the rules (after all, many players don't even have a current set of rules) and, even if they do, the rules are neither light nor exciting reading. Furthermore, it's often difficult to relate various game situations to specific rules and their applications. Isn't there something other than a rule book that spectators can read and that will give them the basics of the rules? Not that I know of, and this is why I wrote this guide. It's designed to give spectators, or anyone else, an introduction to some of the fundamental rules and concepts of water polo and how they are applied. I have tried to make this guide more user-friendly than a rule book by dividing it into topics that might be of interest to spectators, at least based on my experiences as a spectator and referee. The first few sections of the guide cover some of the basic rules of the game, the middle sections cover some of the common fouls that occur during games, and the last three sections cover some of the important principles that guide referees in calling fouls.

It doesn't matter if you are watching your first or your one hundred and first water polo game, you are going to have questions about the rules or the calls that were made during the game. Many times after refereeing a game, I've walked out of the pool and the spectators are asking among themselves, "What was that call?", "Why was that a foul?", "How could the referee miss that foul?", or similar questions. However, I have never seen a spectator with a rule book (I am not suggesting that they bring one to a game), and they rarely ask questions of the one person who should know the rules and

A Spectator's Guide to Water Polo  
Page 8

who made the calls they might be questioning, the referee. Thus, their questions go unanswered. This is really unfortunate, because every referee that I know is more than willing to discuss water polo with spectators, players, and coaches. After all, referees are referees because they love the sport, and they love to talk about the sport. So, if you have a question about the rules of the game or a call that was made during the game, ask the referee after the game is over. However, remember that a referee may call dozens of fouls during a game, so please don't expect him/her to remember every call.

A final source of information about water polo is United States Water Polo's (USWP) Message Board; it can be reached via a link from USWP's home page ([www.usawaterpolo.com](http://www.usawaterpolo.com)). The Message Board is divided into a number of sections, including separate sections for referees, coaches, parents, different levels of play, etc. The Message Board is a great source of information about all aspects of water polo.

I want to thank the following individuals who were kind enough to read and comment on a preliminary draft of this guide: Kevin Cahill; Genie Diserio; Craig Laidig; Leigh McGuire (Head Women's Water Polo Coach, St. Mary's College), Dennis McKenna; Jim Silverman; Bruce Wigo (Executive Director, USA Water Polo); Tim Whitwham; Lisa Wolff; Jamie Wolff; and Larry Zubin (Head Coach, Laguna Beach High School Girls Water Polo).

Finally, I hope that this guide helps you understand and enjoy the sport of water polo. If you have any comments about this guide, particularly suggestions on how it might be improved, please send them to me ([ppappas1@columbus.rr.com](mailto:ppappas1@columbus.rr.com)).

Thank you.

Pete Pappas  
Columbus, OH

August 26, 2002

**The file for this guide can be found at:**

**<http://www.biosci.ohio-state.edu/~parasite/waterpolo/guide.html>**



## Table of Contents

Preface.....	2
Table of Contents.....	9
(1) Who Determines the Rules of the Game? .....	11
(2) The Basics.....	12
(3) The Field of Play and Its Markings.....	13
(3.a) Goal line.....	13
(3.b) 2-meter line.....	13
(3.c) 5-meter line.....	14
(3.d) Mid-pool.....	15
(4) Fouls.....	15
(4.a) Ordinary fouls.....	16
(4.b) Exclusion fouls.....	16
(4.c) Penalty fouls.....	17
(5) Player Safety.....	18
(6) What's a Goal?.....	18
(7) Who's Holding the Ball?.....	20
(8) Putting the Ball into Play.....	21
(8.a) Free Throws, Goal Throws, and Corner Throws.....	21
(8.b) Who May Take the Throw?.....	22
(8.c) Undue Delay.....	22
(8.d) Putting the Ball into Play - Correctly.....	23
(8.e) Interfering with a Free Throw, Goal Throw, or Corner Throw.....	24
(9) Legal and Illegal Entries and Exits, and Illegal Players.....	25
(9.a) Legal and Illegal Entries and Exits.....	25
(9.b) Illegal Players.....	27
(10) The Ball Under Rule.....	28
(11) The Goalkeeper's Privileges and Limitations.....	30
(12) Dead time.....	30
(13) Stalling or Wasting Time.....	31
(14) Double-Exclusion Fouls.....	32
(15) Sportsmanship.....	32
(16) Advantage.....	33
(16.a) Possessional advantage.....	35
(16.b) Positional Advantage.....	36
(16.c) Probable goal advantage.....	37
(17) Reward Good Play, Punish Bad Play.....	40
(18) Play the Ball and Not the Player.....	41
(19) The Referees' Perspective.....	42
(19.a) What Does Each Referee Watch at the Offensive End of the Pool?.....	43
(19.b) Calling the Offensive/Defensive Set Position.....	44
(19.c) The Transition.....	47
Appendix 1. Fouls and Referees' Signals.....	51

A Spectator's Guide to Water Polo

(A) Ordinary Fouls .....	51
(B) Exclusion Fouls.....	52
(C) Penalty Fouls.....	53
(D) Game Exclusion Foul with Delayed Substitution .....	54
(E) Game Exclusion Foul with Delayed Substitution and a Penalty Foul.....	54

## (1) Who Determines the Rules of the Game?

For many sports, different sets of rules are used in different geographic areas and for different levels of play, and water polo is no exception. Thus, to understand the rules, you need to know which set of rules is being used during a particular game. The international governing body for water polo is La Federation International de Natation (FINA, [www.fina.org](http://www.fina.org)), located in Lausanne, Switzerland. FINA water polo rules are used in many international competitions (e.g., the World Championships and the Olympics), and all other sets of rules are based on (but not necessarily identical to) FINA rules.

The governing body for water polo in the United States is USA Water Polo (USAWP, [www.usawaterpolo.com](http://www.usawaterpolo.com)). USAWP rules are used in all USAWP-sanctioned events in the United States (e.g., Men's and Women's National Championships), and they are also used in some states for high school competitions. The current USAWP rules (2005-2009) are identical to FINA rules. National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA, [www.ncaa.org](http://www.ncaa.org)) rules are used for most collegiate competitions, including games sanctioned by the NCAA and the Collegiate Water Polo Association (CWPA, [www.collegiatewaterpolo.org](http://www.collegiatewaterpolo.org)).

National Interscholastic Swimming Coaches Association (NISCA) rules are used in many states for high school competitions; the NISCA rules are often referred to as "high school rules" or "Federation rules." NCAA and NISCA rules are based on USAWP rules (and, hence, FINA rules), but NCAA, NISCA, and USAWP rules are not identical.<sup>1</sup> FINA, USAWP, and NCAA rules are available in the form of electronic files from each organization's web site. NISCA water polo rules are published as part of the *National Federation of State High School Associations (NFHS) Swimming and Diving and Water Polo Rules Book*, which can be purchased from NFHS ([www.nfhs.org](http://www.nfhs.org)). If NISCA rules are used for your high school water polo games, they might also be available from your state's high school athletic association.

As a water polo spectator, you'll notice sooner or later that the written rules seem to be applied or "interpreted" differently under different game situations, and in some situations fouls might not even be called. Why aren't the rules applied the same way all the time, and what determines when fouls are or are not called? Partial answers to these questions can be found in the rule book, but they are neither easy to find nor to understand. Complete answers to many of these questions can be found in *The Water Polo Officiating Manual*<sup>2</sup> (hereafter referred to as the *Manual*). The *Manual*, produced by USAWP and available through the USAWP web site, contains detailed discussions of many of the rules of water polo and how these rules should be applied and interpreted under different game situations. If you hear a coach or referee refer to "the

---

<sup>1</sup>In most cases, the differences among USAWP, NCAA, and NISCA rules are minor. A few of the differences among the NISCA (2006-2007), NCAA (2006-2007), and USAWP (2005-2009) rules are summarized in subsequent footnotes.

<sup>2</sup>The current version (3.0) was released on August 1, 2002.

interpretations," he/she is referring to information contained in the *Manual*. A discussion of all of the interpretations in the *Manual* is beyond the scope of this document, but a few of the more important interpretations are mentioned. For those of you who are interested, you can download a copy of the *Manual* from USAWP ([www.usawaterpolo.org/media/nrcofficiatingmanual.pdf](http://www.usawaterpolo.org/media/nrcofficiatingmanual.pdf)).

## (2) The Basics

In the NISCA ("high school") rules, there is no limit to the number of players on a water polo team<sup>3</sup>, but only seven players from each team, six field players and a goalkeeper, are permitted in the water at any time (5.1).<sup>4</sup> The visiting team's field players wear white caps, and the home team's field players wear dark (often blue) caps (4.1). The goalkeepers for both teams wear solid or "quartered" red caps. As of July 1, 2004, goalkeepers are required to wear "quartered caps" (4.3).

A water polo game consists of 4 periods of play, and each period is 5, 6, or 7 minutes long depending on the level of play (11.1). There are 2 minute breaks between the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> and the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> periods of play and a 5 minute break at halftime (11.2).<sup>5</sup> Each team is permitted to call three timeouts during the four periods of regulation play (and one timeout if the game goes into overtime); each timeout is 2 minutes long. When the ball is in play, only the team in possession of the ball may call a timeout. After a goal has been scored or before a penalty throw, either team may call a timeout (12.1, and 12.3).<sup>6</sup>

Both teams may substitute players. When the game is in progress, players must exit and substitutes must enter the field of play (or pool) through their team's re-entry area (5.6). A team's re-entry area is normally the corner of the pool directly in front of the team's bench. Between periods, during a timeout, or after a goal is scored, players may leave and substitutes may enter the pool from anywhere (5.7). The circumstances of players entering and leaving the pool legally (and illegally) are covered in more detail in Section 9 of this *Guide*.

Even though a game is only 28 minutes of actual playing time (assuming 7 minute periods), the players are in the pool much longer than 28 minutes, and, other than the breaks between periods and the timeouts, the action is almost continuous. You need to watch the game closely to fully appreciate what's going on.

---

<sup>3</sup>The NCAA rules also impose no limit on the number of players. In USAWP rules, the number of players on a team is limited to 13 (7 starters and 6 reserves).

<sup>4</sup>The numbers in parentheses refer to the 2006-2007 NISCA rules. Just look up the rule if you want more information.

<sup>5</sup>The breaks between periods are the same in the NCAA and USAWP rules.

<sup>6</sup>The NCAA rules are similar, but the NCAA rules also permit each team to call one additional 20 second timeout anytime during a game. The NCAA rules also contain a provision for "television timeouts." In the USAWP rules, the number and duration of timeouts are different and only the team in possession of the ball may call a timeout.

### **(3) The Field of Play and Its Markings**

For high school water polo, the pool should be 75 feet (or 25 meters) in length, at least 45 feet (13 meters) in width (20 meters maximum), and 6.6 feet (2 meters) in depth (1.4).<sup>7</sup> If a game is played in a pool that is larger than specified in the rules, the edges of the field of play may be marked off by lane lines. Field players are not permitted to stand, walk on, or jump off the bottom of the pool (20.5), so pools with a shallow end are not well-suited for the sport of water polo.

Colored markers should be placed along each side of the pool (1.6). The colors and locations of these markers are specified as follows:

- White marker at the goal line (face of the goal)
- Red marker at the 2-meter line
- Yellow marker at the 5-meter line
- White marker at mid-pool

More often than not, all of the markers are simply orange “construction cones.” They’re not the correct colors, but they serve their intended purpose. In pools in which lane lines mark the edges of the field of play, the lane lines may have white, red and yellow sections, which mark off the appropriate areas of the field of play. Knowing the significance of each of the above lines (or the section of the field of play denoted by each of the lines) is important in understanding how the game is played and the fouls that are called.

#### **(3.a) Goal line**

The front edge of the goal marks the goal line. To score a goal, the ball must go completely across the goal line and into the goal (14.1). The goal line also marks the end of the field of play. “Whenever the ball passes completely behind the goal line (the face of the goal)...the ball is out of bounds” (1.4). Thus, it is very important to know exactly where the ball is relative to the goal line, and this is why one of the referees usually stands along the side of the pool close to the goal line; the referee must be able to see if the ball goes completely into the goal or out of the field of play.

#### **(3.b) 2-meter line**

No offensive player is allowed inside of the opponent’s 2-meter line unless the player has the ball or is behind the ball (20.12).<sup>8</sup> If an offensive player has the ball and swims inside of the 2-meter line, it’s not a foul. If the ball is inside of the 2-meter line and an offensive player swims in to get the ball, it’s not a foul. However, it is a foul (a 2-meter violation) if an offensive player swims inside of the 2-meter line and then receives the

---

<sup>7</sup>The recommended pool dimensions are different in USAWP and NCAA rules.

<sup>8</sup>This rule does not apply to members of the defensive team.

ball. If an offensive player is inside of the 2-meter line and a player outside of the 2-meter line shoots and scores a goal, the goal does not count.

The 2-meter line also limits the area from which a goal throw<sup>9</sup> may be taken. A goal throw may be taken by any member of the team awarded the throw, but it must be taken behind the 2-meter line (16.2).

### **(3.c) 5-meter line**

If a defensive player commits a foul inside of the 5-meter line “but for which a goal would probably have resulted,” that player is charged with a penalty foul (a personal foul), and the offended team is awarded a penalty throw (22.1 and 22.2). This includes a field player attempting to block (or blocking) a pass or shot with both arms raised out of the water. When a penalty throw (a “5-meter”) is awarded, the penalty throw may be taken by any member of the team awarded the throw (except the goalkeeper) and from anywhere on the 5-meter line (23.1). Penalty fouls are discussed in more detail in Section 4.c of this *Guide*.

A goalkeeper loses his/her “privileges” outside of the 5-meter line. The goalkeeper’s privileges and limitations are described in more detail in Section 11 of this *Guide*.

