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COACHING FUNDAMENTAL CONCEPTS



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FUNDAMENTALS

Without good fundamentals no player is able to succeed in this sport or any sport for that matter. The four fundamentals are:

MOBILITY IN THE WATER

PASSING, AND ITS EXTENSION, SHOOTING

POSITIONING IN RELATION TO THE BALL, THE GOAL, OR THE FREE MAN

COMMUNICATION

You as a coach then must look at the players you have and decide how you are going to use your time effectively to develop the fundamentals needed to make the team as successful as possible.

You will also have to think about any changes in the rules or the way the game is going to be called that may force you to work on and develop different fundamental skills that will allow your players to take advantage of these changes.

Time is always the limiting factor and because the game changes and officials change you have to spend more time working on different skills so you can be effective.

It would be nice if all the players on your team were at the same level in all of these fundamentals, but that is never the case; individually some will need to spend a lot more time and effort on one of these areas than another. It is up to you the coach to try to provide for this within the time frame you are dealing with without destroying the team workout.

Motivating players to work on their own or in small groups can be a big help but it can not always be done and it is going to take some organization on your part to see that this is accomplished.

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MOBILITY

The ability to move side ways, backward or forward quickly. I like to call this balance in the water (I will go over this at some length in my next talk.)

PASSING

Passing, catching and moving with the ball are all important skills. Passing is more important in water polo than in most sports because the ball travels so much faster than players can swim. Plus players have to learn to handle the ball with only one hand at a time.

Early training usually teaches these individuals to catch the ball with their weak arm side and throw it with their strong arm. In polo you have to catch and pass the ball with the same arm most of the time. Ball handling is so important it should take up at least $\frac{1}{4}$ of your time. The more you can get players to work on these skills on their own the more time you may have for other things but these skills are so important we spend $\frac{1}{4}$ of every workout dealing with them.

The best passing drills force players to handle the ball individually as often as possible. 2 man passing I feel is better than 3 and 3 is better than 4 etc. There are skills that you can learn with 3 or maybe 4 players that you are going to have difficulty doing with only 2 but most of the time 2 works better because they will handle the ball more times in the same amount of time.

Shooting is an extension of passing and you can teach shooting when a player is passing. The arm motion is basically the same: the longer the pass the closer the speed of the arm and the snap of the wrist are to shooting.

BACK SPIN

First a player must learn to throw the ball with a backspin and the only way this is going to happen is to have the ball come off of the middle finger. This is the first step because players must learn to throw a ball that will fly straight. A side spinning ball curves and the player loses power as his hand slips around the ball. Putting the ball on the water and making it slide is a good way to see if players have learned to back spin a ball.

KNUCKLE BALL AND REVERSE SPIN BALL

After learning a backspin they should learn to throw a knuckle ball and a reverse spin ball. The knuckle ball is used in games when you don't want to slide the ball past a player when you may have to put the ball on the water. Reverse spin is really only worth while so the man catching the ball can learn to read and catch such a ball as the ball may reverse spin when coming off the cage.

The correct arm motion from my point of view is to try to keep the elbow out in front and work to keep the arm fairly straight, this gives the shooter good hand speed; the arm should be relaxed and the wrist should snap like the end of a whip. This means you are really shooting or passing off of the wrist. The more you can get off of your wrist the better it will be for polo. You can get very arm weary swimming but the wrist doesn't get tired so it takes pressure off the shoulders and arms and puts it on the wrist. This increases power and cuts down on shoulder problems.

Remember the straighter the elbow the bigger the circle the ball will travel in which means greater ball speed with less effort or muscle use. Speed comes from the whipping motion. All players need to work on catching the ball and getting it off their hand quickly.

It is a bad habit to always catch the ball and pump it once to get balance and control or to put the ball on the water to gain balance. Developing the skill to catch and control and pass or shoot quickly is a difficult thing to get players to learn. It takes time and motivation on your part to get players to develop this skill. There is a great amount of negative feed back when a player fans the ball or it runs off the back of his hand when he tries to pass or shoot a pass quickly.

