

PROFESSIONAL WATER POLO ASSOCIATION

An Operational Discussion

General

There is a demand for year-round water polo at a level more intense than currently available within the standard open-level (Masters) competition and for athletes out of, or not interested in playing for, their college teams. Additionally, because of NCAA and local HS rules, many water polo players aged 15-22 are upper-limited by season, contact, and eligibility limitations. Thus, there is a large hurdle to excellences in the path of too many of our best high school players and virtually all of our collegiate players. It is past time to reconstruct the future of men's water polo in the USA.

Vision

We plan to create a structure by which open men's teams can play a meaningful schedule of high-level games leading to a meaningful national championship. The structure should accommodate any and all players with an adequate skill level. The in-season games themselves should be competitive, for the sake of the competition itself, and attractive, for the sake of sport promotion and marketing of the sport. The playoffs should be competitive at the highest possible level and have presentation value that makes them a spectator sport.

Operational Starting Point

What follows is a proposed starting point for the discussion of how to construct a legitimate (in the future) professional water polo league in the USA. It is essential to our success that everyone realizes that this effort will not succeed via a heavy-handed top-down construct. It will only succeed to the extent that individual teams take it upon themselves to operate in their own enlightened self-interest, both organizationally as well as financially.

Who is really in charge?

- The decision makers MUST be the individual team owners, operating in their own best interests.
- There are only a very few things that must be managed centrally.

Competitive Construct

General

The season would run from mid-January to mid-May. The mid-January start is designed to attract college players with no more eligibility to play all winter and spring. The mid-May finish is designed to allow our top players, those with aspirations of playing on our national team, to move directly from the Final Four to national team training. This is the reason most of the European leagues end at about the same time. Although this depends on the desires of the team owners, over a full season, each team would play somewhere between 30 and 40 games.

Four teams, at a bare minimum, are required for this to have any sort of functionality. However, two or (better) three four-team divisions, sub-divided by geography, make this enterprise much more functional. The schedule ought to provide each team with two or three games per week, ideally one game per day. This would produce a four-team divisional event with three two-game slots. TO accommodate the semi-pro nature of these teams, we

Schedule Options in 4-Team Division

- Fri night (2 games), Sat night (2 games), and Sun afternoon (2 games)
- Sat midday (2 games), Sat night (2 games), and Sun afternoon (2 games).

would schedule games only every other weekend. Ideally, the choices for game slots are: Friday night, Saturday afternoon, Saturday night, and Sunday afternoon. The in-season games provide the seeding for the championships. Initially, it probably makes sense to have a single-elimination Final-Four type of

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championship. Eventually, it could morph into a best two out of three, with all three (if necessary) games hosted by the higher seeded team.

Immediate Term

The goal is to create a league with at least two, perhaps three, and eventually four separate divisions, each of which has an ideal size of four teams. The expansion should be based on the creation of geographically sensible divisions (to minimize travel costs). A four-team division provides each team with the opportunity to host a three-session event (where each team in the division plays each other team in the division) as well as attending such an event at the home venue of each of the other three teams in the division. By playing one entire home and away circuit, a team gets a 12-game schedule. By playing two such circuits, a team gets a 24-game schedule. Ideally, via a set of crossover events, each team plays one game against each team in the other division(s). The team owners will have to decide to what extent they wish to have most of their games local (playing and re-playing the same teams) vs to what extent they wish to have cross-overs outside their divisions (to play other teams). These decisions will be based on a balance between travel time and cost vs the attractiveness of playing new and different teams.

The Game Schedule

- A tournament is little more than a cost-saving mechanism, but a properly marketed and presented single game can be a spectacle. Our goal should be to figure out how to market and present single game spectacles.
- Similarly, playing games within the division, with multiple games against the same opponent during a season, makes each game less of a spectacle.
- Our goal is find the ideal balance.

Medium Term

In the medium term, we hope to be able to stabilize a structure with four four-team divisions.

Long Term

In the long-term, we hope to be able to create a structure whereby each first division has a second division, with the winner of the second division earning some sort of win-in or compete-in provision.

Funding and Finances

This is intended to be (at least at first, semi-)professional water polo. As such, nothing prevents any team from doing whatever it wants to get the roster it wants, including paying players to play. Eventually, the league ought to have some sort of balancing system so that salaries (in and of themselves) do not completely determine the annual champion. However, too much salary funding is our GOAL, not our problem, so for now, teams can (and are encouraged to) do whatever they want to assemble whatever roster they want. Initially, via some degree of self-funding, the league itself will provide prize money for the winners. Going forwards, the goal must be to have net team, and net league, income.