If a foul is committed outside of the 5-meter line and a free throw<sup>10</sup> is awarded, the player taking the free throw may take an immediate shot at the opponent’s goal as long as he/she is also outside of the 5-meter line (14.3). This is one of the few instances in water polo where a player may take an immediate shot at the goal from a free throw (i.e., the ball does not have to be touched by two players before a goal can be scored). Note that for this rule to be in effect, the foul for which the free throw is awarded must occur outside of the 5-meter line. “If at the award of a foul outside of 5 meters, the ball is inside 5 meters or closer to the defending team’s goal, a goal may be scored under this rule if the ball is returned without delay to either the place where the foul was committed, to any place on the same line as the foul or to any place behind the line of the foul provided the shot is then immediately made from that position” (14.3).

Under the circumstances of this rule, the shot from the free throw must be immediate. The player must pick the ball off the surface of the water without delay and shoot at the goal immediately, and this must be done in one continuous motion (i.e., the same motion as used in taking a penalty throw). If the player delays in picking the ball up (e.g., while looking to see if any defenders are nearby or if he/she has a clear shot) or delays while shooting (e.g., “pumps” the ball), this is a foul, and the ball is turned over to the other team (14.3 and 23.4, and Section 3.3.3 of the *Manual*).

---

<sup>9</sup>See Section 8.a of this *Guide* for a more detailed description of a goal throw.

<sup>10</sup>See Section 8.a of this *Guide* for a more detailed description of a free throw.

### **(3.d) Mid-pool**

Each period is started with a sprint for the ball. The players on both teams line up at their respective ends of the pool, the referee blows the whistle, the ball is dropped in the water at mid-pool, and the players sprint for the ball (13.2 and 13.3). As you might expect, the team with the fastest swimmer generally gets possession of the ball.

After a goal is scored, the game is restarted at mid-pool. The players of each team are required to be in their respective halves of the pool, and play is restarted with a player from the team that did not score the goal putting the ball into play (15.1). Despite the fact that the rules state explicitly that the players must be in their respective halves of the pool before a restart, the referees will often start play even if the players are not lined up exactly at mid-pool, as long as it's clear that both teams are ready and neither team has an advantage.

After a timeout is called, play is restarted at mid-pool in most instances.<sup>11</sup> When play restarts after a timeout, the players of both teams may take any position in the field of play (i.e., they do not have to "line up"), and the ball is put into play at mid-pool by the appropriate player (12.3 and 12.6).

The mid-pool (half-distance) line is also important because a goalkeeper may not go beyond this line (20.15), and it also comes into play when considering stalling or wasting time. Stalling and wasting time are discussed in more detail in Section 13 of this *Guide*.

## **(4) Fouls**

One of the first things that a spectator notices is that the referees are always blowing their whistles, yet play almost never stops. (Contrary to popular belief, water polo referees do not get paid according to how many times they blow their whistles.) Water polo is not like other sports to which you might be accustomed where the action stops every time a whistle blows, and the referees huddle up to discuss what has happened. In water polo, when the referee blows his/her whistle signaling that a foul has occurred, the action might continue uninterrupted, and in many circumstances the action actually speeds up.

Compared to many other sports, water polo is also unusual in that committing fouls can be an important part of a team's strategy, and it's not unusual to hear members of one team yelling "foul em, foul em!" at their teammates. In most sports, fouling an opponent and being penalized for the foul are not good game strategies. But, in water polo, a player will often intentionally foul another player as a way of disrupting the opposing team's strategy. If you want to understand, enjoy, and get the most out of water polo,

---

<sup>11</sup>After a timeout, it is also permissible for a player behind the mid-pool line to put the ball into play. However, if a timeout is called before a corner throw or penalty throw, play is restarted with the taking of the corner throw or penalty throw (12.3).

you should understand each type of foul and its consequences as it is called during the game.

There are three basic types of fouls called during a water polo game:

- Ordinary fouls
- Exclusion fouls
- Penalty fouls

#### **(4.a) Ordinary fouls**

A player is charged with an ordinary foul when he/she violates a “minor” rule.<sup>12</sup> For example, if a field player (i.e., any player except one of the goalkeepers) touches the ball with both hands at the same time (20.8) or any player impedes the movement of an opposing player who is not holding the ball (20.9), that player is charged with an ordinary foul. When the referee calls an ordinary foul, the offended team is awarded a free throw (20.1). If an ordinary foul is called against a defensive player, the free throw is awarded to the offensive team. If the foul is called against an offensive player, the ball is turned over to and the defensive (now offensive) team is awarded a free throw.

The time between calling the foul and the taking of the free throw is usually just a few seconds, and during this time play continues (i.e., the players of both teams may continue to swim and strive for position in the field of play). In fact, if you didn't hear the referee's whistle, in many cases you wouldn't even know an ordinary foul was called. Play just goes on, almost as if nothing has happened.

#### **(4.b) Exclusion fouls**

An exclusion foul (a kick-out or an ejection) is called for more serious violations of the rules. For example, holding, sinking, or pulling back a player who is not holding the ball (21.8) or interfering with the taking of a free throw (21.5) is an exclusion foul. When a player commits an exclusion foul, he/she must swim immediately to and enter his/her team's re-entry area (the corner of the pool in front of his/her team's bench) without interfering with play (20.20) and without affecting the alignment of the goal (22.4), and the offended team is awarded a free throw (21.1). Just as for ordinary fouls described above, play doesn't stop during this whole process, and the players of both teams (except for the excluded player) may continue to swim and strive for position.

Once the excluded player enters the re-entry area, he/she must remain there until (1) a goal is scored, (2) 20 seconds of playing time has elapsed<sup>13</sup>, or (3) his/her team regains possession of the ball (21.3). While the player is in the re-entry area, his/her team plays

---

<sup>12</sup>When applied to fouls, the term “minor” is not an official term --- it's mine. I use this term because the penalty for violating one of these rules is “minor” compared to the penalties for violating other rules.

<sup>13</sup>The 20 second exclusion period begins when the foul is called, not when the player actually enters the re-entry area.



“a man down,” and the offensive team has a “6-on-5.” When one of the above three conditions has been met (e.g., 20 seconds elapses), the player may re-enter the game.

Most often, defensive players are charged with exclusion fouls, but offensive players can also be excluded. When an offensive player is excluded, the excluded player must swim to his/her team's re-entry area, and the ball is turned over to and a free-throw awarded to the offended team.

In some instances, a defensive or an offensive player can be “excluded from the remainder of the game with delayed substitution.” (Such fouls are often referred to as “gamers,” and the player is said to have been “gamed” or “rolled.” The latter term comes from the “rolling” motion the referee makes with his/her arms when gaming the player.) Most of the fouls associated with unsportsmanlike conduct (see Section 15 of this *Guide*) are game exclusion fouls. When this happens, the excluded player must swim to his/her team's re-entry area and leave the field of play, and the player is not permitted to play for the remainder of the game. A substitute for the excluded player may enter the game from the team's re-entry area when the exclusion period is over (i.e., when one of the three conditions in the above paragraph has been met).

#### **(4.c) Penalty fouls**

If a defensive player commits a foul inside of the opponent's 5-meter line that prevents a probable goal, a penalty foul is called, and the offended team is awarded a penalty throw (a “5-meter”) (22.1 and 22.2). There are other violations for which a team can be awarded a penalty throw, even though a player's actions did not prevent a probable goal. For example, if a substitute player enters the field of play before another player leaves, the substitute player is an illegal (8<sup>th</sup>) player. When this occurs, the offended team is awarded a penalty throw. The illegal player is also excluded from the remainder of the game (see Section 9 of this *Guide*).

Exclusion and penalty fouls are “personal fouls” (24.1). If a player receives three personal fouls in a game, the player is excluded from the remainder of the game with delayed substitution (24.2). If that player enters the game later while the ball is in play, he/she is an illegal player, and the offended team is awarded a penalty throw (22.6) (also see Section 9 of this *Guide*).

Depending on the circumstances of the game, the penalties for some fouls change or a combination of penalties might be assessed against an offending player. Moreover, the referees will use a combination of whistle and hand signals to inform the spectators and officials table of “who did what.” You'll find a summary of much of this information in Appendix 1.

## (5) Player Safety

**“The safety of the players must be the primary concern of each and every water polo referee and participant.”**

(“United States Water Polo Statement on Violence,” as published in the *Manual*.)

Water polo is a very physical sport. Depending on who is playing and the level of play, it can be a combination of swimming, lacrosse, soccer, ice hockey, rugby, Australian rules football, and “professional wrestling” (just like “professional wrestlers,” some water polo players are great actors when it comes to fouls). You will see a lot of contact among the players above water, and there’s also a lot of contact below the water that you won’t see. Contact among players is the nature of the game. Actions such as pushing, pulling, grabbing, holding, and even sinking a player are not only likely to occur during a game, they are actually legal and encouraged under some circumstances.

**Water polo is a contact sport!**

Depending on what’s happening in the water, such as who has the ball and the players’ positions in the field of play, referees have some discretion about which fouls are or are not called, and under some circumstances referees might not call an obvious foul (e.g., see Section 16 [“Advantage”] in this *Guide*). However, there is a caveat. Referees have no discretion about calling fouls when player safety is involved; fouls that endanger a player’s safety can not be tolerated under any circumstances and should always be called.<sup>14</sup> These fouls include the obvious, such as hitting or kicking or attempting to hit or kick an opponent or overly aggressive fouling, and the less obvious such as one player fouling another player around the “head and neck” (even if the contact is clearly accidental and the player is not hurt) or “coming over the top” of another player. So, as you read on and come across examples of rules that might be interpreted differently under different game situations or fouls that might not be called, remember this caveat; fouls that endanger a player’s safety should always be called.

## (6) What’s a Goal?

The object of water polo is simple enough --- score goals (and, hopefully, more than your opponent). To score a goal in water polo, the entire ball must go into the goal (net). This means that the entire ball must pass over (go completely across) the goal

---

<sup>14</sup>Player safety is emphasized in Section 2.3.2.1 of the *Manual*. The first paragraph of this Section states, “Referees are charged with ensuring the safety of the players during the conduct of the game. Referees, therefore, sometimes must call fouls that are outside the ‘flow’ and violate advantage. The objective of these calls should be to stop the inappropriate activities of players who are violating the spirit of the rules and the game, especially when these activities can escalate into violent or even brutal fouls.”

line (the front of the goal) and between the goal posts (14.1). "Close" does not count! Watch the referees during a game, and you'll see that the front court (attack) referee stands at or near the 2-meter line. The referee does this so he/she can look down the goal line and across the front of the goal and make sure that the ball goes completely across the goal line.

A player may score a goal by putting the ball into the goal with any part of his/her body except a clenched fist (14.3). If a field player hits the ball with a clenched fist, it is an ordinary foul (20.7), in which case the ball is turned over to the other team, or a penalty foul (22.2), in which case the opposing team is awarded a penalty throw. Most often a player will simply throw the ball into the goal, but a player may swim with the ball into the goal, and it's perfectly legal to kick the ball into the goal.

In most circumstances of the game, at least two players, excluding the defending goalkeeper, must intentionally touch the ball before a goal can be scored. That is, after any stoppage of play (e.g., an ordinary or exclusion foul, a goal, a double-exclusion foul, or a timeout), the player putting the ball into play may not shoot at the opponent's goal. If he/she shoots at the opponent's goal, it is an illegal shot. If an illegal shot goes into the goal, even if touched by the defending goalkeeper, the goal does not count (14.3). The player putting the ball into play must pass the ball to a teammate who may then shoot at the opponent's goal.

There are, however, a few circumstances in a game in which the player putting the ball into play may take a legal shot at the opponent's goal (i.e., two players do not have to intentionally play the ball). Some of these are explained below.

The defensive team is awarded a goal throw when the ball (a shot) goes over the end line last touched by an offensive or defensive field player (i.e., any player other than the defensive goalkeeper). Once the goalkeeper or a field player gets possession of the ball, he/she may take an immediate shot at the opponent's goal (14.3).<sup>15</sup> If the player gets possession of the ball and there is any delay before he/she takes the shot (e.g., the player looks for an open teammate or swims with the ball), it is an illegal shot (an ordinary foul).

If a foul is committed outside of the 5-meter line and a free throw is awarded, the free throw, if also taken from outside of the 5-meter line, may be an immediate shot on goal.

Only one player needs to play or touch the ball when a penalty throw is taken (14.3); obviously, this is the player taking the penalty throw. If the ball rebounds off the goal or is deflected by the goalkeeper back into the field of play and any player puts the ball into the goal (either the attacking team on purpose or the defensive team by mistake), the goal counts.

---

<sup>15</sup>If the ball exits the pool or field of play over the side line and it is returned to the goalkeeper or field player, the resulting throw is not a goal throw. Under these circumstances, the goalkeeper or field player may not take an immediate shot at the opponent's goal.

The last circumstance in which only one player needs to touch or play to ball for a goal to count is when the defensive team puts the ball into its own goal (14.5). If the ball is in play and any member of a team, including the goalkeeper, puts the ball into his/her own goal, the goal counts for the opposing team. If a field player puts the ball into his/her own goal when taking a free throw or a corner throw<sup>16</sup>, the goal counts for the opposing team. On the other hand, if the goalkeeper, when taking a free throw or a goal throw, somehow drops or throws the ball into his/her own goal, the goal does not count, and the free throw or goal throw is retaken (14.6).

## (7) Who's Holding the Ball?

I was refereeing a high school game and a defensive player held an offensive player who was not holding the ball. I excluded the defensive player, and someone in the stands (perhaps one of the defensive player's parents) yelled, "That's not a foul, he wasn't even holding the ball." This experience emphasizes an important principle of water polo fouls, one that some spectators do not understand; a player who is "holding" the ball can not be fouled. (This is true most of the time, and don't forget the caveat about player safety [Section 5].) The rules state that it is an ordinary foul "to impede or otherwise prevent the free movement of an opponent who is not holding the ball..." (20.9) and an exclusion foul to "to hold, sink, or pull back an opponent who is not holding the ball" (21.8). Note that in both rules (and other rules as well), it is a foul only if the player is not holding the ball. If one player sinks another player who is holding the ball, it is not a foul<sup>17</sup>; if one player sinks another player who is not holding the ball, it is a foul. As you can imagine, spectators often find this hard to understand, especially if it's their son or daughter who is holding the ball and gets sunk and no foul is called. (Also, see Section 18, "Play the Ball and Not the Player.")

