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WATER POLO Ball Handling Skills

A Guide to the Video Tape

by Tamas Farago

To order the video, call USWP at 719-634-0699

ABOUT TAMAS FARAGO

In the opinion of most international judges and players, Tamas Farago is the best athlete ever to play the game of water polo. Known for his amazing attacking and shooting skills, Farago was the main reason for Hungary's Olympic medal performances of 1972, 1976 and 1980.

At the 1976 Olympics, in Montreal, Farago was almost a one man show, scoring 22 of Hungary's 30 Olympic tournament goals. In the game that determined the gold medal, Farago scored four of Hungary's six goals, including the game winner with 20 seconds left on the game clock to defeat Italy, 6 to 5.

Water polo is Hungary's national sport, and games are played with the same intensity as football and basketball are in America. With its strong club system, Hungary is always considered a contender for a medal in any tournament. It is because of players like Tamas Farago that Hungary was able to win a medal at every Olympic Games from 1928 through 1980.

Today, Farago is a Doctor of Veterinary Medicine, runs a highly successful private water polo school for children in Budapest and coaches the Hungarian Jr. National Team - 1995 FINA World Jr. Champions.

For the Record: OLYMPICS: 1972 silver, 1976 gold, 1980 bronze.
 WORLD CHAMPIONSHIPS: 1973 gold, 1975 silver, 1978 silver. FINA
 CUP: 1979 gold. European Championships: 1974 gold, 1977 gold.

Introduction

To be good at water polo, you must be good with the ball. You must own

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your own ball. You must get to know the ball by playing with it as much as possible so you can develop a feel for it. You must make it your companion and friend. If you do, the ball will be good to you in games.

TODAY, SPORTS ARE DEMANDING MORE CREATIVE PLAYS, ADVANCED PLAYS, ARTISTIC PASSES. However, before you can make the trick pass or trick shot - the flashy play - you need to have the fundamentals - the basics.

There are two types of fundamental ball handling skills. The basic and the creative. That's what I'm going to teach you in this video - the basic fundamentals and then the creative fundamentals. Some of the exercises you will see are not for use in a game. However, they will improve your game for the following reasons:

1. They are a great warm-up exercises.
2. They will improve your feel for the ball.
3. They will strengthen your fingers, finger tips, wrists, forearms and shoulders.
4. They will build your self-confidence and poise for pressurized game situations.
5. They will develop your ability to concentrate.
6. They will improve your coordination, hand quickness and general reaction time.

THE COORDINATION CORRELATION - The development of specific agility skills will improve your overall coordination. Under this theory, it is believed that skills using your head or feet will improve your hand skills by improving overall coordination.

For me, these exercises were a challenge. I wanted to break the routine and boredom of practice, to be creative, do something new and different. I never wanted to just be good. I wanted to be the best - which is a lot better than just being good.

To be the best you have to practice and practice and practice the drills I'm going to show you. They made water polo fun for me. They made me better. They'll be fun for you too.

Tips from Tamas: Practice does not always make perfect. What practice does - is to make the way you practice permanent. "Practice makes perfect" only when you use proper technique during practice.

The big thing to remember when you are doing these drills is to perform them with proper technique. Don't cheat to make them easier. Pay

attention to body and leg position and the proper arm motion. Remember to use your entire body for balance and power. You must be sure to hold the ball with strong-sensitive fingers. Finally, you must work hard on these skills. If you do, I guarantee that your game will improve

Chapter 1: PICKING UP THE BALL IN THE WATER

Tips from Tamas: Try not to use a new ball in practice. Look for the old, worn out slippery balls. The old ones require better skills and techniques and will help you become a better player.

There are two basic methods of lifting the ball from the water: by placing the hand underneath the ball, and by placing it on top. The location of the ball and your body position will determine how you pick it up.

To pick the ball up from underneath, the palm of the hand - with fingers wide-spread and relaxed - is placed under the ball, and the opposite hand aids in supporting the body in the water.

Relax, Take the ball, DON'T GRAB or Squeeze it. Hold the ball in a loose grip with some space between the palm of your hand and the ball. The ball is then lifted to a position above the head by rotating the wrist in a half circle to allow the finger tips to take a position toward the back of the ball in preparation for the throw.

You must also practice and learn to handle the ball in this manner with both right and left hand.

To pick the ball up from the top, the palm of the hand, with fingers wide spread is placed on top of the ball. The ball is then pressed into the water and quickly released. As the hand is drawn away the pressure of the water underneath the ball causes it to rebound and stick to the palm of the hand. Then as the ball slightly clears the surface of the water, the wrist is rotated in a half circle to allow the hand to get underneath the ball.

