

Critical Mass

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Amid a growth in water polo that approaches critical mass, there's hope that swimming and water polo can work for the common good. Experience indicates something much different.

BY TOM SLEAR

Adam Hewko mixes water polo and swimming the old fashioned way. He plays water polo for Servite High School in Anaheim, Calif., three months of the year and swims for Dave Salo at Irvine Novaquatics the other nine. There is little crossover. During water polo season, he attends no swim practices, and when he concentrates on swimming, he rarely touches a ball.

Hewko is a member of a fading breed. In this emerging era of athletic specialization at younger and younger ages, he has resisted picking one sport over the other. What's more, neither Salo nor Jim Sprague, the water polo coach at Servite, has exerted any pressure to choose.

"I've been blessed," Hewko says. "They understand that the most important thing is to determine what the athlete wants and then offer the proper encouragement."

Yet Hewko senses he won't be able to put off a decision much longer. This fall as a senior, he will likely be the most sought after water polo recruit in the country. As a swimmer, he will be among the top five or six.

A part of him says he should be able to continue as he has in high school. Yet another part of him warns that his days of freedom are numbered.

College sports, at least at the level Hewko will participate, is at its root level, a business. The currency is winning. Coaches are not disposed to sharing their scholarship athletes with other sports.

In years past, the college water polo player who also swam was common, even among the elite schools. The University of California-Berkeley has always been the leader in this regard. This past year, however, it had no one doing both, which, says Kirk Everist, the head men's water polo coach at Berkeley, serves as a clear indication of a trend. Fewer athletes are willing to try it, he says, and even fewer coaches are willing to accept it.

"I'm worried about the decision because I really want to continue with both sports," says Hewko. "I will sit down and talk to the coaches and see if we can work it out. If not, I will have a big decision to make."

SPECIALIZATION - THE ORDER OF THE DAY

Hewko's impending dilemma represents in microcosm the rift between water polo and swimming. For all of the talk of getting along, the sports inevitably force the athletes to choose. The tidy division between the two, with water polo in the fall, swimming in the winter and spring, and perhaps an agreeable mix of the two in the swimmer, has gone the way of cheap gas, replaced by year-round water polo clubs that are competing with swimming for athletes right down to the age-group level.

"Instead of the two sports being mutually beneficial, it's forcing kids to make choices, and it's hurting both," says Paul Bergen, the three-time Olympic swim coach who is now head coach at Tualatin Hills Swim Club in Beaverton, Ore. "I used to see a lot of carryover, and I used water polo in the fall to get (swimmers) into shape. But what I've been seeing the last five years is water polo in the spring on a club basis. The result has been slower swimmers and slower water polo players."

Members from each camp insist they are not competing for athletes. It's not about building empires, they say. Rather, they merely want what's best for all concerned. When asked to define "best," however, their answers are as predictable as a morning sunrise. Water polo coaches want the athletes to play water polo throughout the year, with an ample amount of swimming thrown in to enhance the conditioning base. Swimming coaches want year-round swimming with water polo inserted here and there for variety.

The turf fight between the two sports is surprising only in that anyone would find it surprising. Specialization has been the order of the day for sports in America since the early 1990s. Middle school soccer players are never more than a phone call away from competition twelve months of the year, including indoor play in the northern states. The same can be said for basketball and, to a lesser extent, baseball. The rest of the athletic community is doing what swimming has done for decades – capture the athletes young and groom them for a four-season commitment by the time they enter high school. Water polo is matching swimming at its own game, and understandably so. If the United States hopes to compete favorably on the international level, it must build a foundation beyond the traditional high school base.

"In Europe, the players at all levels are playing 50 to 80 games a year," says USA Water Polo spokesperson Eric Velazquez. "In the high school season here in the United States, some of the top teams might play 30 to 35 games. The answer is to get on a club team where they can start playing at a younger age and then play outside the high school season."

SIZE AND EXPOSURE

A quick look at the structure of water polo in America leads to one inescapable conclusion – water polo desperately needs swimming. Says Everist, who played on two Olympic water polo teams after swimming and playing water polo at Berkeley in the late

1980s, "Every once in a while there is a player who didn't come up through the swimming ranks, but it's pretty rare."

In 15 or 20 years, perhaps, the United States might duplicate the European model of starting players off strictly with water polo when they are as young as 8 years old, but for now, water polo's recruiting base in America remains entrenched in competitive swimming. Nearly as important, water polo needs swimming clubs to develop the ability of its players to get up and down a 30-meter course many times during a 28-minute game.

