

BOAT, PADDLE AND BALL

A short history of canoe polo

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Today's canoe polo is a game of thrills and spills that contrasts with the relaxed recreational canoe ball games of the past. The birth of the modern sport could be considered the demonstration games at Duisberg, Germany in 1987. But for over 100 years before this, canoeists played games of boat, paddle, and ball.

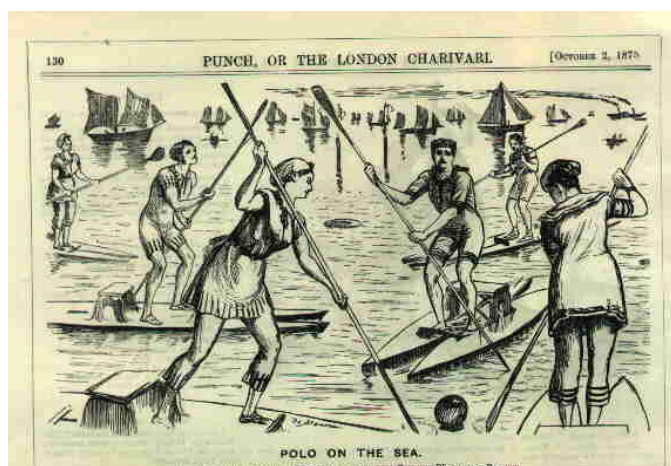
Beginnings

Early British magazines record that a variety of canoe ball games were played in Great Britain in the late nineteenth century. *Punch, or the London Charivari*, published a woodcut entitled 'Polo on the Sea' in 1875. The picture shows men and women in neck-to-knee bathing costumes standing on flat topped, double-hulled vessels competing for the ball with double bladed paddles. *The Graphic*, also of London, published an engraving in 1880 entitled 'Water Polo at Hunter's Quay, Scotland'. But this was quite different; players sat astride wooden barrels made-up with horses' heads and tails. Simply staying on the horse was challenging enough as riders were thrown from their uncooperative charges. Another picture, 'Water Polo', from *The Graphic* in 1884, shows players in decked canoes.ⁱ

All of these early games were a novelty, about fun and entertainment, and did not develop into today's canoe polo.

In the 1920's, paddlers in Germany and Franceⁱⁱ played canoe ball games as an introduction to canoeing and for building river skills. Serious canoeists paddled remote rivers but as the automobile was not yet widely available, only the most enthusiastic ventured out. It was difficult to attract new paddlers and spectators were few. Canoe ball games provided an exciting introduction to canoeing: challenging, safe, and close to home.

In 1926 the German Canoe Federation introduced 'kanupolo' as a way to attract new members as well as encourage camaraderie and contribute to federation finances. They also published rules of play. Folding kayaks were used until the 1930's but later replaced with wooden boats that were over four metres long. The playing area was large, 99–120 m long by 50–90 m wide. Goals on the water and were 4 m wide by 1.5 m high. Each team had 11 players and a game was in two halves of 45 minutes each. The playing field was later reduced to 60–90 m x 40–60 m with two 30 minute halves and five players aside. By 1935 kanupolo had become a regular competition with a governing body, coaching manuals, and consistent rules of play. However, it is apparent that the sport came to a standstill during the Second World War with interest not renewed until 1965. Regular competitions resumed 1969.



Polo on the Sea. *Punch, or the London Charivari*, 2 October 1875. Picture courtesy of J W Lester.



Water polo at Hunter's Quay, Scotland, *The Graphic*, 1880.

The Canoe Club of France introduced canoe ball games to canoeing festival programs in 1929. The games soon developed to become a sport with a playing area of 60–100 m long by the width of the river. Goals sat on the water and teams comprised 3, 4, or 5 boats. In 1935 a group of paddlers set guidelines for a game called ‘canoe ball’ to be played at the festivals—its primary aim was to vary training and to test paddling skills. It was not intended to create a competitive sport although by 1943 the playing rules were formalised, the large playing fields were reduced to 80 m x 35 m, kayaks replaced canoes, and canoe ball became ‘kayak ball’.



Water Polo. The Graphic, 1884. Picture courtesy of J W Lester.

Canoe polo was played in Great Britain in the 1950s although it is not clear what form it took or how it developed. Oliver Cock was an early protagonist and in 1960, refereed a game played in canvas boats on a lake in Northern Wales. A different game was played in Australia. From 1952 through to the 70’s, the Australians used touring canoes with two players to each boat. The bow paddler played the ball while the stern paddler controlled the boat.

For many years canoe polo had been played on rivers and lakes in a variety of craft, on different sized fields, to different rules, under different names, and for different reasons. There was little need to change what was an enjoyable and rewarding activity.

Technology

Quite independently, in 1966, the Borough of Newham in London asked Bert Keeble from the National Schools Sailing Association to design a kayak for teaching in swimming baths. Many pools were built in schools in the sixties and used for teaching children basic paddling and rolling skills. Canoe polo was a part of these sessions and provided an entertaining and practical way to apply the new skills. Some pools were open to the public. The pools were small, 10 m x 25 m, so small kayaks were needed to make the best use of the available space. The new kayak was made from wood; it was short and had a rounded bow and stern to prevent damage to the pool. Later, Alan Byde, a senior coach with the British Canoe Union (BCU), constructed a similar one from glass reinforced plastic. He called his boat the Baths Advanced Trainer (BAT).

The move to a baths setting and the creation of the BAT together provided the impetus to reshape the sport: the pool limiting the size of the playing area and the smaller boat leading to a more manoeuvrable craft. There were few rules of play, but these would change too.