What constitutes "holding the ball?" Obviously, if the ball is in a player's hand, the player is holding the ball. However, a player is also considered to be holding the ball if he/she is simply touching it (20.8). Granted, the player is not holding the ball in the normal sense, but this shows the importance of knowing the rules. On the other hand, if a player is dribbling the ball (i.e., swimming with the ball between his/her arms but not actually holding the ball in a hand), the player is not holding the ball (20.8). Thus, under the circumstances of these rules, it is a foul to impede, hold, sink, or pull back a player who is dribbling (swimming with) the ball.

Here are three examples of how the rules regarding "holding the ball" and fouls might be applied during a game.

- 1) A player who is holding the ball is tackled<sup>18</sup> and loses possession of the ball. This is not a foul since the player was holding the ball when tackled. The

---

<sup>16</sup>See Section 8.a of this *Guide* for a more detailed description of a corner throw.

<sup>17</sup>If the referee considers the fouling to be too rough, the referee can call a foul for overly aggressive or violent play.

<sup>18</sup>Any contact between players is considered tackling.

defensive player now impedes the offensive player so he/she is unable to regain possession of the ball. This is a foul since the offensive player was not holding the ball when impeded.

- 2) The ball is passed into the set position, and the offensive player is held after he/she picks up the ball. No foul is called. However, if the set loses possession of (or simply drops) the ball and the defender does not let go, an exclusion foul for holding might be called.
- 3) This last example always brings the crowd to its feet. A player with the ball is swimming towards the opponent's goal and will almost certainly score if he/she shoots. The player stops in the water, picks up the ball to shoot, and a defender comes up from behind and grabs the offensive player's arm. The offensive player loses possession, and the crowd starts yelling, "five meter, five meter!" This is not a foul, let alone a penalty foul, since the offensive player was holding the ball when grabbed by defender. Now, if the offensive player (who is now not holding the ball) tries to regain possession of the ball and is held by the defender, a penalty foul might be called.

## **(8) Putting the Ball into Play**

### **(8.a) Free Throws, Goal Throws, and Corner Throws**

Whenever a free throw, goal throw, or corner throw is awarded, the game and possession ("shot") clocks stop briefly, and a player must "put the ball into play" (and both clocks restart). This seems like a simple enough thing to do; a player picks up the ball and passes it to a teammate, and the ball is in play. However, it's a bit more complicated than this, since there are a number of rules that specify who, how, and from where the ball may be put into play, how quickly the ball must be put into play, and what the defensive players may or may not do while all of this is going on. Considering how many free throws, corner throws, and goal throws are awarded during a game, you would think that everyone understands how the ball should be put into play. This is not the case, however.

When are free throws, corner throws, and goal throws awarded? A free throw is awarded to a player of the offended team when an ordinary or exclusion foul is called (20.1 and 21.1). A free throw is taken "at the place where the foul occurred, except: (a) if the ball is further from the defending team's goal, the free throw shall be taken from the location of the ball; (b) if the foul is committed by a defending player within the defender's 2 yard/meter area, the free throw shall be taken on the 2 yard/meter line opposite to where the foul was committed or, if the ball is outside of the 2 yard/meter line, from the location of the ball; or (c) where otherwise provided for in the rules" (19.1).

A goal throw is awarded when the ball (a shot) goes out of bounds over the end line last touched by anyone other than the defensive team's goalkeeper (i.e., last touched by

any offensive or defensive field player) or when an illegal shot is taken (16.1). A goal throw may be taken by any member of the team awarded the goal throw, and it may be taken anywhere inside of the 2-meter line (16.2).

A corner throw is awarded when the ball (a shot) goes out of bounds over the end line last touched by the defending team's goalkeeper or the ball (a pass) is deflected out of bounds over the end line by one of the defensive team's field players (17.1). A corner throw is taken "from the 2 meter mark on the side [of the pool] nearest to which the ball crossed the goal line," and it may be taken by any field player on the offensive team (17.2).

It is the referees' responsibility to make sure that a throw is taken from the correct location. If a free throw, corner throw, or goal throw is taken from the wrong location, the throw is retaken from the correct position (16.2, 17.4, and 19.1).

### **(8.b) Who May Take the Throw?**

Any player on a team may take a free throw, corner throw or goal throw awarded to that team, as long as the throw is taken from the correct location and without "undue delay" (see the following paragraph). If a team is awarded a goal throw, any player (goalkeeper or field player) on that team may take that throw, as long as it is taken without "undue delay." If a field player takes a goal throw, that field player does not have any of the goalkeeper's privileges (e.g., a field player taking a goal throw may not touch the ball with two hands or stand on the bottom of the pool).

### **(8.c) Undue Delay**

Once a free throw, corner throw, or goal throw is awarded, the ball must be put into play without "undue delay" (16.2 and 19.2). This means that a player on the team awarded the throw must (1) take possession of the ball (if he/she doesn't have possession already) and (2) put the ball into play. In other words, if a team does not have possession of the ball (e.g., the ball might be floating on the water), a player must locate the ball and take possession (i.e., pick up the ball) without undue delay. For a free throw, the player closest to the ball will usually pick up the ball. If a player who is clearly in a position to take possession of the ball does not (e.g., a player swims by the ball without picking it up), this is an ordinary foul (19.2), and the ball is awarded to the opposing team. If the team does not take possession quickly, this is also an ordinary foul (20.14). When a corner throw or a goal throw is awarded, the ball has often gone out of the field of play (or pool). Thus, some delay is expected in taking possession of the ball, since the ball must be returned to the field of play. However, once a player has possession of the ball, the ball must be put into play without undue delay.

As long as the ball is in the field of play, it is the offensive team's responsibility to return the ball to the correct player and the correct location for the taking of a free throw (19.3).

In fact, if a member of the opposing team (the team that committed the foul) picks up and throws the ball to a player who is to take a free throw, this might be interpreted by a

referee as interfering with a free throw, which would result in an exclusion foul (21.5, see below, also). This doesn't mean that a defender who returns the ball to an offensive player must be excluded. In fact, the *Manual* (Section 3.4.8) states specifically that, under these circumstances, "an exclusion foul may not be appropriate," and that the referees should use "discretion." Players are often taught that, when the other team is awarded a free throw, they should drop the ball immediately and swim away from it. This is good advice. If a player does this, it gives the offensive team every opportunity to take possession of the ball, and the defender's actions can not be misinterpreted by the referee.

Once a player takes possession of the ball, the free throw, corner throw, or goal throw should be taken without "undue delay" and "in such a manner so as to enable the other players to observe the ball leaving the thrower's hand" (16.2). What's "undue delay" (or how much time does a player have to put the ball into play)? The rules state explicitly, "The time allowed for a player to take a free throw shall be at the discretion of the referees; it shall be reasonable and without undue delay but does not have to be immediate" (19.2). Many players and coaches believe that the ball must be put into play within 3 seconds, and many players and coaches have recited to me the "3-second-rule." However, none of the rules (FINA, USAWP, NCAA, or NISCA) state that a player must put the ball into play within 3 seconds. The *Manual* (Section 3.3.17) states, "As a rule of thumb, 3 seconds from the time when a player gets control of the ball is a reasonable amount of time to put the ball into play." But, this is only a "rule of thumb," and the interpretation of "undue delay" is left to the referee. It is not reasonable to expect the same type of play from a 12-year-old playing age group water polo and a 20-year-old playing in the National Championships, or a player who plays all year and a player who plays only a 10 or 12 week season once a year. Referees will interpret this rule (19.2) differently depending on the "level of play," and they will often allow less experienced players more time (a few extra seconds) to put the ball into play.

#### **(8.d) Putting the Ball into Play - Correctly**

How is the ball actually "put into play?" This rule is, arguably, one of the most misunderstood rules in water polo, even though the rule is explicit. The rule states that the throw "shall be taken in a manner to enable the players to observe the ball leaving the hand of the player taking the throw" (16.4). Notice that the ball must leave the player's hand, and that this must be seen by the other players. To put the ball into play, a player may pass the ball to a teammate. A pass satisfies both conditions of the rule. If the player cannot (or does not want to) pass the ball immediately, he/she may drop the ball from a raised hand onto the surface of the water, or toss the ball into the air and catch it (pass to him/herself). Again, either action satisfies both conditions of the rule. In a few circumstances, a player taking a free throw may take an immediate shot at the opponent's goal; in these circumstances, the shot constitutes "putting the ball into play."

When is the ball not put into play correctly (or, what is not a legal free throw, corner throw, or goal throw)? Holding the ball over the head, spinning the ball in the hand, "patting" the ball while it is floating on the water, or pushing the ball across the surface

of the water to a teammate is not a legal free throw, as none of these actions satisfy both conditions of the rule. If a player taking a free throw spins the ball in his/her hand for 4 or 5 seconds or pats the ball on the surface of the water while trying to find an open teammate, an ordinary foul might be called. Similarly, if the player pushes the ball across the surface of the water to a teammate, this is an improper free throw and an ordinary foul. As you watch a water polo game, you might see a situation where an offensive player (especially at the set position) is awarded a free throw, and the player pushes the ball to a teammate who then scores a quick goal. Since the ball was not put into play properly (i.e., the action was not visible to other players, especially the defending team's goalkeeper), the goal should not count. If you're cheering for the offensive team, you won't be happy about this call, but you'll understand why the goal did not count. If you're cheering for the defensive team and the referee makes this call, you'll be pleased that the referee knows the rules.

### **(8.e) Interfering with a Free Throw, Goal Throw, or Corner Throw**

A defensive player may not interfere with the taking of a free throw, goal throw, or corner throw. Interfering with a free throw, goal throw, or corner throw is an exclusion foul (21.5). Interference includes: "intentionally to throw away or fail to release the ball to prevent the normal progress of the game; or any attempt to play the ball before it has left the hand of the thrower" (21.5). When a team is awarded a free throw, a defensive player may not do anything that "prevents the normal progress of the game," such as failing to release the ball (i.e., holding the ball after the throw has been awarded), throwing away the ball, interfering with the ball before the other team takes possession (e.g., swimming by the ball and hitting it), or interfering with (impeding) a player of the other team who is trying to take possession of the ball.

Once an offensive player has possession of the ball, a defender may not "attempt to play the ball before it has left the hand of the thrower" (21.5). The *Manual* (Section 3.4.8) provides some guidelines to interpreting this rule. If the player taking the free throw has possession of the ball and the defensive player makes any contact with him/her, this is interference and an exclusion foul. A defensive player must give a player the space he/she needs to take a free throw; if the defender is too close, this is an exclusion foul (even if there is no contact). How much space does a defender have to give? On the perimeter, "the defender should be at least an arm's length (the attacking player's arm's length) away." This means that, if necessary, the defender should move away from the player taking the throw. At the set position, the defender does not necessarily have to move away from the player who is taking the free throw, but the defender must demonstrate that "there is no undue interference with the ability of the set to make a free throw." A defensive player will often raise an arm in front of a player taking a free throw, goal throw, or corner throw. This is permissible as long as the defender's arm is behind his/her head (21.5) and the defender is far enough (an arm's length) away from the offensive player.

So, there's a lot more to interfering with a free/goal/corner throw than just tackling a player who is taking a free/goal/corner throw, and the rules and *Manual* are explicit in



their descriptions of interference. Nevertheless, there's always at least one call during a game where a player interferes with a free throw and is excluded, and he/she looks at the referee with the "What-did-I-do?" expression.

## **(9) Legal and Illegal Entries and Exits, and Illegal Players**

There are a number of rules that determine (1) when and how players may enter (re-enter) or exit the pool ("field of play"<sup>19</sup>) during a game and (2) whether or not a player is actually permitted to take part in the game. Although these topics might seem unrelated, they often go hand-in-hand, since it is not uncommon to see one player penalized for entering (re-entering) or exiting the pool illegally and another player penalized simultaneously (or almost simultaneously) for being an illegal player. The rules governing illegal entries/exits and illegal players are spread throughout the rule book, so it's not surprising that spectators often don't understand the rules that cover these fouls and the penalties associated with them. Hopefully, this section of the *Guide* will clarify some of these rules and penalties.

### **(9.a) Legal and Illegal Entries and Exits**

Under some circumstances of a game, players are permitted to enter or exit the pool at any time and from anywhere without penalty. The only times that players may enter or exit the pool without any restrictions are (5.7):

- During the intervals between periods
- After a goal has been scored
- During a timeout
- To replace an injured or bleeding player

At all other times during a game, players must enter into or exit from the pool through their team's re-entry area (5.6, 21.2, and 21.3).<sup>20</sup>

For a player to enter the pool legally during play, he/she must enter the pool (21.15):

- From his/her team's re-entry area
- Without pushing off or jumping from the side of the pool
- Without affecting the alignment of the goal<sup>21</sup>

---

<sup>19</sup>In larger pools in which the playing area is marked off with lane lines, the "field of play" applies to that area enclosed within the lane lines. In smaller pools in which lane lines are not used, the "field of play" and the pool are the same.

<sup>20</sup>In a pool in which the field of play is not marked off with lane lines, the re-entry area is usually the corner of the pool in front of the player's team bench. In a pool in which the field of play is marked off with lane lines, the re-entry area is in front of the team's bench and behind the goal line and inside of the side line. The re-entry area extends 2 meters from the edge of the pool or the side line, and this area should be (but rarely is) marked with a red cone. See the Figure accompanying Rule (1.2).

In other words, the player must enter the re-entry area by “sliding” into the pool, and the player must then enter the field of play with no assistance. In the case of a player who has been excluded (or the excluded player's substitute) and is already in the re-entry area, the player must also wait to be waved in by the secretary or referee.

If a defensive player (i.e., the player's team does not have possession of the ball) re-enters the pool illegally, the player is excluded again and a penalty throw is awarded to the opposing team (but the offending player is charged with only one personal foul) (21.15). However, if an offensive player re-enters the pool illegally, the player is excluded again and charged with a personal foul, and the offended team is awarded a free throw, but no penalty throw is awarded to the offended team.

