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Rave Reviews

This book has been called the best book ever written on the great sport of water polo. Your assistance with the continued success of this book would be appreciated. Please write the publisher to express your impressions of this text, its illustrations, and all other content related suggestions and reactions. Your comments can assist with the future editions of this book and the development of other water polo books.

Thanks for your interest.

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United States Tactical Water Polo

by:

Monte Nitzkowski



Four-Time USA Olympic Coach



Sports Support Syndicate, Inc.
Pittsburgh, PA, USA
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United States Tactical Water Polo

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Dedication

To my wife Barbara, seven sons (Jim, Greg, Brett, Kevin, Kent, Rick and Jeff), and to all my players, assistant and co-coaches and managers (Community College, Club, National and Olympic Team) who, through their consummate skills, enabled me to enjoy a fun and successful career.

**Acknowledgements**

A special thanks to my chief editor, La Rue Moorhouse of Victor, Montana, who spent long hours trying to make sense out of my rambling, Eileen Sexton of United States Water Polo, Indianapolis, Indiana, for her editorial assistance, and Robert Webster of Costa Mesa, California (presently in Dalton, Georgia) for his editorial advice and guidance. I owe them all a great depth of gratitude.

About the Author

Monte Nitzkowski

Born in Pasadena, California, Monte learned to swim at the age of three at the Pasadena YWCA and Brookside Park pools. His first swimming competition was at age five with the Pasadena Athletic Club. He graduated from Huntington Beach Union High School in 1947, then attended Fullerton Junior College where he was first introduced to water polo by Hall of Fame Coach, James R. Smith.

Monte competed in both water polo and swimming at Fullerton then matriculated to UCLA where, under the coaching of



 1Author and coach, Monte Nitzkowski.



Brud Cleveland, received All Coast honors in water polo and captained the swim team. While at UCLA, Monte set the Pacific Coast Conference record in the 200-yard butterfly.

Upon 1951 graduation with a BA Degree, Monte entered the United States Navy and was eventually stationed at the United States Naval Academy where, under the coaching of John Higgins, Monte made the 1952 United States Olympic Swimming Team. He placed ninth in the 200 meter butterfly at Helsinki.

After the service, Monte entered graduate studies at California State University, Long Beach, where he received his Masters Degree and Teaching Credential in 1955. He began his teaching and coaching career at Long Beach City College in the fall of 1955 and retired from Long Beach City College in 1989. Monte taught in both the History and Physical Education Departments. His teams won numerous Regional and State Water Polo and Swimming Championships.

Monte began coaching water polo internationally with the Pan American Games in 1967 and retired following the 1984 Olympic Games in Los Angeles. He served as Assistant Pan American Coach in 1967 (Gold Medal) and 1975 (Silver Medal), and as Head Pan American Coach in 1979 (Gold Medal) and 1983 (Gold Medal). Monte was the Assistant United States Olympic Water Polo coach in Mexico City (5th place) and Head Olympic Coach for the 1972 Munich Olympics (Bronze Medal), the 1980 Moscow Olympics (boycott) and the 1984 Los Angeles Olympics (Silver Medal). The 1980 Olympic Water Polo Team was one of the finest teams ever to represent the United States and was considered a strong contender for the Gold Medal. During his career, exclusive of the boycott, every Olympic Team which Monte head-coached won an Olympic Medal.

Monte was inducted into the International Swimming Hall of Fame in Ft. Lauderdale, Florida in 1991.

Introduction

by Karen Kachigan

of **Competitive Aquatic Supply of Huntington Beach**

CAS has had the pleasure of knowing and working with Monte for many years. He is one of the world's most outstanding authorities everywhere the words "water polo" are spoken.

This long awaited book will become the bible for any beginning program as well as a handbook up through and including the elite programs already existing throughout the United States. This book should be an essential piece of equipment for everyone associated with the game of water polo.