Taking shape

An international competition beckoned. An enthusiastic following had grown through the schools in England



Kanupolo – Germany circa 1935. Geschichte des kanupolo, Deutsche Meisterschaften, vom 2, 5 Sep 2004

and canoe polo played in swimming baths was an emerging national sport. It was introduced as a demonstration sport at the Crystal Palace Exhibition, London in 1970 and caught the imagination. Such was the interest that the first English National Championships were held at the National Canoe Exhibition in the following year. Subsequently, the national championships were held every second year and over several years, introduced the English version of canoe polo to the world. By the end of the 1970s England, Germany, France, Finland, Sweden, Australia, the Netherlands, and Spain played some form of canoe polo.

Oliver Cock, a national coach with the BCU, had written the rules for the 1970 Crystal Palace games that called for 1 m x 1 m goals suspended 2 m above the water and, along with other requirements, prohibited playing the ball with the paddle. At the first English National Championship in 1971, a school team (average age 16 years) lost the grand final. They were incensed because aside from inconsistent refereeing, the paddle rule was not consistently applied and in effect penalised their style of play. They complained to the BCU and in response, the BCU Canoe Polo Committee was formed to prepare a consistent set of rules.

In 1972 the committee moved to introduce these rules to other countries but met considerable opposition. Consequently two quite different games persisted with the supporters of each passionately defending their favoured style. England, France and Australia preferred the BCU format of 1 m x 1 m goals 2 m above the water and allowing hands to play the ball. Germany, Italy and the Netherlands preferred the large playing area, on water goals, using the paddle to control the ball. Germany continued playing on large playing areas until 1990.

The International Canoe Federation (ICF) published a new version of the playing rules, also after intense argument over which form of the game should be adopted, in 1986. The first demonstration of these was at the World Sprint Titles in Duisberg in 1987, arguably the birth of the modern game. The sport of canoe polo was now official. It is played on a smaller field, with elevated goals; the ball can be controlled by hand or paddle and the BAT is the designated boat.

An international sport

The ICF International Canoe Polo Rules were finalised in 1990—playing area 30 m x 20 m (later revised to 35 m x 23 m); goals 1.5 m x 1 m x 2 m above the water and playing time two, 10 minute halves.

The inaugural ICF World Canoe Polo Championships held at Sheffield, England in 1994 showcased the sport with eighteen countries represented. There were eighteen men's teams and six women's team. The competing countries and their final placing were, for the men: 1 Australia, 2 Germany, 3 Great Britain, 4 Netherlands, 5 France, 6 Belgium, 7 Ireland, 8 Hungary, 9 Italy, 10 New Zealand, 11 Chinese Taipei, 12 South Africa, 13 Finland, 14 Austria, 15 Japan, 16 Brazil, 17 Portugal, and 18 Canada. And for the women: 1 Australia, 2 Great Britain, 3 France, 4 Germany, 5 New Zealand, and 6 Ireland.

Subsequent championships were hosted by Australia (1996), Portugal (1998), Brazil (2000), Germany (2002), Japan (2004), The Netherlands (2006) and Canada (2008). Future championships are planned for Italy (2010) and Spain (2012). A new milestone was reached in 2005 when canoe polo returned to Duisberg for the multi-sport 2005 World Games.

Canoe polo is a sport of speed, skill, and teamwork; a spectator's delight. Tackling, ball skills, and boat skills make it very different. Now a sport in its own right, it is no longer a diversion for the other disciplines.

Close

Far from the relaxed recreational games of yesteryear, canoe polo has become a fast competitive sport that challenges the best sportsmen and sportswomen. It has taken shape over the years and will continue to change. But above all, the origins of the sport are not lost: most still play for fun.

Acknowledgement

The author wishes to acknowledge the various sources that have provided the material for this history. Along with the references given below, many players have shared their recollections of the game's changes over



The modern game is fast and exciting as this (illegal) tackle shows. Photographer Rebecca Jennings.

recent years and the Internet has been invaluable; providing access to the web sites and histories of clubs and other groups from around the world. Thank you everyone. Comments on this essay are welcome and should be addressed to the author at: ibeasley@eftel.net.au.

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Endnotes

ⁱ Many people wonder how a sport played in kayaks gained the name 'canoe' polo instead of 'kayak' polo. In late nineteenth century England, canoes were considered boats in which the paddler sat low and faced the direction of travel (compared to a row boat in which the paddler sat high with their back to the direction of travel). Canoe conveniently described a variety of craft that included Canadian canoes, Eskimo kayaks, kayaks, decked canoes, folding canoes, and the Rob Roy. Early games were played in canoes and kayaks, so canoe polo was an easy and logical name for the sport. The Rob Roy is of interest because it was possibly the first example of a decked canoe that would today be called a kayak. John MacGregor constructed a deck on a canoe, which he called the Rob Roy, to paddle Europe's rivers; he also used a double bladed paddle. A description of the boat and his adventures are given in his book *A Thousand Miles in a Rob Roy Canoe* published in 1866.

ⁱⁱ It is generally accepted that the United States of America were latecomers to canoe polo. But in 1905, John F Conkling of Hawley, Pennsylvania applied for a patent with the United States Patent Office for a collapsible canoe particularly designed for playing water or canoe polo. The boat was 183 cm long x 61 cm wide. Conkling applied for a second patent in 1906 for a water-polo apparatus that was designed to mark off a playing field for canoe polo. The field was 48.8m x 24.3m wide, the frame included goals and a method for placing the ball in the centre of the field. What became of Conkling's inventions and his involvement with canoe polo is not known, but it is clear that the term *canoe polo* was used by him, in the USA, in 1905.