As to the general operational paradigm, decisions need to be made about what kinds of funds should be managed centrally and what kind of funds should be managed locally. In general, using minor league baseball and hockey as the model for success, the recommendation is that we start out deferring to local control when possible. Enough central funding MUST be in place, right from the start, to support (in this order) expenses required for: the league web site (the web site is the public face of the league), centralized administrative activities (there must be near instantaneous responses to email and telephone); referees; media and broadcasting; marketing and/or promotions, and prize money.

The League-Level

Each team will provide buy-in funding. For purposes of our initial discussions, we are creating an operational construct based on the presumption of a \$10,000 buy-in for each team. In the future, depending on the balance of central vs local obligations, this might change, in either direction. The

Why a buy-in?

- It funds the league office.
- It funds activities to benefit all teams.
- It funds the officials.
- It represents a tangible commitment to participate with seriousness.

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issue is that the league (in whatever is its definition) must best serve all the teams in the league. If more, vs less, centralized funding, seems to be the solution, we can move in that direction. The league will use most of this funding for all its central operations and the rest will be distributed to the teams themselves as prize money. Depending on the successes of centralized marketing, promotions, and fundraising, we would like to see the prize money for fourth place to be one-half the league buy-in, for third place to equal the league buy-in, and for second and first place to be greater than the league buy-in. This will provide each team with additional incentive to construct a roster that can win.

The Team-Level

Each team owner must determine how to construct a competitive team. Given the numbers of good players out there and the quality of existing teams, the most effective way to build a competitive team in Year One of the PWPA is to hire one or more (perhaps even up to seven) players with the skills necessary to elevate the overall level of that team. In the accompanying spreadsheet, I have constructed a very simple calculation for how much it might cost to provide financial support for any players imported from outside the area or outside the club.

Surely, there are currently a few intact teams out there (the Olympic Club, the NYAC, and LAWPC come immediately to mind) who could just keep their recently-past Premier League rosters in place and go toe to toe with any team in this league. But for most other teams, becoming a legitimate competitor in this league will require the team owner to make a critical evaluation of the existing team, identifying the (relative) personnel weakness(es) of their team, and going into the external talent pool to drop onto the top of the existing team some number of talented starters. To use MLB parlance, the simplest way to do this is to go into the “free agent market” and get the talent you need to be competitive. Again, there are two simple ways to do this: (1) bring in players (most likely from Europe), find like-nationals in the area who want to host them, or (2) go into the general free-agent market and pay market value (including paying for housing etc...). What follows are some simple examples of the ways this kind of team structure could be created.

Simple Example 1 – Existing Club Team

There are a few established club teams (such as the Olympic Club or the NYAC) in the USA that can function, as they are (more or less the same roster construct they used the last time we had a real Premier League), and be legitimate contenders for a PWPA championship. They neither need any augmentation to their rosters nor any (or much) additional funding to deal with the costs associated with playing in the PWPA. For these kinds of teams, the only decisions to be made are: (1) whether or not to play in the PWPA and (2) how the time, energy, and resources required to play in the PWPA might fit into how they normally plan to spend their competitive year.

Simple Example 2 – The Free Agent Market

There are many club teams, functionally “masters” teams, full of players in the 22-35 age range, all still good enough to play (at least) at a decently high level. The team owner/leader does an analysis of the existing roster and fills-in with one or more players who are interesting in relocating to that area for the season. The nature of the relocation is up to the team, although many of the obvious options provide the host club with some automatic community connections, some of which might be very useful as starting points for developing community support and/or sponsorships. An additional benefit to this kind of a team construct is the possibility that the host club would now have enough talent and personnel to support a second team.

Some Relocation Options

- Players (domestic or, more likely, foreign) housed by local families;
- Players who are placed at companies, perhaps as only interns;
- Players who are supported (studio apartment, lease car, monthly stipend) by the club;
- Players who are brought into the area and put into positions as age-group and/or HS coaches;

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Aside from the obvious benefit, greater home-club participation and interest, this might also be the beginnings of the establishment of a second-division to the league.

