

# Think Shaq's job is tough? Get in the water with Bailey

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*Water polo player Ryan Bailey spends much of his time two meters away from the opponent's goal, but that's given him a unique view of the world. The former UC Irvine star, 28, is a veteran of the U.S. national team and has played professionally in Croatia. His job is roughly (in all senses of the word) the same as Shaquille O'Neal's or Brian McBride's — mix it up in front of the goal and score. He spoke with USATODAY.com's Beau Dure after the first of his team's two daily practices on Tuesday.*



Ryan Bailey in one of his rare moments without a defender attempting to inflict punishment on him.

By Daniel Hankin / USWP

## **1. How do you describe water polo to a first-time viewer?**

Usually, they say, "What's water polo?" And I tell them we have to teach our horses not to drink the water. They relate it to regular polo on a horse.

Normally, I describe it as a mixture between soccer and basketball, but in the water. I tell them it's a physical game, lots of wrestling. And I have a great time doing it — it's a lot of fun.

## **2. How nasty does it get in front of the goal?**

I play right in front of the goal, that's my position, kind of like the center in basketball. It gets bad. I've been choked, I've had my eyes gouged, I've had guys grabbing my (testicles). Pretty much everything you can think of, it happens. I've had 80 or so stitches in my face. It gets pretty ugly sometimes.

## **3. USA TODAY recently listed Shaquille O'Neal as one of the toughest athletes in sports. You do roughly the same thing he does, and you have the added concern of keeping yourself afloat. Doesn't that mean you're tougher than Shaq?**

I think so. Shaq's a tough guy, but most of the time on the basketball court, he's got guys hanging on him all the time. I've got guys hanging on me, plus everything under the water the referee can't see. Everything's legal, pretty much. So I'm getting grabbed, punched, kneed — everything you can think of. It's a lot more physical than basketball, that's for sure.

#### **4. Which country is the dirtiest?**

I think the dirtiest team is probably the Hungarians. Maybe the Americans are pretty dirty, too.

#### **Are you saying you give as well as you get?**

I try. I do my best.

#### **5. You play the 2-meter position. Your height is listed as 1.96 meters. Have you been tempted to grow your hair out to get that last 0.04 meters?**

Yes. I tell people I'm 1.99. I'm still trying to get to the full two meters. I think 1.99 is 6-6 and 1.96 is 6-5. I do need to grow my hair out a bit just to get that extra centimeter. That would be pretty good.

#### **Maybe a Ben Wallace type of 'do?**

Oh, whatever, yeah. Go with the Afro.

#### **6. How would you compare playing in college with playing professionally in Croatia?**

Internationally, it's just a lot faster of a game, a lot more physical. In college, you've got guys who are 5-6, 150 pounds playing against you. Internationally, everyone's 6-2 or 6-3 at least, and most guys are over 200 pounds. So it's bigger guys, faster play, a lot more physical.

#### **7. How do the fans compare?**

Oh, it's awesome. I played in Croatia, where water polo is the No. 1 sport. Here's it's like basketball, football, whatever. We get 5,000 people at our games. The games are on TV. You're a semi-celebrity in Croatia when you play water polo. It's a lot different than being here.

#### **Would you ever go back?**

Yeah, absolutely.

**8. *ER* features a Croatian doctor. Does he remind you of anyone you met while you were there?**

What's funny — all the Croatians when I was there, they were the ones telling me how about how *ER* had this Croatian doctor, and h

ow he speaks Croatian on the show. They were all pretty fired up on it when I was over there. The only guy he would remind me of is my good friend Niksa, who I played with.

**9. If you guys win the gold in Athens this year, and they decide to make a movie about you as they did for the "Miracle On Ice" hockey team, which actor should play you?**

Wesley Snipes.

**10. If you didn't play water polo, which Olympic sport would you like to try?**

I'm thinking about coming back as a shooter after I retire. With water polo ... like this morning, we swam six miles already today. It just seems like if you're a shooter, all you do is stand around a lot of the time. I'd come back somewhere I didn't have to work out so hard.

In the morning, we swim for three hours. Today we swam six miles. Actually, we lift weights first, and then we'll jump in the water and swim. And then at night, we'll do more swimming, and then we'll work on our legs, holding eight-kilo (or 20-pound) balls above our heads. And then we'll shoot a little bit and then swim some more.