CAS was able to team together Mark of SSS and Monte to put the finishing touches together and publish this book. Their connection and this title are bound to help the growth of water polo around the world. We hope you enjoy the book and pass on the good word to all your aquatic friends.

Now that you have some insider knowledge of how to play water polo, lets get started with building a program from scratch. There are thousands of pools across the USA that do not host water polo activities. Water polo isn't scheduled mainly because the lifeguards, coaches, pool managers and recreation people don't have the knowledge of how to play. After reading this book, there is no excuse.

“An outstanding innovator in water polo, Nitzkowski has developed a step-by-step system to teach tactics at all levels.”

Dennis Fosdick, National Development Chairman, U.S. Water Polo & Head Coach, Occidental College, Eagle Rock, Calif.

“Monte Nitzkowski is one of the few master tacticians of the game of water polo. I witnessed this as a player for Monte. He taught us to carefully analyze each game, and we began each contest with the belief that we would be tactically superior to our opponents. As President of United States Water Polo, I have had the opportunity to meet and discuss the game with the top coaches and administrators across the world. One theme is consistent in these conversations—the sincere respect for Monte’s tactical genius. Apply the lessons in this book with confidence. You can rest assured that each point has been well thought out and has been time tested.”

Richard J. Foster, President, United States Water Polo, Inc.

“Excellent!! I recommend it to all coaches and players. Monte has taught me all the tactical skills to become successful as both a coach and player.”

Maureen O’Toole Mendoza, USA Women’s National Team Player & two-time World’s Best Women’s Player. Coach, Rio Hondo College, Whittier, California

“Monte’s *USTWP* is the most useful and thoughtful book on water polo to date. It is a must for every coach who is serious about winning.”

Bruce Wigo, Executive Director, United States Water Polo, Ft. Lauderdale

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About This Book

Rules Rule

United States Tactical Water Polo is for coaches and serious, water polo athletes. This book's emphasis is on the tactical aspects of the game. Most of the books written on water polo have dealt with history and basic fundamentals, such as ball handling, passing and shooting. Books written 30 years ago that emphasize fundamentals still have merit as the basic skills for playing water polo remain essentially the same. However, when it comes to the tactical aspects of the game, few publications go into great detail. Books that have attempted to explore tactics are badly outdated, as tactics are determined by the rules of the day, and water polo rules have changed drastically in the past years.

Fortunately, the pace of drastic, rule-changing slowed. Now, international rules for water polo must stay the same for a four-year period. Changes in the international rules (FINA) may be considered every four years during the year of the World Championships. With only one opportunity to change the rules each four years, books devoted to the tactical side of water polo have greater lasting potential.

Additionally, the international rules, which for many years differed greatly from those played in the United States, are now basically the same rules as those used by U.S.A.'s clubs, universities and community colleges. Even high school rules now closely parallel those used by the clubs and universities. The tactics of water polo team-play are controlled by both the rules and the referees' interpretation of those rules. NCAA rules closely parallel FINA rules, so we will continue to see a similar game played in the United States.

In publication, this text takes some chance in becoming out-of-date given future, new rule changes. However, a detailed book

on the game's tactics is a must for the water polo scholar and a text with this approach is sorely needed.

History of Tactical Components

United States Tactical Water Polo features chapters on the key areas of the tactical game. The tactics of individual defense, team defense, counterattack, frontcourt offense, six-on-five and special situations are all discussed in detail. Most chapters conclude with team drills to develop that particular aspect of the tactical game.

During the past 20 years, United States water polo has taken a giant step forward, particularly with the international game. Much of the early success of the USA Team has been a direct result of an emphasis on developing new tactical concepts.

Only in recent years has the United States international water polo athlete been able to train extensively. With college and job commitments, playing Olympic-level water polo is, at best, a difficult task. However, in 1977 the United States finally launched a workable, national-training program. Although there was little financial backing, the results speak for themselves. United States water polo started its move into world prominence. Actually, even before 1977 and the national training program, the United States National Team had started up the long ladder toward water polo success. This was aptly demonstrated with the Bronze Medal finish by the 1972 team in the Munich Olympics.

