

MY IMPRESSIONS OF ITALIAN WATER POLO

by

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WHY ITALY?

Now that I have retired from coaching and wine making, I have a lot more leisure time on my hands. This has given me the opportunity to spend six months in my father's native country, Italy. I am situated in the hot bed of Italian Water Polo, the Italian riviera of Liguria near Genoa. There are thirteen professional teams from the top two divisions A1 and A2 located with twenty-five miles of each other; including the top Italian club team, Pro-Recco. Not only is Recco the top team in Italy, but probably the best club in Europe. Italian teams are allowed three foreign players, but Recco has five. Two are Italian citizens by virtue of marrying Italian women.

WHO'S PLAYING?

Top players from all over the world come here to play; mostly because of the competition and partly because of the money. It is like the NBA of Water polo. What a great opportunity for water polo players to play against the best in the world, and get paid for it! Players from countries like Canada and Australia have benefited greatly from the experience. Canada has sent eight players to play in Europe. A result of this is that Canada has qualified for the Olympic Games; the first since Montreal, where they were the host country. I really have a hard time with US Water Polo's reluctance to allow Americans to play in Europe. Gone are the times when we could stay home and only practice together, and then try to beat the more experienced Europeans. Players from the United States need this experience. Without it we will fall behind the rest of the water polo world.

WHERE AM I ?

I am located in the town of Camogli, where former USA National Team coach Ricardo Azevedo has led the local team Rari Nantes to first place in the A2 Division. They will surely move up to Division A1 next year. He has the best young players in Italy playing for him and one foreigner, Marcos Santos, who played for UCLA for the last 4 years. Ricardo's club also leads Italian teams in all of the younger age group divisions in Italy. We are going to miss having Ricardo in the USA leading our Olympic team. I don't know how we let one of our most experienced and talented International coaches get away.

US PLAYERS IN ITALY

Ricardo's son Tony was playing in Italy, in Cremona; until they lost their sponsor. He is now playing in Dubrovnik, Croatia for the Jug team, one of the best in Europe. Ricardo's daughter Cassie is also playing in Rapallo, just five minutes from here. Yes folks, they have women's professional polo here in Italy. Living in the atmosphere of the great

Italian culture, coaching some of the best water polo players in the world. and having his children close by. Why would Ricardo ever want to come back to the United States and coach? They absolutely love him here in Italy. Other USA players playing in Italy are Peter Verallis in Savona, Jeff Powers in Padua, Adam Wright in Cremona, and Dreason Barry in Imperia.

ITALIAN LEAGUE AND CUP OF CHAMPIONS

The best thing about being in Italy in March, April and May is the opportunity to see many of the top European players and teams. Not only is the Italian League right in the middle of their league competition, but at the same time the European Cup of Champions competition is going on. This competition features the club champions of all of the European countries playing each other in a home and away competition. The competition starts with 38 clubs from around Europe. It is now down to the final eight clubs, two from Italy, and one each from Hungary, Croatia, Greece, Serbia, Montenegro, and Spain.

The Italian league is still going strong now in March and April. The play-offs for league champion in the first division A1 will end in mid-May. This is a little earlier than usual; because it is an Olympic year, and players will be released to their National teams.

RECCO-MARSEILLE

Last week I saw a Cup of Champions play-off game between Recco and Marseille of France. I also got a chance to see former Stanford and current national team player Layne Beaubien play for Marseille. I haven't seen him in years. His play was not enough to keep Recco from dominating the game and advancing to the final eight teams. Marseille is also the former team of USA National team assistant coach Robert Lynn.

ITALIAN STYLE

Most of the games that Recco plays for the Cup of Champions are staged here in Camogli; because they have one of the nicest pools in Italy, and Recco is only a mile away. This area is famous for its pesto sauce and its focaccia bread with melted cheese. I brought a team from Stanford here in 1998, and believe me we took advantage of the great food; as I am doing now. Of course the wine speaks for itself! It's not hard to keep my weight down, because I don't have a car; so I walk everywhere. Last week I walked to Recco to watch a game with Catania of Sicily.