On the other hand, swimming has little need for water polo. Rarely do water polo players switch to swimming. In fact, quite the opposite. Bill Thompson, the CEO of Silicon Valley Aquatic Association, which includes a water polo and a swim club, sees 10 or so of his senior swimmers each year switch to water polo while none go the other way. But, as he says, "The ones who go to water polo aren't great swimmers. The ones excelling at swimming are sticking with swimming."

Such losses aside, swimming still dwarfs water polo in size and exposure. Despite Herculean efforts to expand its base, water polo remains a California sport. In 2002, only six states reported participation to the National Federation of State High School Associations. Of the 1,150 schools hosting boys or girls water polo, 886 were from California. Of the 28,527 participants, 23,668 were from California. In comparison, swimming had 11,475 schools competing in 48 states with 231,916 boys and girls participating.

USA Water Polo has a membership of 31,000, barely one-seventh of USA Swimming's 228,216. As for exposure, neither sport sets any records, but a sizable portion of the American sporting public is familiar with names such as Jenny Thompson, Dara Torres and Lenny Krayzelburg. Water polo has perhaps one recognizable name – Brad Schumacher – and mostly because he combined his water polo and swimming talents well enough to earn two Olympic gold medals in swimming in 1996 and a spot on the U.S. Olympic water polo team in 2000.

Moreover, while water polo coaches almost universally see value to competitive swimming in the offseason, swim coaches see little benefit from water polo other than the break it inserts into the routine.

"I don't think there's any justification for saying water polo can be a legitimate part of swim training development," says Murray Stephens, founder of North Baltimore Aquatic Club and an Olympic coach in 1996.

"Water polo for swimmers is a way to have fun, but there is very little transfer in training. Water polo is another physical exercise that can help you get stronger and develop some power and maybe some muscular conditioning that you might not focus on when you are doing swim training, but it's not complementary as such, any more than dry-land training is complementary."

CRITICAL MASS

Yet despite its meager size and utility, water polo is like a persistent fly. It might not be big or powerful, but it has swimming's attention nonetheless. With the infusion of women since the mid-1990s at the high school and college levels, water polo has grown by leaps and bounds. The sport is approaching critical mass, even threatening, to some extent, swimming's monopoly over aquatic sports. According to Jeff Pease, the head coach of North Shore Aquatics in Carlsbad, Calif., his program has lost some 30 percent of its pool time to water polo over the last 10 years.

"It's gotten to the point where we are at bare minimum for pool space," he says. "Any more cuts, and we couldn't support the program."

Ensnared in Maryland, Stephens thought he was immune from the inroads of water polo, but recently the time at a pool he rents was cut back because of the needs of a high school water polo team.

More worrisome to swim coaches is the talent drain that has accompanied water polo's growth. When pressed, they will concede that swimming invariably loses when it goes head to head with water polo for the hearts and minds of the athletes.

"Let's face it. Water polo training is a lot more fun than training for swimming," says Schumacher, who has dropped water polo to train for the Olympic swimming trials next summer. "I think a lot of club swimming is just overtraining."

CHANGES CALLED FOR

Competitive swimming offers many pluses – delayed gratification, top physical conditioning, the mental toughness of individual competition – yet swimmers are well into high school or even college before they comprehend the merits of these benefits. Meanwhile, sometimes in the same facility in which they are swimming, they are tempted by a team sport that offers considerably more variety and social interaction during practice and short, intense competitions instead of four-hour marathons.

"We've got to make some changes," admits Pease. "We've got to have more team experiences, such as dual meets, and we've got to do a better job of selling the individual side of the sport. In swimming, everyone gets a chance to compete. That's not always the case with polo."

The hope in many circles is that water polo and swimming will find a way to come together for everyone's benefit. Experience paints that notion as naive.

When competing for athletes, sports have never offered more than superficial cooperation. Football continues to lengthen its season regardless of the wishes of many of its players to compete in basketball. Soccer has expanded its competitive seasons despite the desire of many to play baseball or softball. And women's college water polo

has settled into a spring season, overlapping with the championship portion of the swimming schedule, roughly equating to what men's swimming has done by scheduling dual meets as early as October, smack in the middle of the men's water polo season.

The relationship between swimming and diving points out a more likely scenario. Once linked, they now touch each other only tangentially. At the end of the day, they discovered that water was their only common ground. To try to do both meant success in neither.

"I'm conflicted," says Larry Rogers, the head coach of water polo and swimming at Bellermino College Prep in San Jose, California. "I hate to see the kids have to make a choice. It bothers me to see a kid say, 'I'm just a water polo player,' or, 'I'm just a swimmer.'" But with the water polo clubs – there are more of them, and they will grow bigger – that's the way it's going. I don't know if it's right, but it's the way it's gotten in this country. We're more specific in all areas of athletics."