The success of the 1972 team was based largely on two important factors. First, our 1972 Olympic Team was put together with a number of skilled, intelligent and dedicated young players. Second, the USA team introduced many new tactical concepts to world water polo. The success of this team was based more on tactics than training time. Featuring two outstanding club teams, brought together only two months prior to the Games, the 1972 USA Team made its mark with emphasis. With extremely-mobile offenses and defenses, picks, and new counterattack philosophies, this team was fun to watch. European correspondents labeled its new style "space age water polo."

I've always been extremely proud of the accomplishments of the 1972 team as, with little time together but great discipline to the tactical team approach, this group wrote a new page into the history of water polo development. They were the "pathfinders of success" for present-day United States water polo. They proved to the world there was more to the sport than just fine athletes with great ball-handling skills. Up to this point, water polo had been



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dominated by European teams which had played together for years. These European teams had great instinctive recognition and a complete understanding of the international rules and the European referees who interpreted and called those rules.

It was the tactical approach to water polo that kept the United States prominent in the sport until a true national-training concept was launched in 1977.

Swimming ability was and still remains an important element of the United States tactical plan. During recent years, this concept has been enhanced as FINA rules have tended to place more emphasis on the moving game. Originally, mobility was the only aspect of the game where the United States could excel.

Most of our water polo players began their aquatic careers as competitive age-group swimmers. These athletes slowly emigrated into water polo either because of a preference for a team sport or because they realized their national and international swimming potential was limited. Actually, some truly great United States swim stars have successfully participated in both sports—Roy Saari, Tim Shaw, Matt Biondi, Bob Hughes, Pablo Morales, Johnny Weismueller and Duke Kahanamoku to name some of our very best.

Since most USA national water polo players have been swimmers first and water polo players second, this has greatly influenced the tactical style of play for the United States. With no national training program, limited funding and geographic isolation from European water polo, the United States had to press tactical mobility to the maximum.

Since 1984, United States Water Polo has been able to combine a national training program with financial support. With this opportunity we've been able to gain successful consistency in the international game.

It has been this success, based originally on the tactical game, which has led to the writing of this book. United States tactical water polo was the base for our successful climb to world water polo prominence, and it's to these tactical concepts this book is dedicated.

Monte Nitzkowski,
United States Olympic Water Polo Coach,
1968, 1972, 1980, 1984

Preface

Defense

Multiple defenses are the game of the present and the future. Defensively, teams should learn to play effectively in a fronting press, a dropback and variations of both. Under present rules—and as aforementioned, the referees' interpretation of those rules—the 2-M DEFENDER is extremely vulnerable to ejection, so an effective dropback is essential. Good teams, at a moment's notice, should be able to phase in and out of the different defenses.

Counterattack

The counterattack's importance has increased with the present rules. The primary purpose of the counterattack has always been to free a player for a high-percentage shot. However, when playing against outstanding teams, consistently maintaining a free player in the counter is a difficult task. Yet a consistent, persistent and hard-charging counterattack allows for more time in the frontcourt, even when a free player is not maintained. Today, with the great number of defensive ejections being called, maximizing frontcourt offensive time is critical to the successful team. A well-trained counterattack helps create this additional offensive time.

Transition Game

The transition from counterattack to frontcourt offense must be practiced extensively. The transition ends when the 2-M PLAYER is in position to operate the offense. Six-to-ten seconds can be added to frontcourt offense when the transition is effective. Under present rules, those extra seconds may help provide several additional ejections over the course of a game.

Frontcourt Offense

Tactically, the frontcourt game must feature strong two-meter-hole play complimented by strong drive and perimeter play. The present rules definitely have put the 2-M PLAYER back into



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the game. The **(2-M PLAYER)** is again an offensive threat. If the ball can be controlled by the offensive team, that team has an excellent chance for a two-meter shot or causing an ejection. If the defense is employing a dropback to deprive the **(2-M PLAYER)** of offensive opportunities, strong perimeter shooting makes a lot of goals.