CUP OF CHAMPIONS QUARTER-FINALS

Next week's play-off game features the final two Italian teams left in the tournament, Recco and Possilipo of Naples. Nice draw! Out of the eight teams left in the tournament, the two Italian teams have to play each other in the quarter finals. It should be a great game! Teams only play twice against each other, and goal difference is important for advancement. If one team wins the first game by 4 goals; but loses the second game by three goals, they will advance by virtue of the goal difference of +1. If at the end of the second game, the teams are tied in terms of goal difference, they will play overtime in that second game, until one team gains a goal advantage.

WATER POLO STYLES OF PLAY

Water polo in Italy, and throughout Europe, is similar in style to what we play in the United States. There are some exceptions and differences of course, especially on defense. Many European teams, and most Italian teams, play a similar defensive style that employs the best of a press defense and the best of a zone defense. I was first introduced to this defense when I assisted Ratko Rudic with the USA team in 2000-2001. I employed this defense in my last season at Stanford in the Fall of 2001. The result was a school record least goals scored per game by all opponents during a season, and a NCAA Championship. I used it again several years later when I coached Sacred Heart School for one season. The result was a CCS/CIF Championship for the school, the first in their history.

Every team that I have seen so far here in Italy employs this type of defense, with some variations. Ricardo Azevedo uses this defense to beat teams with more experience and size than his team has. Since 2001 I have not seen any collegiate or high school team use this defense. I don't understand why not, because it works !

PRESS TO DROP OR PRESS TO A GAP

I am not going to go into all of the details of this defense, but I will give you the basics. It starts when the other team gets possession of the ball. Immediately the defense will press the ball, no matter where it is in the pool, trying not to commit a foul. At the same time the 2-meter defender will front the hole man as he moves into position. Some teams in the US will run a press that is similar to this. But that is where the similarity ends. As long as the 2-meter defender can stay in front of the hole man, the team stays in a press. Once the 2-meter defender loses position, he will call the team back into a zone of some kind by yelling out the name of the zone or a code word of some kind.

WHAT KIND OF ZONE?

This is where differences may occur between different teams. Here in Italy many teams will drop back into an "M" zone defense that doubles the hole man and gaps the outside players. The reason for this is that it keeps the ball out of the 2-meter position, and also puts the outside defenders in position for a counterattack; at the same time that the shot clock is running down. I have also seen teams fall back into a 2-3-4 zone, a 2-4 zone, or a 4-5 zone. The 4-5 drop is used when the offense has only right-handers at the 4-5 position. This style of defense combines the best that the press and a zone have to offer, all within the same 30 second shot clock period. Offenses have to be very creative to be able to beat this combination.

6 ON 5

Other differences that I have observed between USA and European water polo occur in the extra man offense. There is more movement by the outside players, as well as the post players; in order to draw defenders out of position, and put players in a better position to shot the ball. The 1 and 6 wing players are constantly shifting in and out from inside the 2 meter line to the pocket area. At the same time the 4 and 5 outside players

shift left and right so that one is always in the best position in the center of the goal. The post players are also moving to open areas vacated by defensive players. A pass that you will never see in the USA is very common here. That is the pass from 4 into the 2 post and 5 into the 3 post. It is usually open, but very rarely do teams take advantage of it in the US.

PASS FROM THE OBVIOUS SHOOTER

Italian players are very unselfish when it comes to who takes the shot. At the end of the counterattack or whenever a player is penetrating towards the goal with the ball, many times you will see that player set the goalie and the defenders with a hard fake, and then pass the ball to a teammate who is positioned near the goal but inside the zone defender. Recco, who has some of the best outside shooters in the world, will do this many times during a game.

I feel very fortunate, as a water polo fan, to be here in Italy and to be able to watch some of the the best water polo that is being played in the world. USA Water Polo can't be serious about trying to keep US players away from this great learning and cultural experience. Not only in Italy, but in other European countries as well. It can only help the success of our National team. At the very least, it gives players a chance to continue playing water polo when their college days are over. How many players in the US continue playing after college?