

Salt Water Polo (NaCl H₂O)

By Eric Sandy, Del Mar

It looked like a fishing net. Well, it was a fishing net, that is, before it was modified and stretched over a frame of 2 by 4's. The net then became..voila!...a cage! You know, the goal for a water polo game. Ok, so then what was this "cage" going out here, floating 200 yards off the beach?

My morning paddle is normally a chance to fire off some sleepy synapses, pay homage to mother ocean, wake up slowly. So to stumble into a water polo game halfway to the workout buoy was like a fuzzy trip into some aquatic twilight zone. But there they were, water polo players with beanies, waving that yellow ball, bombing shots at the goal. It quickly became apparent that besides the ball and the beanies, all similarity with "traditional" water polo ended. This was SALT WATER POLO or OCEAN POLO (OP).

Water Polo has been described as a gang fight in a pool. A recent article in the San Diego Union Tribune also mentioned this controlled thuggery but gave credit for the enormous fitness levels of polo players. It's not as if you can sit down and rest when you get tired, the article noted. In salt water polo, this lack of any convenient "bench" becomes even more crucial.

So whose idea was this anyway? Most of the blame can be traced to Del Mar lifeguards Dennis Zavalok and Mark Rathsam. Both are avid polo players and thought that summer polo games would be another fun way to stay fit. Of course, the valuable missing ingredient for regular polo was a pool. Del Mar has dozens of pools but all of them are private, backyard kidney shaped pools with exotic waterfalls and spouting marble statues. The only pools fit for polo are all either full of tri-athletes swimming laps or solidly booked till the wee hours. So, why not use the ocean? Well, it was worth a try.

Some of the other notable differences in OP as observed by this writer – who has played only co-ed, inner-tube polo in college where the biggest excitement was watching the girls tug at each other's bikini tops...

Since the salt water gives the players more buoyancy, they stay higher out of the water but so does the goalie, allowing him to hover like some wet praying mantis, ready to slap the ball back at the shooters. Unfortunately, what the goalie can't do is keep track of the goal as it bobs back and forth in the swells. Defending the right corner can quickly become defending open ocean. Wind chop adds another element. The ball seems to bounce unpredictably, sometimes skidding into the cage, other times wallowing to a harmless stop. Refereeing seems especially difficult since water visibility, even on clear glassy days is minimal. This, of course, allows more of all those wonderfully imaginative underwater "maneuvers" with slashing feet and pummeling knees.

Of course, there is no shallow end in OP. And back to that thought about resting on the bench or even hanging onto the pool gutters for a breather, no chance!

Some of the easily fatigued sought rest by holding onto the paddleboards that supported the cage, but this was only temporary. The opposition didn't like the chance that the "resting" would instead become a clever tactic to move the cage aside when the other team was shooting.

Although none were seen during games, the idea of a visit to the playing area by local sea life could be a problem. Schools of dolphins would have been a blast. We could just imagine the ball being nosed around by our finny friends at speeds we only dream of. Those other sea critters with fins, El Tiburon, the Man in the Gray Suit, "Jaws", would also make a real mess of things with any impromptu visits. That floating cage could come in reeeeeeeal handy! Low flying Pelicans might not appreciate the cage when dive-bombing for food. Sea Lions taking up

residency on the paddleboard floats would make things real noisy. Migrating gray whales would find the whole scene just a minor nuisance, nothing to spout about.

And then there is the prospect of the rogue wave – out of nowhere – that one in a million huge macker that rolls in without notice. Getting dumped over the falls with a makeshift polo cage would not be fun. Body surfing down the face of a huge wave for a three-on-one fast break though, might be exciting.

In all, OP looked like a great way to spend the morning. There was no chlorine in the water, no concrete walls to get bashed against. The air was pure and clean. The quality of play may not be Olympic, but the workout was strenuous.

And after all, that's what these extra-curricular activities are all about – a healthy period of exercise with friends and teammates this time with an interesting twist. Like the real game in the pool, Salt Water Polo gets the blood moving, just not moving from the nose.