Tips from Tamas: Never dribble the ball when you have the opportunity to pass

To pick up the ball from a swimming or dribbling situation, you should always utilize both hands to control the ball with the two-handed transfer (although two hands are never actually in contact with the ball at the same time). When perfected, this technique gives you greater control over the ball than all other techniques.

The lead hand pushes, or hands off the ball to the throwing hand while the body is rotating into the proper throwing position. Once the ball is touched or controlled by the lead hand, you no longer need to look at the ball. Look around, look at the situation, look at the goalie - if the situation is no good, you can always put the ball back on the water and swim away.

The hand transfer from both a stationary position and while dribbling must be practiced over and over until perfected.

Picking up the ball with the back of the hand and rolling the ball into the palm is a creative technique that should be practiced to improve your feel for the ball and your coordination. If mastered, the back of the hand pick up is a useful skill that can catch both defenders and goalkeepers off guard.

It is also possible to pick up the ball with your feet with great effect. Over the years, I have picked up the ball, shot and scored in international competition with my feet. I don't recommend young players using feet in games because foot skills are 20 year skills (skills that take 20 years to master). However, foot drills are challenging, fun and will improve your game by improving your overall coordination and balance in the water.

Chapter 2. BALL HANDLING DRILLS

Tips from Tamas: The big thing to remember when doing ball handling drills is to always use proper technique.

1. The Finger Tip Tap. The finger tip tap drill is designed to strengthen your fingers and finger tips. Finger tip strength is essential for ball handling and throwing the ball with speed and accuracy. In this drill, the ball is tapped in the air from the finger tips, with arms straight.

In this variation of the tap drill, the arms are extended and elbows are locked. As the ball is tapped back and forth with straight fingers from the wrist, the arms move from horizontal to vertical positions.

This drill requires great concentration, especially when you take your eye off the ball.

2. Squeezing the Banana. Another finger and hand strengthening drill is squeezing the banana. In this drill the finger tips actually squeeze the ball into the air.

Slippery balls are definitely better for this one.

By moving the arms above the head, the arms and shoulders are also strengthened.

3. Behind the back pass. Passing the ball behind the back is a coordination and concentration drill which is the first step in mastering the "Around the World" drill.

4. Around the World. "Around the world" is a great drill for practicing the two handed pick up and learning to sense and control the ball without looking at it.

Because the "Around the World" drill is both a conditioning and coordination drill requiring tremendous concentration, it is one of the most beneficial of all the ball handling drills.

5. The Flip and Roll, Water-Wheel and Finger Spinning. The backhand flip and roll is a coordination and concentration drill that simulates the back handed pick up . It is also one of many drills that can be practiced during leg work, like the water wheeland finger spinning.

6. Head Drills. Balance and coordination in the water are essential for any water polo player. Few drills require more balance and coordination than balancing the ball on your head.

Head juggling is another drill that will improve your athletic agility and your game.

7. Foot Drills. Like head drills, foot juggling will improve your overall balance and coordination.

Tips from Tamas: Make the commitment to be a good water polo player and become dedicated to ball handling.

Chapter 3: Throwing Techniques

Tips from Tamas: Rebound boards are especially useful in developing proper throwing and catching techniques and should be used throughout the year

1. The Tap Drill. The first drill in this sequence of throwing techniques is the tap drill. The tap drill is a great warm up and coordination exercise that also develops finger and wrist strength - essential for all throwing techniques. The tap drill should be practiced close to the board and can be performed with two hands, one hand only and with alternate hands.

2. The Wrist Flick. The first true throwing technique in the drill sequence is the wrist flick. Beginning athletes should start fairly close to the board. As you develop you should move farther away. The wrist flick is not a shoulder throw. Shoulders are square to the board and don't move. The ball never goes behind the head and the throw is made primarily by a flick of the wrist and snap of the fingers. Like almost all throws in this sequence, the wrist flick should be practiced with both hands.

3. Full Arm Throw. When throwing the ball, with a full arm motion, it is important that you use your entire body. It should never be just with your arm. As the ball is taken behind your head, your torso and shoulder should rotate and generate torque for maximum power and speed. For accuracy the ball should move in a straight line from back to front. At the end of the motion, the wrist should flick and the fingers should snap. Concentrate and

focus on the target to ensure the ball returns to you consistently. A slight backspin should be on the ball.

4. Catching. To catch the ball, the fingers should be relaxed, spread wide and slightly bent at the joints. Do not attempt to stop the ball, but continue in the direction of the pass, bending back the hand at the wrist, with a light movement of the elbow or shoulder.