SHOOTING

Shooting drills are very often 1 on 1 against the goalie, therefore players tend to catch and pump the goalie several times so they have a better chance to score. This obviously conditions players to catch and pump the ball. They never practice shooting quickly because they want to score the ball, but in a game quick cross court shots will go almost every time. If you want them to learn this skill you have to work a passing drill where the man with the ball can shoot or pass cross court then the cross court player will be rewarded for shooting the ball quickly into the open cage.

The cage in water polo sounds large but players miss the cage and bar the ball all the time and trying to get players to shoot in the blue is not an easy thing to do. Some times I have found it effective to make players swim 2 widths every time they miss or bar the ball. This forces them to shoot in the blue.

If you want to improve your ability to pass and shoot off the top 2, 3, 4 spots you need to put players in these spots and have them pass 2 or 3 times and then shoot. Think and try to make your drills do things that you feel your players need to work on; and if you are going to play a 3-3 balance on offense and you are going up against a zone working on 2, 3, 4 passing and shooting will help your players do this better.

The key fundamentals here are making sure 3 is the farthest from the goal and that the players pass the ball off their wrist so they can keep balance in a shooting position. If you believe that with the drop you are going to have

to drive a new man into set or because the teams you play have key men they want to have guard your 2 meter man you need to set up a 3-3 balance and then with no defense have your players practice ways to drive in a new 2 meter man.

There are several methods of doing this, and they are:

3 passes the ball to 5 and 4 drives ball side into set. 3 passes to 5 and runs a 43 pick so 3 goes ball side toward 5. If 3 has a big hole guard on him and he runs this 43 he should end up with man who was guarding 4. Get the ball to 5 or 4 and run a 32 moving pick and 2 should end up ball side. Your team is going to have to run these things over and over again with no defense until they know what they are trying to do then maybe they will try to do these things in practice and gradually they may try them in a game.

Never expect your players to do anything they have not spent time practicing. A good 4 man passing drill is to put players in the 4 outside spots of the extra man (1-4-5-6) and have them pass the ball around making a good fake at the cage each time they catch the ball so they are locking the goal. This gets them used to passing the correct distance and catching the ball from correct distance and catching the ball from correct angles they are going to have to deal with in a game. A good 2 man passing drill to help players learn to pass and break is give one man the ball and his partner then hits him. This gets swimming, passing and movement off the pass all in one drill. Use two or 3 groups and go a minute on and 1 minute off or 2 depending on the number of groups.

POSITIONING

Probably the most difficult concepts to teach players is how to play the midcourt and the last 10 meters of a counter attack both offensively and defensively. This takes great understanding of the game and requires:

1. offensively: balance, seeing the entire course, progressing deep with the ball, passing correctly, driving ball side, getting an open lane to the ball, and understand how to counter rotate or pop back on the weak side;
2. defensively: swimming back hard, knowing where the ball is and where the free man is, knowing when and where to stunt, know when to foul or press and when to drop plus making sure you are in the passing lanes on the weak side.

To teach these skills like to go ½ court 3 on 2 with a trailer starting with the ball on the right side, trailer chasing down the middle. You can move the ball or trailer to any of the positions. This forces players to deal with the front court many times in a given period of time. The next step up is 4 on 3 with a trailer full court. I generally like to have my players at 2-3-4-6 and have the free man coming off the 2 meter man but you can really move the

free man to any one of these spots. The ball comes out from the cage. If you want to practice this from a drop have either the 2 or 4 man drop in and give the ball to the man being dropped off of and have him shoot and counter off of the shot. It is easy to run a moving pick off the shooter and get 2 players going ball side.

You have to think about what you feel your players should be learning; then you have to tell them what they are trying to learn; then structure drills that will force them to learn the correct concepts.