All frontcourt offenses must be prepared to attack both the press and the dropback—sometimes both during the same :35 seconds. This requires the offense to master two offensive strategies: the driving Umbrella structure against the press; and the more static Three-Three against the drop.

Six-on-Five and Five-on-Six

Both the Six-on-Five Offense and the Five-on-Six Defense must be tactically strong. Teams, under present rules, play in one or the other about one third of the time.

On offense, it is critical that teams learn both the Four-Two and Three-Three structures of attack. This has been mandated by the :20-second rule pertaining to ejections. Sometimes there is not enough time to set-up in an effective Four-Two structure, and the Three-Three Offense may be the only option.

When appropriate, rotational plays also must be considered. However, six-on-five plays should not be the entire basis of the Six-on-Five Offense. With extra-player time limited to :20 seconds, water polo athletes must be well grounded in the basics. They must be able to read the defense and properly pass and shoot the ball. The successful Six-on-Five Offense needs to score 55–60% of the time, and this requires players well skilled in the basics.

Tips for Reading This Text

The written words and diagrams used in this text have been presented in an editor's format that should allow for easier reference and understandability. Standards are important in all endeavors. Perhaps water polo writers, coaches and players can use these for future efforts of idea dissemination.

Text

If you are new to water polo, the first stop for reading this book should be the Glossary. The book is full of terms, and all the important terms are explained in the Glossary. On first mention of a water-polo term that appears in the Glossary, *italic* type is used.



Monte's colorful, descriptive terms, such as, "hammer the players," are put in quotes. **Bold** shows **emphasis!**


The text utilizes figures in combination with style enhancements to present the readers with clear ideas of the action. Here are some examples:

— Offensive players are shown as white circles, and if necessary with a number. Defensive players are dark squares.

— When discussing offense, the cute, little dudes in the diagrams attack the goal positioned at the top of the of the page. For defensive discussions, the figures protect the goal at the bottom of the page. In other words, as a reader, the good guys are shooting at the north goal, and the opposition is shooting at the south goal.

— Common, sport-specific terms have been made into compound words, such as counterattack and midcourt.


Drills

The drills for practices are included within the chapters. There is not a specific drill chapter. All the drill descriptions are numbered and appear with this sign. .

Players

Polo is played by men, women, boys and girls. Effort has been made to appeal to both sexes and all ages. The women's game of polo is expected to be the greatest area of growth for the sport. Use this book and start a women's team in your neighborhood.

Illustrations

The illustrations include many signs, such as stunting (). Most of these *do-dads* and *ding-bats* are self-explanatory and are discussed in the illustration captions that accompany the diagrams. All the illustrations are numbered and appear with this sign,



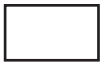


Photo Section

The author of this book, Coach Monte Nitzkowski, is living a successful and eventful career in the sport of water polo. He still does a tremendous amount of traveling and consulting with the sport. He travels abroad on a regular basis. In the short time that this book was in production, Monte went to Michigan, Rome, Atlanta and Jamaica on water polo business. He is in great demand at coaching clinics and at all types of water polo events.

The photos that follow provide only a quick blink at the places and the people Monte has had the pleasure to visit with and work with.

Perhaps your team, organization or league can be the sight of one of Monte's upcoming visits. Consider the possibilities, but in the meantime, you better practice to have those square-outs sharp and those wrist shots powerful.



 2Gold Medal Pan American Team in Winnipeg, Canada, 1967

Back Row: Bob Horn (assistant coach), Tony Van Dorp, Steve Barnett, Jon Shores, Barry Weitzenberg, Stan Cole, Bill Birch, Art Lambert (head coach).
Front Row: Gary Scheerer, Greg Hind, Dave Ashleigh, Dean Willeford, Monte Nitzkowski, (assistant coach).