5. The Sweep or Sling. The sweep or sling resembles the technique of a discus thrower. Do not bend the elbow when sweeping. As with all throws that begin with the ball on the water, the ball should be picked up using the two hand transfer technique. The ball is thrown with a straight-arm that sweeps low over the water. Rotation of the head, chin, shoulder and hips is what gives the ball velocity.

6. The Screw. Pushing or "Screwing" the ball while swimming, is a great way to make a quick pass or shot. The Screw should always begin with the non-passing hand assisting the pick up (the two-hand transfer). As the ball is handed back to the shooting hand, the shoulders and body rotate into shooting position. As the ball is picked up, it is slightly drawn back to the shoulder release position. As the ball is released, the arm shoots forward in a piston like motion.

7. The T-shot. Another spectacular and effective passing or shooting technique is accomplished by "Tee-ing" up the ball on one palm and shooting it off the "T" with the finger tips of the opposite side hand. The T-shot is relatively easy to learn, but is difficult to perfect and is the one throw that should only be used with the strong hand. As the ball is "Teed" up, the shooting hand and shoulder appear to be doing a normal crawl recovery stroke. The fingers then fly forward in a quick motion toward the ball. The shooting arm and shoulder continue to follow through after the ball is shot off the "T". The advantage of the "T - shot" is the element of surprise.

8. The Half-Backhand. To be a complete offensive player you should master the backhand with both right and left hand. The backhand progression begins with the half-backhand. The throw originates in the shoulder, with the elbow and wrist following.

9. The Backhand Wrist Flick. The Back Handed Wrist Flick is thrown from a straight-arm which is stretched out across the water at a 90 degree angle to the direction of the throw. While the elbow is straight, it is turned toward the direction of the throw. The advantage of the wrist flick is its quick release and short-range accuracy.

10. The Backhand. The backhand can be taken with either a bent or straight arm. Backhanded shots are thrown with a great deal of velocity because of the body torque, but are sometimes hard to control. However, as experience is gained through practice, a great deal of control can be achieved.

11. The Forward Volley. The faultless execution of the forward volley from a pass requires great ball handling skill and a flawless sense of timing. Anticipating the pass, the player rises out of the water with vigorous leg action. Concentration is the Key to calculating the precise spot and moment to touch the ball. The start of the throwing action almost coincides with the completion of the shot.

12. Head & Foot Volleying. Using the rebound board for head and foot juggling will develop and improve coordination and will make you a better player by improving your overall hand eye coordination.

13. Passing Practice. After you have mastered the basic throwing techniques on the rebound board, practice passing all the drills demonstrated in the video on the rebound board with a team mate.

Hungarian golden rule of passing: Pass the ball that you would like to catch!

14. Shooting Practice. You can also practice shooting with your team mates. Shoot five or ten consecutive shots while another player blocks the ball and returns it to you. Then trade places. Be sure to move to simulate game situations by moving and faking.

Shooting requires more power than passing. Power is partially determined by the distance the arm travels from the start of the throw to the follow through. The distance the arm can move is in turn determined by body balance and torque, or how much the body is used to assist the arm.

Shots can be simple or complex, but it is essential that all shots be perfectly executed with pinpoint accuracy.

Practice, experiment and develop your own techniques to score in specialized game situations.

15. Faking. Faking is the art of deception. A fake must make the goalie and/or a defender think you are shooting or passing. If they are not deceived, the fake is no good. You can fake with your arm, shoulders, chest, hips, eyes or any combination. Any solution that deceives the goalie is good.

You must fake to avoid telegraphing shots and passes. To be good at faking you have got to practice at every opportunity, particularly during passing and shooting drills with teammates and when practicing on your own.

Faking techniques include:

1. Arm only fake (ball moves)

2. Shoulder and arm combination fake
3. Shoulder, arm and head combination
4. Chest, hip, head combination (everything moves except the arm and ball)
5. One shot to another (example: hard shot to lob shot)
6. One location to another (example: fake low left, shoot high right)
7. Fake a pass, then shoot or fake a shot then pass

General tips to remember when faking:

1. Always use your eyes deceptively.
2. Make every movement different - get the goalie out of rhythm.
3. Always attack while faking (move in or to the side). Work for a better shooting angle, to get the goalie out of position, or to create a better angle for a teammate.
4. A lob shot is not like a basketball shot. It must come off a fake. No fake - no lob! A lob shot should be taken with the wrist and fingers from a high extended arm position.