FUNDAMENTAL DRILLS FOR EXTRA MAN

Put players in the 1-2-3-4-5-6 spots and give them at least 3 balls with no goalie; start off with 6-3; 1-2; 4-5 or 5-4; the first man is passing to the second for a shot. Do this for 5 minutes this will teach these players how to pass to that man for a shot and teach the shooter how to shoot from that spot. Next go 6-2; 1-5. 5-1; 4-3; then 6-4; 4-6; 5-2; 1-3 and finally 6-1 & 1-6; 5-3; 4-2. These are all basic passing shooting situations on the extra man which both the passer and the shooter have to be able to execute. Very simple but very worth while if you expect to score on your extra man. Breaking things down to the simplest part will definitely help to teach your players skills that will allow them to succeed and learn and that is what we all want.

On extra man defense it is very important to get your outside defenders to play with the legs out toward 1-4-5-6. This allows them to cover up inside but get out quickly to get pressure on the outside shooter. The drill I like here is to put defenders at 1-4-5-6 then tell the offense just how I want them to pass. Example 6-5-6-4-1-6 the defense then stay back and anticipate and move toward there feet and get pressure on the ball or foul the man. The offense can't move the ball too quickly and the purpose is to get the defenders to think and anticipate the pass. Plus it forces the defender to really use his mobility, which is obviously a key fundamental to be a successful polo player.

COMMUNICATION

One of the most important fundamentals which is needed in water polo is getting players to communicate. Players have a difficult time seeing, because they are so close to the surface they play on, so that communication is very important. Here again you the coach have got to have your players learn what to say and when to say it.

I have found that it works to have communication drills for front court offense and defense and the same thing for counter attack offense and defense. I write down and give to the players just what they should say and have them learn it then we practice it in the water with only offense or defense and then put it together. Some of the key phrases or words are:

FRONT COURT OFFENSE

Need help weak side, set, help weak side, release help, get ball to 5, weak pick.

FRONT COURT DEFENSE

Sided, press weak side, 4-3 drop, 3-2 drop. Foul and drop, I will foul and switch, you foul and switch.

COUNTER OFFENSE

Hit me I am free, release right or left, help strong side, free weak side, free middle, help ball side.

COUNTER ATTACK DEFENSE

Press no foul, foul and drop, stunt and drop, lane out weak side, look out pick.

You the coach need to figure what kind of communication you need then tell players what you want so they won't feel funny saying it and then maybe they will learn to do it if they are motivated.

FROM SIMPLE TO COMPLEX IN A GAME LIKE SITUATION

As a coaching and player-learning concept, it seems to me that workouts should go from simple to more complex but aiming toward getting players to do what they should in a game like situation. So in one workout on counter attack you would start out passing so they have their passing hands and arms. Next you go a 3 man wedging, passing, and shooting drill. Line the players up in a line about 10 meters from the cage. If the center man is right handed put the ball with the man on the right side. The center man wedges into the man on his left and drives toward the cage and release toward the center about 4 meters the man on the right gives him the ball wet and he picks it up and shoots it.

This is something that happened often in a counter attack, plus the men going down the outside on the counter need to wedge into their defender and release off of him to get the outlet pass if the defense is pressing on the outlet pass.

Here you have got players working on what they will need in two places in the pool, on the flats and coming ball side down the middle. Then go to a 3 on 2½ court with a trailer so they understand what they should do here. Then go to 4 on 3 with a trailer. Next to a 6 on 5 with a trailer. Finally give one team the ball with 10 seconds on the clock and have the defense counter off of a miss or when the 10 seconds runs out. Hopefully by using this progression your team will carry over some of its learning into a game like situation so the learning has meaning.

For each workout you must know what you are trying to teach and your players must know what they are trying to learn, and then they have got to use this learning in a game like situation. This takes time, thought and understanding on your part. However, your learning curve will go up, workout will have a meaning, and you will have smarter players.

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