3The USA Olympic Water Polo Team in the Olympic Village in Mexico City, Mexico, 1968

Back Row (left to right): Russ Webb, John Parker, Art Lambert (coach), Dave Ashleigh, Gary Scheerer. Front Row: Tony Van Dorp, Bruce Bradley, Monte Nitzkowski (assistant coach), Steve Barnett, Stan Cole, Ron Crawford, Dean Willeford, Barry Weitzenberg, John Felix (referee) Photo from Burt Shaw.



4The USA Bronze Medal Team in Munich, Germany, 1972

Back Row: Monte Nitzkowski (head coach), Art Lambert (assistant coach), Peter Asch, James Ferguson, Russ Webb, Bruce Bradley, John Parker, Steve Barnett, Bob Helmick (team leader). Front Row: Barry Weitzenberg, Jim Slatton, Eric Lindroth, Gary Scheerer, Stan Cole. Photo from Annette.



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USA Coaching Hair styles—
1973

Head Coach, Monte Nitzkowski, talks with Assistant Coach, Pete Cutino while on-deck at the first-ever, World Championships, Belgrade, Yugoslavia, in July 1973.



 6The USA Team's First National Training Team at Chabot College in Hayward, California in 1977

Do you recognize any familiar faces? The showman flexing his muscles and holding up the diving platform is Jim Kruse, the television commentator for the Olympics in 1984, 1988 and 1992.

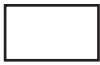


 7US Olympic Water Polo Team, 1980

This team was one of the best teams ever fielded by the United States. The team was a strong medal favorite, but was not able to compete because of the US boycott of the 1980 Olympic Games.

Back Row (left to right): Steve Haman, Drew McDonald, Jon Svendsen, Joe Vargas, Eric Lindroth, John Siman, Chris Dorst, Terry Schroeder.

Front Row (left to right): Ken Lindgren (assistant coach), Monte Nitzkowski (head coach), Peter Schnugg, Gary Figueroa, Kevin Robertson, Terry Saying (team leader). Photo from the US Olympic Committee.



 8The Famous 1984 Olympic Poster of the USA Water Polo Team.

The 1984 USA Olympic Team got the Silver Medal in 1984.

Back Row (left to right): John Siman, Terry Schroeder, Jon Svendsen, Drew McDonald, Peter Campbell, Chris Dorst, Craig Wilson.

Middle Row: Kevin Robertson, Jamie Bergeson, Doug Burke, Jody Campbell, George Newland, Tim Shaw.

Front Row: Gary Figueroa, Joe Vargas.

Original poster photo taken by Budd Symes, Los Angeles, California



9The Olympic Village Haircut, 1984 Games in Los Angeles

USA Goalie, Craig Wilson, is receiving a haircut from expert barbers, Jody Campbell and Drew McDonald. Offering encouragement are John Siman and Chris Dorst.



10Another Team Meeting

The Author and Head Coach, Monte Nitzkowski, lead another team meeting with the US Olympic Team. This tactical session was held at Belmont Plaza Olympic Pool in Long Beach, California, 1983.



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The USA Team Get the Bronze at the 1972 Olympic Games

The photo shows the USA Team stepping to the award stand to accept its Bronze Medal. The names of the USA players are showing on the scoreboard. Meanwhile, the players from the Gold and Silver Teams, The Hungarian and Russian teams applaud the USA effort to get its first water polo medal in 40 years.

Players names are: Slatton, Cole, Webb, Weitzenberg, Sheerer, Bradley, Asch, Ferguson, Barnett, Parker, Lindroth.

Water Polo Coach and Players in Ticker Tape Parade in New York City in August 1984

Behind New York's finest, the USA Water Polo Team enjoyed a huge parade in New York. Photo shows John Siman, Monte Nitzkowski, Terry Saying, Drew McDonald and goalie coach, Rich Corso.