For a player to exit the pool legally during play, he/she must swim to and enter his/her team's re-entry area. Once in the re-entry area, a player may exit the pool. In the case of a substitution, the player who is exiting the game may leave the re-entry area before his/her substitute enters the re-entry area. If a player exits the pool at any location other than through his/her team's re-entry area, that player is excluded and charged with a personal foul (21.4). The excluded player or his/her substitute may re-enter the game from the appropriate re-entry area when the exclusion period expires (e.g., after 20 seconds of actual playing time). If an excluded player exits the pool at any location other than his/her team's re-entry area, that player is guilty of “misconduct” (21.2). The player is excluded from the remainder of the game with delayed substitution (21.4), and the penalty is the same regardless of when this foul occurs during a game (i.e., it is the same during periods of regulation play, overtime, and sudden-death overtime).

There is an important exception to the penalty for exiting the pool illegally that applies to a player who has been excluded or excluded from the remainder of the game (i.e., this rule does not apply to a player who simply climbs out of the pool during play). If a player receives his/her 3<sup>rd</sup> personal foul or a game exclusion foul and exits the pool (field of play) illegally, but the player then goes to the correct re-entry area (i.e., the player walks along the pool deck to and enters the re-entry area), a substitute for the player is permitted to re-enter the game (through the re-entry area) at the appropriate time (i.e., after 20 seconds, a goal, or a change in possession). However, if the excluded player in the above example exits the pool illegally and does not go to his/her team's re-entry area, the substitute for that player is not permitted to re-enter the game until after a goal is scored, a timeout is called, or until the start of the next period (21.2).

Following are three examples which describe the differences in the rules governing and the penalties applied to an illegal exit of a player and the re-entry of a substitute for that player.

---

<sup>21</sup>If a player swims over the lane line marking the end line of the pool, this may be interpreted as “affecting the alignment of the goal.” This same interpretation may also be applied to a player who enters the re-entry area by swimming over the lane line. In either case, the appropriate call is a penalty foul.

- B3 is “gamed” for disrespect (or receives his/her 3<sup>rd</sup> personal foul) and exits the pool through the re-entry area. B15 enters the re-entry area as a substitute for B3. Blue takes possession of the ball, the referees wave in B15, and B15 enters the game. B15's entry is legal and he/she is not penalized.
- B3 is “gamed” for disrespect and exits the pool along the side line. B3 returns to and enters the team's re-entry area. B15 enters the re-entry area as a substitute for B3. Blue takes possession of the ball, the referees wave in B15, and B15 enters the game. Since B3 returned to the re-entry area, B15's entry is legal (no foul).
- B3 is “gamed” for disrespect, exits the pool along the side line, and sits down on the team bench. B15 enters the re-entry area as a substitute. After 20 seconds of actual playing time, B15 enters the game. Since B3 did not return to the re-entry area, B15's entry is illegal (additionally, B15 was not waved in by the referee). Since the blue team is the defensive team, B15 is excluded again, and the white team is awarded a penalty throw (21.15).

### **(9.b) Illegal Players**

NISCA, NCAA, and USAWP rules define an “illegal player” as an extra player (i.e., an 8<sup>th</sup> player), or a player who has received three personal fouls or has been excluded from the remainder of the game.<sup>22</sup> As the term implies, an “illegal player” is not permitted to take part in the game.

If a player who has received three personal fouls and been “red-flagged” or has been excluded from the remainder of the game enters the pool during play, the player is removed from the pool, a substitute is permitted to enter immediately, and the opposing team is awarded a penalty throw. If an extra player (i.e., an 8<sup>th</sup> player) enters the pool during play, the player is excluded from the remainder of the game, and the opposing team is awarded a penalty throw (5.1 and 21.6).

As examples of these circumstances, consider the following:

1. W8 exits the pool through the team's re-entry area, and W4, who has three personal fouls, enters the game as a substitute for W8. W4 is removed from the game, a substitute for W4 enters immediately, and the blue team is awarded a penalty throw.
2. During play, W7 enters the re-entry area as a substitute for another field player. However, before a field player enters the re-entry area, W7 enters the field of play. W4, an “extra” player, is excluded from the remainder of the game, and the blue team is awarded a penalty throw.

---

<sup>22</sup>The *Manual* uses the term “ineligible” rather than “illegal.”

3. B15 takes a shot at the opponent's goal, and the ball goes into the goal. However, the shot is ruled "illegal" and waved-off by the referees, and the referees signal a change in possession. However, thinking that the goal counted (and not paying attention), three players on the white team dive into the pool. All three players are illegal and excluded from the remainder of the game. The blue team is awarded three penalty shots (one for each illegal player). Needless to say, this is a very expensive mistake!
4. W4 is excluded and enters the re-entry area. A player from the bench (W9) enters the re-entry area as a substitute for W4. When W4 is waved in, both players (W9 and W4) enter the field of play. The first player to enter the field of play is legal (no foul). The second player to enter the field of play is an "extra" player. If the two players enter simultaneously, the substitute (W9 in this example) is considered to be the "extra" player (22.6). The "extra" player is excluded from the remainder of the game, and the blue team is awarded a penalty throw.

As noted above, illegal entries/exits and illegal players often go hand-in-hand. The following are two examples of such circumstances.

1. Same circumstances as in #4 immediately above, but both players "push off" the side of the pool when re-entering. The first player to re-enter the field of play is charged with an illegal re-entry and is excluded (21.3); if this player's team is on defense, the opposing team is awarded a penalty throw (21.4). The second player to enter the game (an "extra" player) is excluded from the remainder of the game with delayed substitution, and the blue team is awarded a(nother) penalty throw.
2. B6 is excluded (2<sup>nd</sup> personal foul) and exits the pool along the side line. Almost immediately, B12 dives into the pool as a substitute for B6. B6 is excluded from the remainder of the game with delayed substitution for "misconduct" (an illegal exit of an excluded player), and B12 is excluded for an illegal re-entry (if the white team still had possession of the ball, the white team would also be awarded a penalty throw).

## **(10) The Ball Under Rule**

Ball under is a fairly common call in water polo, but players, coaches, spectators, and referees often have different perspectives of this rule. The actual rule states, "It is an ordinary foul to take or hold the ball under the water when tackled, even if the player holding the ball has [his/her] hand forced under the water with the ball, as a result of the opponent's challenge" (20.6). The textbook example of a ball under is when an attacking player is holding the ball (with his/her hand on top of the ball), and a defender puts his/her hand on top of the attacking player's hand (hand-on-hand-on-ball) and

forces the ball entirely under water. Few players, coaches, or spectators will argue when a foul is called under these circumstances.

However, what about a situation in which a player takes (puts) the ball under water, but his/her hand is not forced under the water by an opponent? Can a ball under be called?

Yes, because the player's hand does not have to be forced under the water by a defender. The *Manual* (Section 3.4.2) states that a ball under occurs anytime a player takes (puts) the ball under the water and there is contact (by the defending player) to the shoulder, arm, forearm, wrist, or hand on the side of the body of the player holding the ball. So, using this interpretation, if an attacking player takes the ball under the water and is simply touched on the shoulder on the side of the body holding the ball, it's a ball under. Note that it is a ball under only if the player is touched by a defending player. If a player holds the ball under the water and is not touched by a defender, it is not a foul. This rule applies to both field players and goalkeepers.

How far under the water does the ball have to go, and how long does it have to be under water before it's a ball under? There is no hard and fast rule, so it's up to the referee. The *Manual* (Section 3.4.2) states that a ball under should not be called "if the ball goes under for only a fraction of a second," but some referees will call this a ball under. Other referees, however, will not call a ball under unless the ball is submerged completely for one or two seconds. It really doesn't matter how a referee calls this foul, as long as he/she calls it consistently for both teams throughout the game.

In most instances, a ball under is an ordinary foul (20.6), but if a field player or goalkeeper puts the ball under in front of his/her goal, it might be a penalty foul (22.2). This foul occurs most often when a goalkeeper gets possession of the ball (e.g., catches a shot) in front of his/her goal and is tackled by an opposing player. In an effort to keep the ball away from the defender, the goalkeeper will push or pull the ball under the water. If an opposing player tackles the goalkeeper when the ball is under the water, it's a penalty foul, and the opposing team is awarded a penalty throw.

A ball under foul is called against the team in possession of the ball when the ball goes under water, even if it is actually pushed under the water by a defender. If an attacking player has possession of the ball in front of his/her opponent's goal and the opposing goalkeeper pushes the ball under the water, this is an ordinary foul against the player of the attacking team. It is not a penalty foul against the opposing goalkeeper, since he/she did not have possession of the ball.

If a defender tries to put the ball under and in doing so fouls the player holding the ball, the defender is charged with the appropriate foul, and the ball under foul is not called. Defenders will often try to reach around a player who is holding the ball and push the ball under the water. Since the offensive player is holding the ball, incidental contact between the players is not a foul. However, if the defender reaches over the head (goes "over the top") of the attacking player, and especially if the defender comes in contact with the attacking player's neck and/or head, the defender should be excluded.

## (11) The Goalkeeper's Privileges and Limitations

When inside of his/her 5-yard/meter line, a goalkeeper is permitted to do some things that a field player is not. These are the goalkeeper's privileges, and they include:

- Hitting (striking) the ball with a clenched fist (20.7)
- Standing on and jumping off the bottom of the pool (20.5)<sup>23</sup>
- Playing or touching the ball with two hands at the same time (20.8)

The goalkeeper has none of the above privileges when he/she is outside of his/her 5-meter line. If the goalkeeper violates any of the above rules outside of his/her 5-meter line, it is an ordinary foul.

Note that field players have none of these privileges. It is an ordinary, exclusion, or penalty foul (depending on the circumstances of the game) if a field player hits the ball with a clenched fist, touches the ball with two hands, or stands or jumps off the bottom of the pool.<sup>24</sup>

The goalkeeper has one limitation. The goalkeeper is not permitted to "go or touch the ball beyond the half distance line" (20.15). To do so is an ordinary foul.

Just as for field players, a substitute may enter for a goalkeeper. The substitute must wear a goalkeeper's cap (5.6), and the substitute has the same limitations and privileges as the original goalkeeper. However, if a field player is guarding the goal (e.g., if the goalkeeper is out of the goal or has been excluded), the field player has none of the goalkeeper's privileges or limitations. For example, if a field player is guarding the goal and he/she jumps off the bottom of the pool to prevent a goal or attempts to block a shot with two hands, that player is charged with a penalty foul, and the offensive team is awarded a penalty throw (22.1 and 22.2).

## (12) Dead time

The time between the calling of an ordinary foul or exclusion foul and the taking of the free throw, corner throw, or goal throw is referred to as dead time. During dead time, the game and possession (35-second or shot) clocks are stopped (the clocks stop when the whistle blows to signal the foul, and the clocks restart when the ball is put into play), but the players of both teams may continue to swim and strive for position. Spectators have different (and sometimes mistaken) ideas about what fouls can and cannot occur during dead time, but the rules are clear. A foul is a foul, and any foul that can be called during live time can also be called during dead time.

---

<sup>23</sup>The only time this rule comes into play is when a game is played in a shallow-deep pool.

<sup>24</sup>If a field player "uses the bottom" and this does not affect play or give the player an advantage, a foul might not be called against the player.

In water polo, unlike other sports, the action does not stop when most fouls are called, and it may actually speed up. During dead time, especially if an exclusion foul has just been called, the offensive team will usually try to set up an offensive play, and the defensive team will try to defend against it. Thus, some types of fouls are more likely to occur during dead time, and the penalties for these fouls might change depending on the circumstances of the game. For example, during live time it is an ordinary foul for a defensive player to impede an offensive player who is not holding the ball. During dead time, however, impeding an offensive player who is not holding the ball (especially a driver) is an exclusion foul (21.12). If there is anything "special" about dead time and fouls, it's that dead time is a signal for everyone, particularly the referees, to watch the game closely.

### **(13) Stalling or Wasting Time**

The rules state clearly that it is an ordinary foul "to waste time," but the rules and the *Manual* (Section 3.4.15) provide only the following two "technical" examples of stalling:

- If a goalkeeper is the only player of a team in his/her half of the field of play, and the goalkeeper receives the ball from another member of his/her team who is in the other half of the field, this is considered stalling (20.18). A team might do this late in a game to stall, but this seems to happen more often, especially in high school games, because a player has no one else to pass to, and he/she doesn't know (or forgets) that passing the ball to the goalkeeper under these circumstances is an ordinary foul. Even if a player is not stalling intentionally, the foul should be called since the player's actions violate the spirit of the rule.
- The other example of stalling occurs when an offensive player throws ("dumps") the ball into a vacant corner of the pool (9.2). This occurs most often as the 35-second possession clock is about to expire and the attacking team can not get off a shot, so a player dumps the ball into a vacant corner of the pool. Although this tactic appears to be used more often to slow down the opponent's counterattack rather than running down the clock, it is still considered stalling.

The two "technical" violations described above are clear. But, consider a circumstance where it's late in the 4<sup>th</sup> period of play, and the blue team is ahead by one goal. Every time the blue team's goalkeeper is awarded a goal throw, he/she holds the ball for 10 or 15 seconds before passing it to a teammate, and the blue team's field players don't seem to be trying to score a goal. If anything, the blue team's field players seem to be trying to keep the ball away from the opposing team. To make this really interesting, let's say this game is for a high school state championship or collegiate conference championship (I have seen this happen in both), and the supporters for the white team are going ballistic and yelling ---- "they're stalling, they're stalling, call a foul!" Is the home team stalling? Should a foul be called?

The *Manual* stresses that all rules must be applied consistently throughout the game and for both teams. If a referee did not call a stalling foul in the 1<sup>st</sup> period of a game, then the referee should not call a stalling foul for the same behavior in the last period of the game. So, getting back to the above example, it's very unlikely that a referee would call stalling in the 1<sup>st</sup> period of the game if either team's goalkeeper held the ball for 15 seconds or one (or both) of the teams didn't seem to be trying to score. After all, a team has 35 seconds to take a shot, and if the goalkeeper wants to hold the ball for 15 seconds or players do not want to shoot at the goal, why should the referee object? This might even be part of the team's offensive strategy. If the referee didn't call a stalling foul in the 1<sup>st</sup> period for such behavior, then he/she should not call a stalling foul in the 4<sup>th</sup> period for the same behavior.<sup>25</sup> While the white team's supporters might believe that the blue team is stalling, the blue team is just trying to win the game. Stalling should not be called simply because a team is not trying to shoot and score. "The team in the lead is not to be punished because it is in the lead," and " [t]he winning team should be allowed to win without interference from the referees" (Section 3.4.15 of the *Manual*).

