

# Why's water polo so low?

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Los Alamitos, CA --When our panel of experts ranked the degree of difficulty of sports according to categories that ranged from endurance to agility to analytic aptitude, water polo came in at No. 11.

With all due respect to our experts, that's a crock. Water polo got jobbed. I know because I've seen the sport up close. I know because I got down in the water with the guys who play it and lived to tell the story ... but only just barely.

We're supposed to believe football (3), basketball (4), and tennis (7) are harder than water polo? Please.

Endurance? A water polo player swims 1.5 miles a game, with another player dragging and climbing all over him, pushing his head under the water and saying unkind things about his mamma when he comes up for air.



Strength? These guys egg-beater their legs for 32 minutes in nine feet of water, muscle each other for position and rise up into the air like they're jumping off a trampoline to shoot and block shots.

Agility? They work back-cuts and spin-moves like Kobe and Marvin Harrison. Nerve? They take 50-mph shots in the face and breathe in lungs-full of water. And they keep coming back for more.

[Boxing is the No. 1 sport](#) in our rankings, and boxing is brutal. But you know what water polo is? It's boxing *plus* sprinting *plus* basketball *plus* wrestling. With no floor beneath your feet.

Show me the boxer who levitates and shoots a ball with a defender in his face while he's bobbing and weaving. Until then, show me your love for water polo and the amazing athletes who play it.



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Before I get in the water with members of the USA Water Polo Team, I watch them play in the title game of the American Water Polo League Championships in Los Alamitos, CA.

From a distance, the game can look deceptively graceful and fluid. The players seem to glide through the water, the ball skips and hops from one outstretched arm to the next.

I get up poolside, though, and I hear the grunts and gasps. I see the water churning. And I quickly realize that guys getting worked over by mob muscle have it easier than your average water polo player.

Omar Amr, a driver (think point guard) and center defender for Team USA, has a nice Jake LaMotta gouge over his left eye. It's covered with tape, but it's still fresh.

The guy he's guarding holds the center position in front of the net and windmills his arms and elbows like Jimmy V looking to hug somebody, just hoping to catch Amr's eyebrow and bloody up his vision a bit.

"It's pretty much anything goes," Amr says later, shaking it off. "If you've got a weakness, the other guy will find it and try to exploit it."

Fortunately, Amr's a med student at Harvard in his off-time, so he can re-dress the wound when he gets out of the water. (That's right, med school. Did I mention these guys are impressive?)

And it isn't just the hand-to-hand that gets me. It's the relentless pace. Forget that they're treading water constantly. Forget that before they even get to things like passing and shooting, they have to survive their opponents' best efforts to drown them like unwanted kittens. Forget all that.

But remember that every goal, missed shot, and turnover means a sprint back down to the other end of a 30-meter pool, and every opportunity to pass or shoot involves a constant clawing just to get to some little patch of free water. And know that any letdown, any hesitation, means almost certain humiliation with a heaping portion of water up your nose and the other guy's flutter-kicking feet in your gut.

"There is no down-time, no recovery," says Eric Velazquez, director of media relations for the team.

I'm watching these guys; and I'm thinking this isn't a sport, it's a survival exercise. It's something Lou Gossett Jr. would do to Richard Gere just to make him suffer.

When their game ends, and the guys (every one of them with shoulders built to block out the sun and hold up the world) come walking my way on the deck of the pool, all I'm thinking is the idea of getting in the water with them is a very foolish one.



But we love foolish ideas here at Page 2. And after all, I brought my suit, and who knows? Maybe if I die at the hands of 6-foot-6, 250-pound center Ryan Bailey while chasing down the story of water polo, there'll be some sort of Plimptonian glory in it for me.

These are the things I'm thinking of as I get in the water. Well, these things and things like: Under normal circumstances, I wouldn't want to play checkers against men this big, let alone water polo. And: I wonder, if I get a leg cramp, which seems very likely, will they take pity on me and throw me on the deck or will they just push me to the bottom of the pool so I can have an authentic water polo experience?

Next thing I know, I'm in the pool with four guys from the team: Amr, Bailey, two-meter defender Dan Klatt, and goalkeeper Genai Kerr. We're all egg-beating (a little counter-intuitive leg swirl water-treading trick that is very much like rubbing your stomach and patting your head ... in nine feet of water). They do it nice and easy, like they're waiting for a bus. I do it frantically, like I'm hoping Pam Anderson is coming by with a buoy before I die.