Simple Example 3 – The Local All-Star Team

There are some areas of the country, mostly in California, where there are already many players with recent top-level collegiate experience, some of whom are legitimate contenders to compete for a spot on our national team. How many recent top collegiate players, now age 21-24, with one or two 40-game seasons of top-level competition, might continue to develop to the point where they could be legitimate contenders for selection to our national team? How many players with that skill level wish to continue to play at the highest level possible, while at the same time living in and around where they can develop and/or continue in their new professions?

Simple Example 4 – Tip Of The Pyramid

There are a few good-sized age-group teams in the USA that are already big enough to support a semi-pro team on top of it. This semi-pro team would be composed of a combination of the top players currently in the club, the top alumni of the club, and any number of free-agents attracted in to supplement the talent pool as necessary. There are many benefits to this kind of a construct, not the least of which is the opportunity to make the semi-pro team the level of play and success toward which all the younger players direct their efforts. As for the financial model for this kind of a team, it would be easy to identify a set of semi-pro players who could also function as age-group coaches within the overall club. This would lend itself to a payment structure whereby the semi-pro players are employed and paid as assistant coaches, based on the club dues paid by the age-group players, with little or no need for any additional financial support.

Simple Example 5 – Club University Combination

There are many current clubs located near enough to a university with an existing collegiate-club team that a cooperative team construct could produce a very competitive team. There are enormous benefits to this kind of a construct, including (but certainly not limited to) a large enough roster for robust training sessions, shared use of facilities, shared use of university-funding support, and the possibility that the club team will provide the coach for the collegiate club team during its fall season.

Some examples include:

- UCF and Tampa-Clearwater.
- FIU and UM and any Miami team.
- Lindenwood and Clayton.
- BU, BC, and a Boston team.
- Georgia Tech and Dynamo.

Simple Example 6 – University Super-Club

As heretical as this may be to many water polo people, it is not necessary for a team based in a university to compete within any of the current university competitive constructs. Within the USA, three obvious examples of this are rugby, crew, and cycling, none of which are sponsored by a formal collegiate organization (such as the NCAA) but all of which have all the other trappings of intercollegiate competition. The schools that sponsor these teams do so in a variety of ways, ranging from internal support indistinguishable from that of a traditional varsity

The Marian University Cycling Team

- 12 National Collegiate Cycling Championships since 1992
- One of the highest sports team GPA
- Year-round training and competition
- Great internal student-spectator support
- Current riders help recruit their friends
- Athletic “scholarship” support
- Net financial benefit to the university

team to a student-alumni funded club team. Over the years, I have been at schools that had one or more of these three teams and all of them are able to operate at least as effectively as any traditional varsity program, with the same kinds of internal student-fan base and support, but without any of the artificial constraints on training hours, season length, etc... Not only would nothing prevent any university (anywhere) from building such a team, but most reasonable financial models (using a

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typical small private school paradigm) suggest net financial benefits to any small private school adding such a team.

Travel

The USA is a big country. Even after dividing the entire league into geographically sensible divisions, travel for competition will have to be addressed, and the competitive construct we create must accommodate it. This accommodation has two components: scheduling and cost.

Scheduling

The visiting teams will have to travel, often by air, to competition. If there are games on Friday night, this means some part of Friday, perhaps most or all of Friday, must be dedicated to travel to competition. Thus, for a semi-pro team, the players who are attending school or working in a profession must miss class and/or work on Friday. Similarly, the trip home on Sunday (or Monday if a team is traveling from the west to the east coast) must be accommodated so that these players can return to school and/or work without missing any more time than can be avoided. Thus, some important decisions have to be made about how to schedule individual games to provide maximal effectiveness and to balance competition, presentation, and travel convenience.

Cost

In the accompanying spreadsheet, I have put together a few examples of the travel costs required for a full season of play. Naturally, this is only a very simple estimate, but it is probably not all that far off if a 15-person team actually traveled to competitions based on such a schedule. It is easy to see that an entire season of travel might cost as little as \$20,000 and as much as \$80,000. For any given trip, an individual team could alter the overall expense related to travel by any number of means. Particularly during the first year of the league, it is likely that most teams will find this to be their greatest expense.

Travel Cost Considerations

- Drive vs fly vs bus charter
- Number of players per room
- Hotel vs host-club housing
- Per diem paid to players?

Finances – Summary Comments

This is a huge undertaking. I hope this is a useful starting point for us to use to create this league. Going forwards, we will explore the many ways in which a club can either lessen its costs associated with creating a competitive roster or generate offsetting revenues.