### **(14) Double-Exclusion Fouls**

It is a double-exclusion foul when two players, one from each team, are excluded simultaneously. Referees often call this foul when two players on the opposing teams get a bit too physical. When a double-exclusion foul is called, play is stopped, each excluded player goes to his/her team's re-entry area, and play is restarted by the offensive team (i.e., the team that had possession of the ball when the double-exclusion foul was called) taking a free throw at the location of the foul. When can the excluded players re-enter the game? Both players may re-enter the game when (1) a goal is scored, (2) after 20 seconds of actual playing time, or (3) when there's a change in possession (21.18.1).

### **(15) Sportsmanship**

Like many other sports, the rules of water polo require that the conduct of players be respectful and sportsmanlike. However, unlike some other sports, the rules of conduct and sportsmanship are enforced strictly during a water polo game.

Player misconduct includes "the use of obscene, abusive, threatening language or gestures, violent or persistent foul play, overaggressive fouls, or to refuse obedience to or show disrespect for a referee or official." "Taunting, baiting or ridiculing an opponent are examples of misconduct" (21.10.1). If a player commits an act of misconduct or displays unsportsmanlike behavior, the player should be excluded from the remainder of the game with delayed substitution (21.10.1).<sup>26</sup>

---

<sup>25</sup>NISCA Rule 20.18 states, "Stalling should be called consistently throughout the game."

<sup>26</sup>Note that coaches and spectators are also expected to conduct themselves in a respectful and sportsmanlike way. Coaches and spectators who demonstrate poor conduct or sportsmanship may be



In NISCA and NCAA rules, referees have the option of excluding a player for a minor act of disrespect. The rule (21.10.2) states:

[A] An exclusion foul with a 20-second period of exclusion will be awarded for minor acts of disrespect that are not sufficient to warrant exclusion from the remainder of the game. Examples of this type of exclusion foul include a player directing minor comments to the referee such as "Call the foul," or "Where is the push-off," or "He's inside of the 2," or making minor gestures to the referee. If a player commits a minor act of disrespect immediately after receiving an exclusion foul, a penalty throw is awarded to the opposing team [and the player is charged with an additional personal foul], and the player [must serve the original exclusion period].<sup>27</sup>

Note that referees have absolute discretion in interpreting the term "minor." What is "minor" (and an exclusion foul) to one referee might be "major" (and a game exclusion foul) to another. Moreover, note the emphasis that this rules places on players behaving appropriately. If an excluded player behaves inappropriately, he/she can be charged with a penalty foul (as well as the original exclusion foul), and the opponent's team is awarded a penalty throw!

Some types of misconduct and disrespect are very obvious to the spectators, and everyone understands when (and why) these fouls are called. But, it's not unusual for a referee to "game" a player, and the spectators don't know what has happened. The spectators don't hear or see anything out of the ordinary, but all of a sudden they hear the referee's whistle, they see the referee "roll" his/her hands, and they see the player go to the re-entry area and leave the pool (field of play), but they have no idea why the player received a game exclusion. This is because some types of misconduct (disrespect) can be very subtle, and only the referee sees (or hears) it. For example, a player might give a referee a "dirty look," make a hand gesture, make a remark under his/her breath, splash water in the referee's direction, or taunt an opponent. Depending on the circumstances of the game, any of these behaviors (and many others) might be missed by the spectators but result in a game exclusion for the player.

## (16) Advantage

In Section 5, I mentioned that referees have no discretion when calling fouls that involve player safety; these fouls must be called regardless of the game situation. However, as long as player safety is not an issue, referees do have some discretion about calling (or not calling) fouls depending on the circumstances of the game. For example, the rules state explicitly that it is an ordinary foul to impede a player who is not holding the ball (20.9), and that it is an exclusion foul to pull back a player who is not holding the ball

---

asked to leave the pool facility.

<sup>27</sup>USAWP rules do not give referees the option of excluding a player for a minor act of disrespect. Any act of disrespect is a game exclusion foul with delayed substitution.

(21.8). So, you might think that the referees will call a foul every time a player who is not holding the ball is impeded or pulled back, but there are other circumstances that a referee must consider before calling any foul. These other circumstances fall into two main topics, "advantage," which is discussed in this section, and "rewarding good play," which is discussed in the following section.

It's ironic that the rules contain so little information about what is arguably the most important principle in water polo, **ADVANTAGE**, and if you look for information in the rule book, it's not easy to find. There's only one short rule that deals with advantage (rule 7.3 and an accompanying note), and it states:

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 give an advantage to the offending player's team.<sup>28</sup>

However, if you look at the *Manual*, you get a much better idea of the importance of advantage, as seven pages of the *Manual* (Section 2.2) are devoted to this topic. Understanding advantage is very important to understanding and enjoying the game of water polo, but you do not need to understand it at the level presented in the *Manual*. So, I'll try to give you a spectator's view of advantage.

The basic principle of advantage is simple. Coaches develop game strategies and players run plays in hopes of gaining an advantage over the other team. A team on offense tries to develop an offensive advantage; the greater the offensive team's advantage, the more likely the team will score a goal. The defensive team, on the other hand, tries to develop a defensive advantage; the greater the defensive team's advantage, the more likely the team will prevent a goal and/or get possession of the ball. So, in simple terms, the advantage rule states that if team A gains an advantage over team B and team B takes away team A's advantage by committing a foul, team B is penalized so that **advantage is returned** to team A. Advantage goes both ways. Fouls are called against the defensive team if it takes away the offense's advantage, and fouls are called against the offensive team if it takes away the defense's advantage. More often than not, it is the defensive team that takes away the offensive team's advantage, so much of this discussion is centered around offensive advantage.

---

<sup>28</sup>This rule is identical in the FINA, USAWP, NCAA, and NISCA rules.

When thinking about advantage, it's important to remember that everyone involved in a water polo game tends to see the game from a different perspective, so they also tend to view advantage from a different perspective. Players tend to view the game from a very limited perspective, their own. Do I have the ball? Am I going to get the ball? Will I be able shoot? Why is the defender yanking on my suit, and why isn't the referee calling the foul? Spectators tend to view the game from the perspective of what's happening to their son or daughter, and coaches tend to be most concerned about their team. Of course, there's nothing wrong with everyone viewing the game from a different perspective, and it's certainly not unique to water polo. However, advantage depends on many things, such as who has the ball, his/her location in the pool, the locations of all of the other players, etc., and advantage changes quickly and constantly throughout a game. So, unlike players, spectators, and coaches, the referees need to view the game with the broadest possible perspective. They view the game in its entirety; they watch both teams and all of the individual players to determine which team (or player) has advantage.

When thinking about advantage, remember the phrase "advantage is returned." Referees do not call fouls simply because a player has violated a specific rule. Rather referees call fouls because a player has taken away (or decreased the level of) another player's (or the other team's) advantage. The referee calls the foul so that advantage is returned to the offended player (team).

There are three levels of advantage, possessional, positional, and probable goal advantage (the "three P's"). I'll describe each briefly and give some examples. (The *Manual* served as a basis for much of the remainder of this section, including some of the examples.)

#### **(16.a) Possessional advantage**

For a player to have possessional advantage, he/she must have possession of the ball and be able to do something with it. Simply having possession of the ball is not enough.

If a player loses possessional advantage because of a foul committed by an opposing player, the referee will return possessional advantage most often by calling an ordinary foul (which gives the offended team a free throw). Consider the following two examples.

In the first example, a player has the ball at mid-pool, and he/she is pinned against the side of the pool by a defensive player. The defensive player is guarding the offensive player very closely, and there are no offensive players nearby to receive a pass. In the second example, the ball is passed to a player, but the pass is not on target, and the player does not have full control of the ball. In both examples, the player has possession of the ball but can't do anything with it, so neither player has possessional advantage. Does this mean that the referee will not call a foul if one of these offensive players is fouled? No. It means that the referee will give the defense an opportunity to steal the ball, and the referee will not call a foul just because the offensive player loses possession of the ball. In fact, if the referee did call a foul on the defense just because the offensive player lost possession of the ball, this would change the level of advantage by giving the offensive player possessional advantage (a free throw) when

he/she didn't have it to begin with. Remember, referees call fouls to return advantage, not to change the level of advantage.

Now, let's change each of the above examples. In the first case, a teammate swims out to mid-pool so he/she can receive a pass. In the second case, the pass is on target and the player has control of the ball. In both examples, the player holding the ball can now do something with it. If either player loses possessional advantage because of a foul (e.g., impeding), the referee would call an ordinary foul and award a free throw to the offended player, thus returning advantage.

### **(16.b) Positional Advantage**

A second level of advantage is positional advantage. A player has positional advantage if he/she is (1) in a position to advance the ball into scoring position or (2) in a position such that the defender can not defend the goal. To gain a positional advantage a player does not need to have possession of the ball; the only thing that matters is the player's position in the field of play and relative to the other players. If a defensive player fouls an offensive player and, in doing so, takes away the offensive player's positional advantage, the defender is excluded, and the offensive team is awarded a free throw. This returns the positional advantage to the offensive team. Several examples of positional advantage follow.

A good pass is thrown to the offensive player at the set position. If the defender sinks, pulls back, or holds the set before he/she is holding the ball, the defender should be excluded and the offensive team awarded a free throw. It would also be an exclusion foul if the defender pushes or shoves the set player out of position before he/she picks up the ball. In this example, the offensive set is in a position to advance the ball into scoring position (even though he/she does not have the ball), but the action of the defender results in a loss of the positional advantage.

An offensive player on the perimeter "turns" his/her defender, and, just as he/she begins to swim toward the goal, the defender grabs the offensive player's suit. Because the offensive player was held, he/she was unable to develop the positional advantage of moving the ball into scoring position. The defender should be excluded.

On a counterattack, the first offensive player down the pool has the ball and is trailed by a defensive player. The defensive player pulls back on the offensive player so the defensive player pulls even. The offensive player lost his/her positional advantage, so the defender should be excluded.

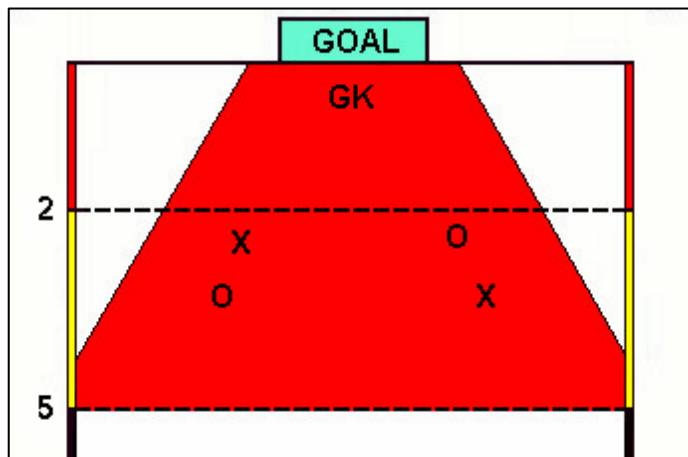
Often you'll see something similar to what's described in the above paragraph (a pull back on the counterattack), but the offensive player does not lose entirely his/her momentum and/or positional advantage. The attacking player is slowed momentarily and the defensive player may catch up a bit, but the attacking player continues toward the opponent's goal. The defensive player should not be excluded in this instance. Why? Remember, the advantage rule states that a referee should not call a foul in

favor of a player who has possession of the ball and is moving toward the goal. The offensive player's level of advantage may be less after the pull back, but the advantage is not lost, so no foul should be called. The offensive player may be able to continue toward the goal and increase his/her level of advantage; if the player is able to get inside of the opponent's 5-meter line, the player now has probable goal advantage (see the following section). If the player is fouled again, he/she would be awarded a penalty throw. So, by not calling the first pull back, the referee allows the offensive team to maximize its level of advantage.

You might also see a situation where a team is counterattacking and the first offensive player down the pool has the ball (and positional advantage). As the counterattack develops, a defensive player in the back court sinks an offensive player. According to the advantage rule, in this case the referee should not call a foul on the defensive player in the back court (unless the foul is overly aggressive). If the referee calls the exclusion foul in the back court, the offensive player with the ball (and positional advantage) must stop swimming, and the ball must be returned to the location of the foul for the free throw. This would actually be an advantage to the defensive (offending) team, since the offensive team would lose its positional advantage. Because of the advantage rule, referees often do not call obvious fouls. If referees do not call these obvious fouls, it's not due to bad eyesight; it's because doing so would violate one of the fundamental principles of advantage.

### (16.c) Probable goal advantage

The third level of advantage is probable goal advantage. For a player to have a probable goal advantage, he/she must be inside of the opponent's 5-meter line and, because of his/her position, have a high probability of scoring a goal. Note that for a player to have a probable goal advantage, he/she does not have to have possession of the ball. As with positional advantage, it's the player's position in the field of play and relative to the other players that are important in determining probable goal advantage. If a defender fouls an offensive player and, in doing so, takes away a probable goal advantage, the defender is charged with a penalty foul, and the offensive team is awarded a penalty throw.



To have a probable goal advantage, a player must be inside of the 5-meter line and in such a position that he/she has a high probability of scoring a goal. As you might expect, the probability of a player scoring a goal is higher

**Figure 1.** The "strike zone" is the red or shaded area inside of the 5-meter line. GK = goalkeeper; X = defensive player; O = offensive player.

from some locations within the field of play than from other locations. A player has the highest probability of scoring when he/she is in the opponent's "strike zone" (Figure 1)<sup>29</sup>. As a player moves out of the "strike zone," the probability of him/her scoring decreases. If the player is too far out of the "strike zone," for example inside of the 2-meter line at the edge of the field of play, the probability of scoring is very low. The lower the probability of scoring, the less likely the player will be able to develop a probable goal advantage.