"Let's show you some basic moves," Klatt says.

At least, I think it was Klatt -- I couldn't hear too well over the sound of my own gasping and gurgling.

First, I try to hold the center position. I need to pick a side I want to favor (Klatt means right or left, but I'm thinking above and below the surface), and I need to elbow my way up and into Klatt to hold him off and make myself available for an entry pass. Simple, on paper. Absurdly difficult in the water. I go for him, and he shifts and I'm in over my head.

Try again. I go for him, and he pushes back and I'm in over my head.

Try again. I go for him, and he takes pity on me, staying in one place, and I've got him where I want him, and Amr throws the ball in ... and I've got nothing left in the tank and it sails over my head and, yes, that's predictable enough because my head is under water, again.



I want out of the pool at this point. I want a massage and a beer and someone to tell my troubles to. Next is Bailey, and it's my job to defend him the way Klatt stuck it to me. I should get up and over his off-hand. I should put his head in the water, do anything to drag him down. I should not, under any circumstances, let him get the ball, because if I do, he'll turn, sometimes to his right with a wicked overhand shot, and sometimes to his left, with a sneaky, equally-wicked backhander, and fire the ball point-blank into the net.

I know my job and I'm ready to give it a go. I jump on his head and shoulders, the way my little girl jumps on mine when she wants a ride around the living room. He doesn't move much. Is he waiting me out? Does he not feel me at all?

No, he feels me all right. I know this because when Amr is ready to throw the ball in, Bailey quickly wraps his left arm around my waist, reaches for the ball with his right hand, and as he shoots, in one fluid motion but in two directions, throws a shot at the net and throws me, left-handed, somewhere out near the middle of the pool. I'm flying through the water. It's the fastest I've ever moved in a pool. And I'm laughing, but only because screaming seems too pathetic.

"Let's try it again," he says. "Only this time, I won't take it quite so easy on you."

Now I'm screaming.

There are other skirmishes and maneuvers. Amr lets me rush him, ducks under my arm and tattoos my chest with his feet, pushes free and clear for a shot before I know what's hit me. Klatt shows me what it's like to be pulled under three or four times in succession.

Kerr talks me through a short stint in goal -- it's a bunch of gobbledy-gook, not a single word of which involves the only sane thing to do when your head is all that

stands between a screaming ball and a net: Namely, duck and pray.

The highlight comes when they teach me how to shoot.

"It's the same principle as throwing a pitch in baseball," Klatt says. And he shows me, shoulders turned and following through, as if he's standing on a mound.

My turn. Just getting to where I can hold the ball up high enough to shoot is a chore. I have to kick my legs like I'm jumping up on a step that isn't there. It's a trick you play on your body, telling it that squared ankles and propulsive thighs are the same as actual solid surfaces.

After three or four tries, I'm up and out of the water. Barely. Still, I feel like Poseidon for doing it. I shoot five times, two of them actually reach the net on the fly. One, my best, is a lookaway that Kerr lets by him. I know he's humoring me and I'm happy to be humored.

And it's at this moment that water polo feels like a dozen other sports I've played.

"We all got into it because we liked other sports first," Klatt says. "We played basketball or football or whatever, but we could swim, too."

The appeal of the sport is the same as any other: You're trying to make good plays, score goals, put one past your opponent.

Sitting on the deck with the guys after our workout, I'm struck by how normal and familiar the scene is. We're replaying moments from our "game," talking about plays from earlier in the afternoon. Kerr even invites me to a cookout they're all headed for afterwards.



The only difference between this and other postgame scenes I know is that I'm sucking wind and thanking my lucky stars for the chance to stand on land again.

That's the thing, I think, that most impresses me about water polo athletes. The baseline for them, the thing that gets them to the point where their game is like all the other games, is this grueling, relentless struggle to stay afloat and move through the water.

There's something pure about it. They can't take for granted the chance to get a shot or stop a shot, to make a pass or to elude a defender. Everything they do is earned, and their appreciation for what they've earned is higher than any other team-sport athletes I know.

They're No. 11 in our rankings. But they're No. 1 with me.

*Eric Neel is a regular columnist for Page 2.*