Hungarian proverbs: A goalie is never more clever than a shooter! A good shot is one that goes in the goal!

Chapter 4: Dry Land Drills

Tips from Tamas: You don't need to be in the pool to practice water polo. You can improve your game at home, in front of the TV, or in your backyard, with drills that will improve your ability to perform with the ball in the water.

Stretching & Warm Up Drills

1. Back and Forth (standing erect, first handing off the ball from one hand to the other, then passing the ball.
2. Swinging the Pendulum (bend at the waist, swing the ball like a pendulum from hand to hand with maximum shoulder stretch. Gradually increase stretch and the speed of the swing.
3. Shooting motion. With left foot foreword, toe pointing forward, right foot a comfortable distance back, toe at 90 degree angle, knees slightly

bent - hold the ball high and to the back. Simulate the proper throwing motion moving the ball from back to front with the right hand. Repeat from the left side - develop a rhythm.

4. Tap/Bump/Spin - Play with the ball.

Strengthening and Coordination Drills

5. Squeeze the banana (squeeze, don't tap)
6. Tap drill (elbows locked, above the head, lower and raise arms while tapping)
7. Around the world
8. Head roll (from eyebrows to the back of your head)
9. Hand rolls (two hand "water wheel" and the backhand flip)
10. Finger spinning
11. Head and Foot balancing and juggling

Tips from Tamas: The number and variety of dry land drills with the ball is limited only by your imagination.

Wall Exercises

1. Tap (two hand, one hand, alternate)
2. Wrist flick (throw from the wrist, snap the wrist and fingers with little or no arm movement)
3. Shoulder throw (proper foot and body position - torque)
4. Sweep or Sling
5. T-shot (strong hand only)
6. Screw
7. Backhand (close, far - two hand catch, one hand catch)
8. Volleyball

Chapter 5: Specialized Swimming For Water Polo

Tips from Tamas: Water polo is a game for swimmers and the better you swim, the better you will be as a water polo player.

In water polo games the crawl stroke is used more than any other stroke...but other strokes are used to develop strength, coordination and a feel for the ball and water in young players.

1. Butterfly. Although never used in a game, a modified butterfly with the head out using a butterfly, flutter or breaststroke kick will develop strength and conditioning. The butterfly is also a preparatory exercise for the arm position in dribbling.
2. Breaststroke. The importance of breaststroke in water polo should not be minimized. Virtually every start, lunge, shot or pass starts with the breast or side strokes. Breaststroke for water polo differs from the competitive style in that the legs are more vertical and push the swimmer up rather than forward.
3. Backstroke. When a player wishes to view the game situation behind him without interrupting his forward progress, the backstroke is used. Again, the angle is more vertical with the head and shoulders held high for a better view and the legs are lower in the water. The arm stroke is accelerated to maintain the high body position and swimming speed. The scissors or breaststroke kick may also be used.
4. The Trudgeon. The Trudgeon stroke, or head out crawl with a scissors kick, should also be practiced to prepare for stops, quick starts and turns.
5. The Sidestroke. The over arm sidestroke, with a strong scissors kick, remains the basic stroke for fast starting and turning.
6. Changing Directions. Water Polo is a game of quick starts, stops, turns and multiple changes of direction. Changing direction is accomplished by executing a fast body turn. The knees are drawn into the chest. The hands scull to change the body's position and direction as the legs prepare for a powerful starting scissors kick. It is essential that the turn be executed quickly in order to save time and produce a fast overall view of the new situation.

MORE TIPS FROM TAMAS

If you can't concentrate, you won't play instinctively in the pool and you won't know what's going on. You won't be able to break down concepts or understand game situations. These drills will help you learn to concentrate.

Water polo is a game of habit, learn to react, anticipate and always strive to the limit of your abilities.

The player who is content just to get by in practice will, in games, cheat himself and his teammates.

You can't go full speed in a game if you're not willing to go full speed in practice.

Desire - If you want to be good, you have to have that inner drive to be the best you can be.

Drive to push through that pain barrier when performing these drills and in practice.

Make sure you have the fundamentals before you try a deceptive pass or shot!

When your frustrated, and want to give up, that's when you do the drill again and again. Break through that frustration and pain and you will improve.

Water polo is a thinking person's game - so think!

How do you get better? If you make 50 passes in practice - of course try to do them right. Then when you get ready for bed at night, close your eyes and make another 50 passes - but this time, strive for perfection.

Use your imagination, there are an infinite variety of drills, passes and shots. Some have yet to be developed.

If you care enough to give your best effort, your example may become contagious to your teammates.

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