The probability of a player scoring also depends on that player's position relative to nearby defenders. The fewer defenders between an attacking player and the opponent's goal, the more likely the attacking player will score. Look at the offensive player (O) on the left side of Figure 1. There are two defenders (a field player [X] and the goalkeeper [GK]) between him/her and the goal. Now look at the offensive player on the right side of Figure 1. This offensive player has "inside water," a position where there is only one defender (most often the goalkeeper) between him/her and the goal. The offensive player on the right, the player with "inside water," has a very good chance of scoring a goal (a probable goal advantage), while the offensive player on the left does not have a good chance of scoring (and no probable goal advantage).

Must a player have "inside water" to have a probable goal advantage? If a player with "inside water" is fouled, is that player guaranteed a penalty shot? The answer to both questions is no. Just as a player does not have to be in the "strike zone" to develop a probable goal advantage<sup>30</sup>, a player does not have to have "inside water." All other things being equal, a player in the "strike zone" and with "inside water" is more likely to develop a probable goal advantage than is a player who is not in the "strike zone" and/or does not have "inside water." If the advantage is taken away due to a foul, the offending player should be charged with a penalty foul and the offended player awarded a penalty throw. A few examples illustrating probable goal advantage follow.

An offensive player has inside water at the opponent's 2-meter line, almost directly in front of the goal (e.g., "O" on the right side of Figure 1). The ball is passed to this player and the pass is on target, but the player is held by a defensive player and is unable to catch the ball. The defensive player's action took away a high percentage opportunity to score a goal, so a penalty foul should be called and a penalty throw awarded. (Note that if the pass was to the offensive player on the left of Figure 1 and that player was held, the correct call would be an exclusion foul.)

During a one-on-one fast break, an offensive player swims toward the opponent's goal, and a defensive player is all over him/her, trying to stop an easy goal. As long as the offensive player continues to make progress toward the goal, the referee should not call

---

<sup>29</sup>The "strike zone" is neither discussed in the rules nor marked along the side of the pool. Version 2.0 of the *Manual* (Section 2.2.6) included a discussion of the "strike zone," but this concept is not included in Version 3.0 of the *Manual*. I think this concept is useful in understanding "probable goal advantage," so I have included it in this *Guide*.

<sup>30</sup>Version 2.0 of the *Manual* states explicitly that, under some circumstances, a player outside of the strike zone may be awarded a penalty foul.

a foul (calling the foul would be an advantage to the defensive team); the referee should give the offensive player every opportunity to get inside of the opponent's 5-meter line. Why should the referee wait to call the foul? If the offensive player is held, sunk, or pulled back outside of the opponent's 5-meter line, it's an exclusion foul (the offended player is awarded a free throw). However, if the referee waits and the offensive player gets inside of the 5-meter line and is then held, sunk, or pulled back, it's a penalty foul and a penalty shot (or the player might score a natural goal in which case this becomes moot).

An offensive player is swimming with the ball toward the goal and has inside water, and there is a defensive player close behind. The offensive player swims in to about the 3-meter line, stops, and picks up the ball to take a shot. At this point, there's a very good chance the player will score. However, a defensive player comes up from behind, grabs the offensive player's arm, and the offensive player loses possession of the ball. No foul, not even an ordinary foul, should be called under these circumstances.<sup>31</sup> Yes, the offensive player had a probable goal advantage, but the defender did not commit a foul (the offensive player was holding the ball), so a penalty throw should not be awarded. Continuing on with this same illustration, the ball is now floating on the surface of the water, within easy reach of the offensive player who is facing the goal; the offensive player still has a probable goal advantage. The offensive player now tries to pick up the ball but is held by the defensive player. Now a penalty foul should be called, since the holding foul prevented the player from taking a high percentage shot.

At the 2001 National Junior Olympics, the following play took place. An offensive player with inside water was swimming towards the opponent's goal while holding the ball on one hand. As he approached the goal and swam inside of the 4-meter line (old rules), two defenders swam into the center of the field of play and on top of the offensive player, and the offensive player went under the water. Needless to say, many of the spectators started yelling immediately for a penalty foul, but neither referee called a foul. Why wasn't a penalty foul called when the offensive player went under the water? The offensive player was holding the ball in his hand when he went under water, and neither referee was certain that the offensive player had lost possession of the ball. When the offensive player finally came up, he was still holding the ball in his hand; he had not lost his advantage, and the referees made the correct call (a "no call"). If the player had lost possession of the ball when he went under the water (or had the foresight to let go of the ball), which the referees would have noted when the player surfaced, a penalty foul and penalty throw would have been an appropriate call. Ultimately, one of the defenders knocked the ball out of offensive player's hand, so all of the offensive player's efforts were for naught.

I'll give one final example, since it is one of my favorites, and it emphasizes what can happen when a player makes the tactical mistake of (1) getting too close to the goalkeeper or (2) allowing the goalkeeper to get too close to him/her. There is a one-

---

<sup>31</sup>If the referee calls an ordinary foul at this point, the offensive player can only pass the ball to another player; he/she can not shoot at the opponent's goal. An ordinary foul would be an advantage to the offending team!

on-one fast break, and the defender is doing everything he/she can to stop the offensive player. However, the offensive player is a very strong swimmer and continues toward the goal even though the defender is almost on top of him/her. (Remember, the referee should not call a foul as long as the offensive player is making progress towards the opponent's goal!) The attacking player swims inside of the 2-meter line and almost into the arms of the goalkeeper. At this point the attacking player is held by the defender and loses control of the ball, and the goalkeeper reaches out and picks up the ball off the surface of the water. In this example, the attacking player had a probable goal advantage at one time, but he/she lost the advantage when he/she swam in too close to the goalkeeper. Advantage was lost because of the attacking player's actions, not the defender's actions. Since the defender did not take away the probable goal advantage, no foul should be called.

### **(17) Reward Good Play, Punish Bad Play**

The concept of rewarding good offense/defense and punishing bad offense/defense is not addressed in any water polo rules, so spectators are often unaware that this principle exists. However, it is covered in some detail in the *Manual* (Section 4.1), and it is an important principle in how referees call the game. As you read on, you'll see that, in many respects, this principle and the principle of advantage are related. Like advantage, rewarding/punishing good/bad play requires that referees consider everything that's going on in the water (who has the ball, what he/she is doing with it, where's everyone else, and what are they doing?), and to interpret this principle based on what's happening at that moment. Good play and advantage tend to go hand-in-hand. If players (and a team) play well offensively, they tend to develop offensive advantage; the better they play, the higher the level of advantage. Similarly, if the players (and a team) play well defensively, they tend to develop defensive advantage. You'll probably recognize this immediately as you read through the following examples (with quotations from the *Manual*), which help to illustrate the concept of good and bad play.

An offensive player with the ball tries to turn and go around his/her defender, and while doing so puts his/her head under the water. The defender reaches over the offensive player and takes away the ball. When a player's head is under water, he/she can not see the ball or his/her teammates, and he/she can not pass or shoot. Putting your head under water is poor offense. If a player loses possession of the ball because of poor offense, "[e]ven though there may have been incidental contact, there is no foul."

An offensive player swims with the ball into a group of defenders. The defenders tackle the offensive player and one of the defenders ends up with the ball. Swimming into a crowd of defensive players is poor offense. "The offense [offensive player] chose not to pass the ball to unguarded teammates and chose to swim the ball into a crowd of defenders...the defenders end up with the ball."



The ball is passed into the set position as two defenders are crashing in on the set. If the offensive set and crashers have an equal opportunity to get the ball and there is incidental contact between the offensive set and his/her defenders, no foul is called. This example demonstrates simultaneously poor offense (the offensive team should not have passed the ball to the set when defensive players were crashing the set) and good defense (the defenders crashing the set in anticipation of a pass). The defensive team deserves to get the ball.

An offensive player with the ball is pinned by a defender against the sideline (or edge of the pool), and no other offensive players are close by. This is poor offense and good defense, and good defense is rewarded by giving the defending player "every opportunity to steal the ball." However, the situation can change very quickly. If another offensive player swims into position to receive a pass from the pinned player, this is good offense, and an ordinary foul might be called when one was not called before.

### **(18) Play the Ball and Not the Player**

"Play the Ball and Not the Player" is another principle that guides referees in which fouls should or should not be called. Like the principles of advantage and good/bad play discussed in the previous sections, you will not find "Play the Ball and Not the Player" in the rule book. This principle is, however, discussed in the *Manual* (Section 2.4.11), and much of the following was paraphrased or quoted from the *Manual*.

The object of water polo is simple; the offensive team tries to put the ball into the opponent's goal, while the defensive team tries to prevent this. As the offensive and defensive teams strive to develop or increase their levels of offensive and defensive advantage, there will be contact among the players.

However, the attacking players "may not advance the ball by moving the opposing player out of the way or by going through or over a defender. Likewise, a defender may not prevent [an attacking player] from advancing the ball by moving [the player] out of the way or preventing the attacking player from going around the defender." In other words, "Players are obligated to direct their efforts toward the ball and not their opponents," so coaches and players tend to think in terms of "playing the ball and not the player." If a player impedes, holds, pushes, pulls, or sinks an opponent who is not holding the ball, the player is "playing the player" rather than the ball. This is a direct violation of the rules, and the "rules are designed to allow the referee to restore a player's level of advantage when the opposing team takes it away." The referee does this by calling the appropriate foul on the offending player.

It's important to remember that this principle applies only to players who are not holding the ball. If a player impedes, holds, pushes, pulls, or sinks an opposing player who is holding the ball, it is not a foul. While I was writing this section, I asked another referee for his thoughts on this principle, and he responded, in part, that:

The job of the player defending the player in possession of the ball (emphasis added) is to [do] whatever he can - within the rules - to prevent that player from executing his team's offensive strategy. Since the rules permit (and to some degree encourage) physical contact in this situation, such contact (including holding, sinking, and pulling back) is well within the limits of what should be allowed. Of course, as you say, once such contact exceeds our limits of physical play - and each official has his/her own such limits - then it becomes appropriate (and mandatory) to eject [exclude] the defensive player. However, such an ejection would not be for holding, sinking, or pulling back -- or even for "playing the person" -- but for kicking/striking, violence, or brutality, depending on the severity of the offense.

### **(19) The Referees' Perspective**

As noted in a previous section of this *Guide* (Section 16), players, coaches, spectators, and referees tend to view the game of water polo from very different perspectives. In particular, referees view the game in its entirety; they must watch both teams and all of the individual players to determine which team or player has advantage. Since there are only two referees to watch 14 individual players, and the referees are on the pool deck and the players are in the water, this is not a simple task!

However, as in virtually all other sports, there is a division of labor between the two water polo referees, and this allows each referee to concentrate on specific players or areas of the pool (field of play). Depending on the circumstances of the game, some fouls are more likely to occur than others, so the referees can concentrate on those players who are more likely to commit fouls or those sections of the pool where fouls are more likely to occur.

At a recent collegiate club tournament, several spectators asked some questions about what referees look for (i.e., what's the "referees' perspective?"). Since there was a game in progress, I pointed out some of the things that referees look for when calling a game. After the last game of the tournament, these same spectators told me how much more they had enjoyed the last few games since they now (1) had some understanding of what the referees were looking for during a game, (2) could anticipate what fouls might be called, and (3) understood better why the referees do not call some obvious fouls. Since these spectators found this information helpful, I thought that others might also find it helpful.

When reading this section of the *Guide*, remember the following caveats:

- Although this section is titled "Referees' Perspective," it is actually only one referee's perspective, mine. Readers should not assume that other referees will or will not agree with what is written here or that these comments reflect the position of any water polo sanctioning organization.

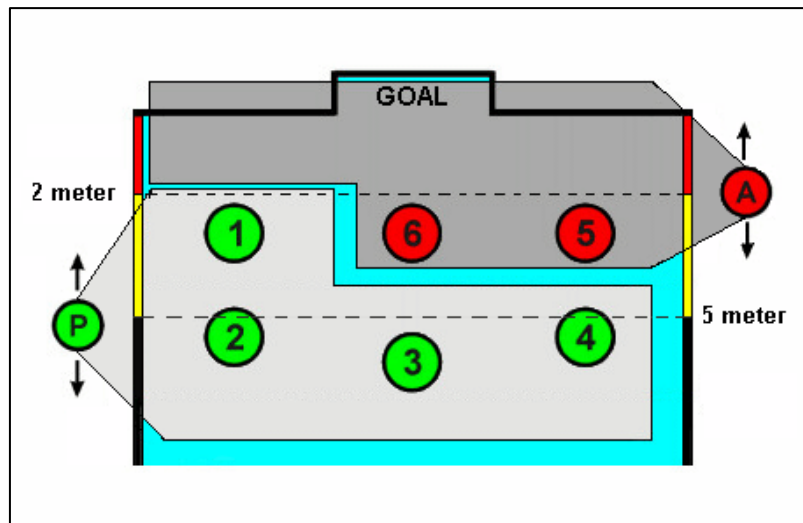
- This section is a very simplified discussion as applied to limited situations. As the positions of the players and ball change (as they do almost constantly), so does the way in which the game is called.
- A game of water polo is not officiated by two individual referees, but by two referees working as a team. Just as individual referees interpret game situations differently, each team of referees also works together differently.
- The physical layout of the pool and environmental conditions are important variables that must be considered. The position of the referees along the edge of the pool and what they look for (or see) can depend on the shape of the pool and the size of the field of play, the amount of lighting (or sunlight), location of the benches, and other factors that might limit a referee's mobility or vision.

### (19.a) What Does Each Referee Watch at the Offensive End of the Pool?

Figure 2 shows the relative positions of the players and referees as they might appear in a typical offensive set. Note that the numbers 1 through 6 refer to the players' **positions** in the field of play, **not the players' cap numbers**. Thus, the #6 red circle represents the approximate location of the offensive and defensive sets. The attack referee is indicated by the "A" (red circle on the right), and the perimeter referee is indicated by the "P" (green circle on the left).

The primary responsibility of the perimeter referee (P) is to watch the players and call fouls in the area shown in light gray. This includes the players at the #1, #2, #3, and #4 positions (all the green circles), as well as players moving through the designated area (e.g., drivers and sloughers).

The perimeter referee usually stands on (or close to) the 5-meter line, since he/she must know if a foul is committed inside or outside of the 5-meter line. (If a foul is committed outside of the 5-meter line, the resulting free throw may be an immediate shot on goal. If a foul is committed inside of the 5-meter line, two players must touch the ball before a goal can be scored.) As a general rule, the perimeter referee should be no closer to the goal than the outer-most pair of players (e.g., position #3 in Figure 2). Thus, if all of the players (and the ball) move inside of the 5-meter line, the perimeter referee might move



**Figure 2.** The relative positions of players and referees in a typical offensive set. Note that the numbers in this Figure refer to the players' positions in the field of play, not the players' cap numbers.

toward the goal. Conversely, if the outer-most players move outside of the 5-meter line, the perimeter referee might also move outside of the 5-meter line.

The primary responsibility of the attack referee (A) is to watch (and call fouls in) the area shown in dark gray. This includes the goalkeeper (not shown in Figure 2) and players at the #5 and #6 (set) positions, as well as players moving through the designated area (e.g., drivers).

The attack referee usually stands on (or close to) the 2-meter line, since he/she must be able to observe (1) when the ball passes completely across the goal line (i.e., a goal is scored or the ball goes out of bounds), (2) when players move inside of the 2-meter line (potential 2-meter violations), and (3) if the ball is tipped (and by whom) before exiting the field of play over the end line. Depending on the locations of the players and ball, the attack referee might move toward or away from the goal line to get a better view of the action.

Readers should note that the areas shown in Figure 2 are the primary areas of responsibility, but they are not the only areas of responsibility. Contrary to the opinion expressed by some coaches that the referees are not permitted to call fouls outside of their primary areas of responsibility, "each referee shall have the power to declare fouls in any part of the field of play" (Appendix A[5]). When a referee calls a foul outside of his/her primary area of responsibility, it is referred to as "poaching." Despite the negative connotation of this term, poaching probably occurs in every game. Depending on the physical and environmental conditions and the circumstances of the game, one referee might have a better view of one or more of the players in the other referee's primary area of responsibility. For example, the attack referee might have a better view of the players at the #1 or #4 position and/or the perimeter referee might have a better view of the players at the #6 position. In either case, poaching (calling a foul outside of one's primary area of responsibility) might be appropriate.

### **(19.b) Calling the Offensive/Defensive Set Position**

Of all the positions in the field of play, none is more difficult to call than the set position. For most teams, the offensive set runs the offense, so the offensive strategy of most teams dictates that the offensive set and his/her defender (the defensive set) will be in a continual battle for possession and/or positional advantage. Thus, the level of physical play between the offensive and defensive sets is higher than for other positions, and referees must interpret carefully the physical level of play and the principles of advantage when calling fouls at the set position. Although it is beyond the scope of this *Guide* to discuss in detail the philosophy of calling the set position (readers who are interested can refer to Section 4.3 of the *Manual*), I thought that readers might find a few comments helpful in understanding the "referees' perspective." As you read the following paragraphs or as you watch a game and apply what you have read, remember that this is a very generalized discussion, which might or might not apply to a specific situation that you see, and that it is up to the referee(s) to interpret players' actions and call fouls relative to the rules of the game and the principles of advantage.

As the offensive and defensive teams set up at one end of the field of play (assuming the ball is on the perimeter), the offensive and defensive sets will try to get into positions that best suit their respective strategies. The offensive set will try to gain a positional advantage so that once the ball is passed in he/she can score (or move into scoring position). The defensive set, on the other hand, will try to gain a positional advantage so that he/she can intercept the ball when it's passed in and/or keep the offensive set out of scoring position. As the two set players strive for position, "incidental contact between the [two players] will occur" and "this should be ignored [by the referees]" (Section 4.3.2 of the *Manual*). So, what constitutes "incidental contact" and how much "incidental contact" is permitted? There is no simple answer to this question! The players are generally permitted to push and shove one another as long as the pushing and shoving does not give one player an advantage over the other. If one player gains an advantage by impeding, holding, sinking, or hand-checking the other player, or by pushing or shoving the other player out of the way, the appropriate foul should be called.

As the teams set up (or when the two set players have called a temporary truce), the ball is passed into the "hole." If the defensive set holds, sinks, or pulls back the offensive set before he/she has possession of the ball, the defensive set should be excluded. Remember that a player is considered to be "in possession" of the ball if (1) he/she is holding the ball in his/her hand or (2) he/she has his/her hand on top of the ball. Thus, if a "wet pass" is thrown to the set, the set is considered to be in possession as soon as he/she touches the ball, which is floating on top of the water. Under these circumstances, "the [defensive set] is obligated to demonstrate that no foul is being committed" (Section 4.3.1 of the *Manual*). In other words, the defensive set is "guilty unless proven innocent." If the referee even suspects that the defensive set is holding, sinking, or pulling on the offensive set before he/she has possession of the ball, and the defensive set is unable to show otherwise, an exclusion foul should be called. Most commonly, the attack referee will look to see if the defensive set's hands/arms are visible and, if visible, that the defensive set is not fouling the offensive set. If the defensive set's hands/arms are not visible and the offensive set looks like he/she is being fouled, an exclusion foul will probably be called.

If the defensive set's hands/arms are visible, then the attack referee will look at the placement of the defensive set's hands/arms. Often, the defensive set will place his/her arms/elbows on (or over) the offensive set's shoulders and push down (or squeeze his/her elbows together). Squeezing the elbows together under these circumstances is "holding," and pushing down with the elbows is "sinking," both of which are exclusion fouls. Players or coaches will sometimes complain when this call is made, especially if the defensive set had his/her hands in the air. Contrary to what players or coaches might think, one player can sink or hold another without ever touching the other player with his/her hands.

While defending the set position, the defensive set might put his/her hand on the offensive set's shoulder. If the defensive set tries to move around the offensive set

(e.g., when the ball is passed in) and in doing so pulls or pushes down on the offensive set's shoulder, it's an exclusion foul. If the defensive set rises out of the water (e.g., while trying to tip the ball as it is passed in) and in doing so pushes down on the offensive set's shoulder, it's an exclusion foul.

The attack referee will also watch the offensive set to make sure that he/she does not gain an advantage illegally. Some things that the offensive set might try (and for which the referee should watch) include:

- If the offensive set raises his/her arms to block the movement of the defensive set, this is impeding and an ordinary foul. For example, if the defender is behind and tries to swim around the offensive set, and the offensive set raises his/her arms preventing the movement of the defender, this is impeding and an ordinary foul.
- If the offensive set grabs hold of the defensive set's arm, it's an ordinary foul and a turnover. This might occur when the defensive set is behind the offensive set, and the defender reaches over the offensive player's shoulder. Note that this is different from the circumstance in which the offensive set simply pushes the defensive set's arm out of the way (a "no call").
- If the offensive set uses his/her head to drive back the defensive set, this is impeding and an ordinary foul. In such a case, the offensive set tilts his/her head backwards and then uses his/her head to push against the defensive set (see Figure 9 in the NISCA Rules). This is different from the circumstance in which the offensive set first backs into the defensive set and then forcibly drives his/her head backwards into the defensive set's face or head. The latter infraction (a head butt) is at least an offensive exclusion foul (it's considered "violent" play, Rule 21.9), but may also be interpreted as brutality.
- If the offensive set holds or sinks the defensive set, it's an ordinary foul and a turnover. For example, the offensive set can reach under water, grab hold of the defender's suit, and hold or sink him/her.

For most teams, the offensive set runs the offense. Thus, an important part of the offensive team's strategy is to get the ball to the offensive set (i.e., "set the hole"). Assuming that the offensive team has been successful and the offensive set has possession of the ball, the offensive set now has two options: shoot at the opponent's goal or pass the ball to another player (who might then take a shot). Considering the important role the offensive set plays in the overall offensive strategy, the referees (in particular, the attack referee) must keep in mind two principles when calling fouls:

- Unless absolutely necessary, do not call a foul that takes away either of the offensive set's options (pass or shoot), especially if such a foul is an advantage to the defensive team.
- If at all possible, allow the offensive team to score a natural goal.

If the attack referee calls an ordinary or exclusion foul on the defensive set, then the offensive set will have only one option, and that's to pass the ball to another player. Thus, in many instances, the attack referee will delay momentarily in calling a foul or not call an obvious foul because calling the foul is an advantage to the defensive team and a disadvantage to the offensive team.

The following is an example of how the above might be applied to a game situation. The offensive set has possession of the ball and is tackled by the defensive set. (As long as the offensive set retains possession of the ball, no foul should be called.) Now, let's assume that the offensive set loses possession of the ball, and that he/she is fouled (impeded) by the defensive set. If the impeding foul is called, the offensive set will no longer have the option of shooting at the opponent's goal (the foul is an advantage to the defensive team). Thus, if the offensive set can regain possession of the ball even though he/she was fouled, the foul should not be called. On the other hand, if the offensive set can not regain possession of the ball because of the foul, the foul should be called.

### **(19.c) The Transition**

When the ball changes possession, there's a period of "transition" during which the teams switch ends of the pool. Transition is the period where the offensive and defensive teams try to set up their respective strategies, and the team that does this most effectively will most likely gain the advantage. Just as the jobs of players switch during transition (offense to defense and *vice versa*), so do the jobs of the referees (perimeter referee to attack referee and *vice versa*). Thus, as discussed in the following paragraphs, there's a lot going on during transition and many opportunities for fouls.

Figure 3 shows the locations of players and referees as they might appear at the beginning of a hypothetical transition. The former attack referee in Figure 2 is now the perimeter referee (P), and the former perimeter referee in Figure 2 is now the attack referee (A). The players on each team are designated by colored circles (blue [B] is the home team and white [W] is the visiting team). The cap numbers of three players on each team (2B, 2W, 3B, 3W, 4B, and 4W) as well as the offensive team's goalkeeper (1W) are indicated.

Since the types of fouls that referees will watch for (or call) depend of the location of the ball in the field of play, two scenarios are shown. The first scenario (Figure 3) shows the ball in the back court (in possession of 4W), as it might appear just as the transition

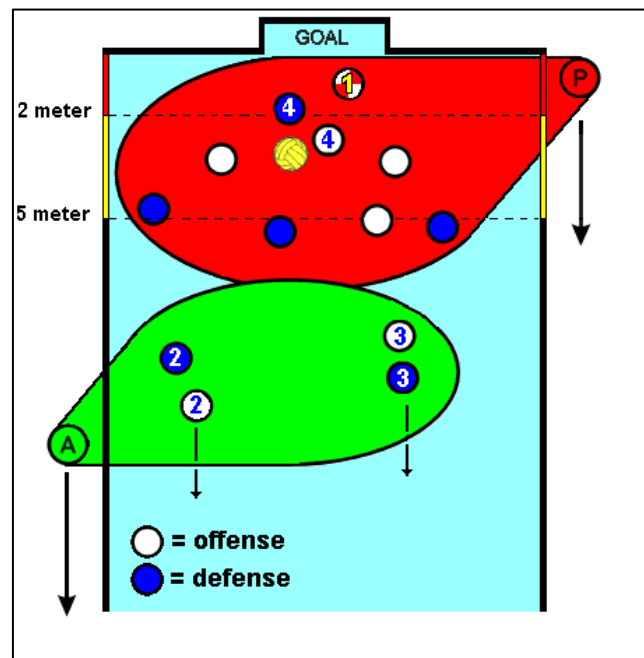
is starting. The second scenario (Figure 4) shows the ball in possession of the lead offensive player (2W), as it might appear as the counterattack develops.

As pointed out earlier in this *Guide*, referees must consider the principle of advantage when calling (or not calling) fouls. Thus, before discussing what the referees look for, it's probably a good idea to review briefly the principle of advantage. NISCA Rule 7.3 states:

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 opponents' goal, because this is considered to give an advantage to the offender's team.

Referees call fouls to restore advantage to the offended team. Ordinary, exclusion, and penalty fouls are called to restore possessional, positional, and probable goal advantage, respectively.

Now, let's review the events that lead to the scenario shown in Figure 3. Blue is on offense, the ball is passed into 4B at the set position, 4B tries to shoot, 4W (the set defender) or 1W (the goalkeeper) blocks the shot, and 4W takes possession of the ball. As soon as 4W takes possession of the ball, the white team transitions to offense (and the blue team to defense), and two offensive players (2W and 3W) and two defensive players (2B and 3B) break towards the blue team's goal. Figure 3 shows the relative locations of the players and referees during this early stage of transition.



**Figure 3.** The relative locations of players and referees as they might appear during early transition. Note that the offensive (white) team is moving from top to bottom.

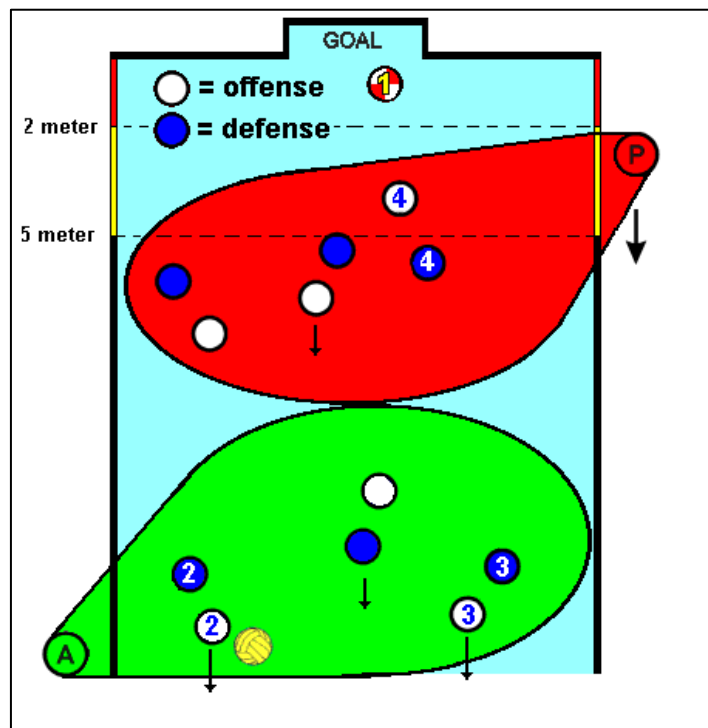
During early transition, the primary responsibility of the attack (former perimeter) referee is to watch the first few players (or pairs of players) swimming down the pool (i.e., the green area in Figure 3). As the players swim down the pool, the attack referee also walks down the pool (often backwards), usually staying ahead of these first few players. This way, the attack referee can watch all players as the counterattack develops. The attack referee will watch closely for any fouls that take



away positional advantage of the offensive or defensive players. As shown in Figure 3, the offensive player 2W has a positional advantage over his/her defender (2B), and the defensive player 3B has a positional advantage over the offensive player 3W. Thus, if 2B (a defender) holds, sinks, or pulls back 2W, 2B should be excluded. Similarly, if 3W (an offensive player) impedes 3B (e.g., by swimming over the player), an ordinary offensive foul should be called.

During the early transition, the perimeter (former attack) referee watches the players in the back court (i.e., the red area), particularly the players who were the offensive and defensive sets (4B and 4W, respectively, in Figure 3). Because of the nature of play at the set position, these two players often have "issues" with each other, so the perimeter referee watches these players carefully so that they don't try to settle these issues as they untangle. In particular, the perimeter referee makes sure that the players do not impede (an ordinary foul), hand check, hold, sink, pull back (exclusion fouls), or hit or kick (violence or brutality fouls) each other as they untangle and start to swim up the field of play. A common tactic used by some players in this situation is the "gross and go," where the defender (4B in Figure 3) will hold (and even sink) the offensive player (4W) and pull himself/herself forward. Under these circumstances, 4B should be excluded for such behavior. Note that if an ordinary or exclusion foul is called in the back court while the ball is in the back court (as in Figure 3), the white team retains possession of the ball at the location of the foul, and the ball can still be passed to the lead swimmer on the counterattack (2W). Thus, calling a foul in the back court under these circumstances does not decrease the offensive (white) team's level of advantage.

As transition progresses and the counterattack develops, it is likely that the ball will be passed to the lead offensive swimmer (i.e., Figure 4, where 2W is swimming with the ball). The primary responsibilities of the attack and perimeter referees do not change as the counterattack develops, but the types of fouls that each referee might call do change.



**Figure 4.** The relative locations of players and referees as they might appear as the counterattack develops. Note the location of the ball immediately in front of 2W, and that the positions of 3B and 3W are reversed compared to Figure 3.

Once the lead swimmer gets the ball, he/she has three options. 2W can continue to swim toward the goal and increase his/her level of positional advantage; 2W can pass the ball to another player (e.g., 3W); 2W can shoot the ball. In keeping with the basic

principles of advantage, neither the attack nor the perimeter referee should call any fouls that decrease the offensive team's level of advantage.

In the case of the perimeter referee, he/she should not call any foul on the defensive team in the back court (the red area) unless it is for disrespect, misconduct, violence, or brutality. If the perimeter referee calls an ordinary or exclusion foul in the back court, the ball must be returned to the location of the foul; this would be an advantage to the offending (defensive) team and a disadvantage to the offended team. Occasionally, a defensive player in the back court will commit an obvious foul in an attempt to draw a whistle and disrupt a fast break (e.g., a defender might grab an offensive player by the suit and sink him/her). In keeping with the principle of advantage, the perimeter referee must ignore such an obvious foul, even though the defender's actions might bring spectators to their feet.

Similarly, the attack referee should give the offensive team every opportunity to score a natural goal. This means that even if the defender (2B) grabs, holds, or swims on top of (impedes) the offensive player (2W), no foul should be called as long as 2W maintains positional advantage and continues to make progress towards the goal. As noted above, the offensive player (2W) has three options; swim, pass, or shoot. If the attack referee calls a foul under these circumstances, 2W would no longer have the option of shooting at the opponent's goal, and 2W would have to pass the ball to another player before a shot could be taken. That is, the foul would be an advantage to the defensive team and violate the principle of advantage.

On the other hand, if the defender is fouling the offensive player to such an extent that the attack referee might call a foul, the attack referee should consider delaying his/her call until the offensive player swims inside of the 5-meter line. By doing so, the offensive player can raise his/her level of advantage to a probable goal advantage, at which point the referee will have the option of calling a penalty foul and awarding a penalty throw to the offensive team.

## Appendix 1. Fouls and Referees' Signals

The following information summarizes many of the fouls that might occur during a water polo game. This appendix includes information about the three basic types of fouls (ordinary, exclusion, and penalty fouls) and the various combinations of these fouls (e.g., a game exclusion foul and a penalty throw). The information for each foul or combination of fouls includes (1) the referee's signal, (2) the penalty, (3) a list of some of the actions that result in the foul being called, and (4) a citation for the appropriate NISCA Rule.

### (A) Ordinary Fouls

**Referee's Signal:** The referee blows the whistle once if the foul is against the defensive team or twice (to indicate a change in possession) if the foul is against the offensive team. The referee raises one arm and points in the direction of the attack (i.e., the direction in which the offensive team will be swimming). If necessary, the referee will also point to the location in the field of play from which the free throw is to be taken.

**Penalty:** The offended team is awarded a free throw (20.1). If the foul is committed by the defensive team, the offensive team is awarded a free throw. If the foul is committed by the offensive team, the defensive team is awarded the ball and the free throw.

#### Actions leading to an ordinary foul:

- To sprint for the ball before the referee's signal is given (20.2).
- To assist a player at any time during the game (20.3).
- To hold on to or push off the goal posts, side of the pool, or any pool fixture (except at the start) (20.4).
- To stand, walk, or push off the bottom of the pool (except the goalkeeper within the 5-yard/meter area) (20.5).
- To put the ball under the water when tackled (20.6).
- To strike the ball with a clenched fist (except the goalkeeper within the 5-yard/meter area) (20.7).
- To play or touch the ball with two hands at the same time (except the goalkeeper within the 5-yard/meter area) (20.8).
- To impede the movement of a player who is not holding the ball (20.9).
- To push or push off from an opponent who is not holding the ball (20.10).
- To be inside of the opponent's 2-yard/meter line except when behind the line of the ball (20.12).
- To take a penalty throw other than as described in the Rules (20.13).
- To delay unduly when taking a free throw, corner throw, or goal throw (20.14).
- For the goalkeeper to go or touch the ball beyond the half distance line (20.15).

- To send the ball out of the field of play (20.16).
- For a team to retain possession of the ball for more than 35 seconds without shooting at the opponent's goal (20.17).
- To waste time (20.18).
- To fail to be ready at the start of a period (20.19).

## **(B) Exclusion Fouls**

**Referee's Signal:** The referee blows the whistle four or five times in rapid succession (e.g., tweeeet, tweet, tweet, tweeeet). The referee raises one arm and points in the direction of the attack. Simultaneously, the referee raises the other arm, points to the excluded player, and sweeps his/her arm towards the re-entry area. The referee also signals the cap number of the excluded player (using hand signals) so that it is visible to the players in the field of play and the officials table. If necessary, the referee will also point to the location in the field of play from which the free throw is to be taken.

**Penalty:** The excluded player must swim to his/her team's re-entry area without interfering with play, and the player must remain there (1) until 20 seconds of actual playing time elapses, (2) until a goal is scored, or (3) until his/her team is awarded possession of the ball. The offended team is awarded a free throw (20.1, 20.2, and 20.3).

### **Actions leading to an exclusion foul:**

- To interfere with the taking of a free throw, goal throw, or corner throw (21.5).
- For a defender to play or block or attempt to play or block a shot when the defender is outside of the 5-meter line (21.6).
- To splash intentionally in the face of an opponent. This applies to both offensive and defensive players (21.7).
- To hold, sink, or pull back an opponent who is not holding the ball (21.8).
- To kick or strike an opponent intentionally, or to make disproportionate movements with that intent (21.9).
- To refuse obedience to or show disrespect for a referee or official (21.10). At the referee's discretion, a player may be excluded for a minor act of disrespect.<sup>32</sup> (See, also, "Game Exclusion Foul with Delayed Substitution.")
- For an excluded player to re-enter or a substitute to enter the game improperly when that player's team is on offense (21.15).
- For a defending goalkeeper to fail to take up the correct position on the goal line at the taking of a penalty throw having been ordered once to do so by the referee (21.17).

---

<sup>32</sup>Applicable to NISCA and NCAA rules, but not USAWP rules.

## (C) Penalty Fouls

**Referee's Signal:** The referee blows the whistle twice (e.g., tweet, tweeeet) and, simultaneously, raises one arm over his/her head with five fingers of the hand extended. The referee also signals the cap number of the offending player so that the signal is visible to the players in the field of play and the officials table.

**Penalty:** The offended team is awarded a penalty throw (a 5-meter shot) (22.1).

### Actions leading to a penalty foul:

- For a defending player to commit a foul within the 5-yard/meter area but for which a goal would probably have resulted. In addition to other offenses preventing a probable goal, it is also an offense within the meaning of this Rule:
  1. For any defending player to pull down or displace the goal.
  2. For a defending field player to play the ball with two hands or a clenched fist.
  3. For any defending player (i.e., a field player or the goalkeeper) to take the ball under the water when tackled.
  4. For a defending player to intentionally play or attempt to play the ball or block or attempt to block a shot or pass with two hands when that defending player is inside of the 5-meter line.
- For the goalkeeper to push off the wall when blocking a shot (22.2).
- Fouls such as holding, pulling back, impeding, etc., that would normally be ordinary or exclusion fouls may become penalty fouls if committed within the 5-yard/meter area by a defending player if a probable goal would otherwise have been scored (22.2).
- For a defending player within the 5-yard/meter area to kick or strike an opponent (22.3). (See, also, "Game Exclusion Foul with No Substitution and a Penalty Throw.")
- For an excluded player to interfere intentionally with play, including affecting the alignment of the goal; the offending player is also charged with another personal foul. If the excluded player does not begin to leave the field of play "almost immediately," the referee may interpret this as intentional interference (21.20, 22.4).
- For an excluded player to re-enter or a substitute to enter the field of play improperly prior to or at the expiration of an exclusion period when that player's team is on defense (21.15).
- For a player with three personal fouls to enter or re-enter the game while the ball is in play (22.8).
- For a player who has been excluded to commit an immediate act of "minor disrespect." The player is charged with two personal fouls, one for the original exclusion and one for the penalty foul (21.20).

### **(D) Game Exclusion Foul with Delayed Substitution**

**Referee's Signal:** The referee blows the whistle four or five times in rapid succession (e.g., tweeeet, tweet, tweet, tweeeet). The referee signals an exclusion foul as noted above and then rotates his/her hands (one around the other) in such a manner that these actions are visible to the players in the field of play and the officials table. The referee also signals the cap number of the excluded player (using hand signals) so that it is visible to the players in the field of play and the officials table. If necessary, the referee will also point to the location in the field of play from which the free throw is to be taken.

**Penalty:** The excluded player must swim to his/her team's re-entry area without interfering with play and then exit the field of play. The excluded player is not permitted to play for the remainder of the game (including any overtime periods), but the player must remain seated on his/her team's bench and wear his/her cap. The offended team is awarded a free throw. A substitute for the excluded player may enter the field of play from the re-entry area (1) after 20 seconds of actual playing time elapses, (2) after a goal is scored, or (3) when his/her team is awarded possession of the ball. Note that the excluded player may leave the field of play through the re-entry area before the substitute enters the re-entry area.<sup>33</sup>

#### **Actions leading to a game exclusion foul with delayed substitution:**

- Misconduct, including obscene or disparaging gestures directed toward any individual, foul language, violent or persistent fouling, or "taunting" an opponent (21.10).
- To refuse obedience to or show disrespect for a referee or official (21.10). While referees may exclude a player for a minor act of disrespect (see "Exclusion Fouls")<sup>34</sup>, more serious acts of disrespect (or a second minor act of disrespect) result in a game exclusion with delayed substitution.
- To interfere with the taking of a penalty throw. If the penalty throw is missed as a result of the interference, the penalty throw is retaken (21.16).

### **(E) Game Exclusion Foul with Delayed Substitution and a Penalty Foul**

**Referee's Signal:** The referee signals, in sequence, an exclusion foul, a game exclusion foul, and a penalty foul, as described in above paragraphs. The referee also

---

<sup>33</sup>If a player is excluded from the remainder of the game for any reason (including receiving a 3<sup>rd</sup> personal foul), and he/she exits the pool any place other than the re-entry area, a substitute for that player is not permitted to re-enter the game until a goal is scored, a timeout is called, or the next period begins. See Section 9 of this *Guide*, which discusses illegal exits from the pool.

<sup>34</sup>Applicable to NISCA and NCAA rules, but not USAWP rules.

signals the cap number of the offending player in such a manner that the signal is visible to the players in the field of play and the officials table.

**Penalty:** The player must leave the field of play immediately, and he/she is not allowed to participate in the remainder of the game (including any overtime periods), but the player must remain seated on his/her team's bench and wear his/her cap. As play is stopped for the administration of the penalty throw, the player does not have to leave the field of play through the team's re-entry area. The substitute for the excluded player enters the re-entry area prior to the administration of the penalty throw, and the offended team then takes the penalty throw. The substitute may re-enter from the re-entry area (1) if the penalty throw is good, (2) after 20 seconds of actual play has elapsed, or (3) when his/her team gains possession of the ball.

**Actions leading to a game exclusion foul with delayed substitution and a penalty throw:**

- For a player within the 5-meter area to kick or strike an opponent (22.3).
- For a player at any location in the pool to commit an act of brutality (22.3). Additional penalties also apply to this foul as outlined in Rule 21.11.
- For a goalkeeper or any defensive field player to pull over the goal completely with the object of preventing a goal (22.5).
- For a player or substitute who is not entitled under the Rules to participate in the play to enter the field of play (22.6). For example, this rule would apply to the entry of (1) an extra or 8<sup>th</sup> player for either team, (2) a player with three personal fouls, or (3) a player who has been excluded from the game. If two or more extra players enter the pool, each player is excluded from the remainder of the game, and the offended team is awarded a penalty throw for each extra player (i.e., 3 extra players equals three penalty throws). See Section 9 of this *Guide* for a discussion of illegal players.