

Protecting the Ball by Terry Schroeder, Head Coach, Men's National Team

Another very important fundamental skill is protecting the ball. This skill applies to all areas of the game. It is critical to be able to protect the ball whether you are at 2 meters, on the perimeter or releasing for the ball on the counter attack. You have to be able to protect the ball to be able to make the next pass or advance the ball. Therefore, as coaches this should be another fundamental skill that we spend time in practice refining with our athletes.

In order to protect the ball properly, you have to use your body properly and think about the angles. Basically, when you have the ball you want to get as much of your body in between the defender and the ball. When you are protecting the ball you should use your entire body as much as you can. Your legs, torso, head, shoulder, arm, elbow, hand are all involved in the process. You should try to keep the ball as far away from the defender as you can while still maintaining control of the ball an arm's length away. If the ball gets too close the defender may be able to knock it away and if the ball gets too far away then we lose control and have to re set our legs. As you keep the ball at an arm's length you can put a little back spin to keep the ball where you want it and keep the ball from floating away.

Let's talk about the angles for a second. At the 2 meter position when the ball comes in you need to turn your body to about a 45 degree angle and use the entire length of your body and arm to keep the ball away from the defender. If you stayed with your back to the defender's chest you would not be able to create as much distance between the ball and the defender. However, when you turn your body 45 degrees you create a larger space and by using more body between the defender and the ball. Also, if you stay in a good split egg beater position you will be totally balanced and strong in the water in this angle. You also have to consider which side the guard is on. If the defender is on your left shoulder you are going to turn your left shoulder into him/her and try to seal him/her off away from the ball with your left elbow and forearm. If the defender jumps to the right side then you must rotate over your hips and use your right arm/elbow and forearm to seal the defender away from the ball. One side of your body is focused on sealing the defender away from the ball while the other side is keeping the ball away from the defender and controlling the ball. So if the defender is on your right side you are sealing with your right and controlling the ball with your left. In this situation your left arm will be outstretched and you will try to keep the ball at arm's length away from your body to create as much space as possible between the ball and the defender. It is important to keep your head up out of the water. **The offensive players head is a very important part of the body to help protect the ball from the defender. If your head is up and you are in the proper positioning then the defender must try to go over your head to get to the ball which will usually result in a kick out.**

One of my favorite drills for teaching your 2 meter players this concept is called the "keep away" drill. It is a simple but a great fundamental drill. It is simple primarily because it is a drill that can be performed with two athletes (one on offense and one on

defense). It is a great drill to help athletes learn how to protect the ball and feel where the defender is in order to adjust and keep their body and head in between the defender and the ball. Basically, when you are protecting the ball you are “keeping the ball away” from the defender and learning how to use your body and the angles to do this. To begin the drill you will have one player begin with the ball and the second player is defending on his back. On the coaches “go” or whistle play begins and the defender tries to get the ball. The offensive player does everything he can to keep the ball away from the defender. The drill lasts for 20 seconds or until the defender gets the ball. Start out with medium pressure on defense and advance to game situation intensity. There is one other tip to think about in this drill. **While playing “keep away” try to maintain your position in the water.** In other words do not get pushed out as you do the drill. If you are a 2 meter player you want to maintain your position on the 2 meter line.

There are slightly different fundamentals involved while protecting the ball on the perimeter. While you are on the perimeter you will need to keep your eyes on what is happening behind you at the 2 meter position. You want to know this because when it is time to make the pass to 2 meters you need to be aware of it. While some perimeter players will prefer to use the 2 meter technique and stay at a 45 degree angle with their side to the opponent’s chest. It is a bit more difficult to turn your head and watch what is going on behind you in this position. Most of the time while playing the perimeter you will need to play in more of a “face to face” position. If you are protecting the ball with your right hand and you are facing the defender then most of the time you will use your left arm to control the right arm/elbow and body of the defender. As you are in this “face to face” position you are trying to keep the ball between the defender and your body, head and arm with the arm that is behind you while the other arm is protecting the defender and keeping him/her away from the ball. Obviously, the protecting arm must do its work under the water to avoid being called for an offensive foul. You can watch 2 meters in this position and step out to make the pass when 2 meters is available. Occasionally, you may be able to get to a more advantageous position when you actually can slide to the outside of the defender and your left arm is protecting and controlling the defender on his/her left. In this position you are set up better to step out over your legs (using your split egg beater) and separating out to your right to make a clean pass to 2 meters. You are stepping out into free water and making a pass with no defense in front of you in this position. However, a good defender will rarely allow you to obtain this advantageous position. We as coaches should help our athletes understand and work on all three scenarios so that our athletes can utilize the best possible positioning that works for him/her. It is also imperative that we teach our young athletes to be able to make a pass using the left and the right hand in all of these positions. **Teaching the young to use both hands for simple short passes will make that athlete a more fundamentally sound and better water polo player.**

A simple way to learn this skill and work on the positioning for perimeter passing and protecting the ball is to begin with three athletes. One player will be the target or 2 meter player. The other two are on the perimeter with one on offense and one on defense. Begin with the ball under light pressure and have the offensive player work on the various possible positions. More back to chest (like playing 2 meters) and more “face

to face” like a traditional perimeter position. On the coaches “go” or whistle have the offensive player try to protect the ball and step out to make a good pass to the target at 2 meters. After about 5 passes rotate so each player plays each position. Make sure each player is working on the different scenarios and trying to make right and left hand passes. After the players are feeling more comfortable with technique then it is time to bump up the defensive intensity and make the drill more game like.

A more advanced drill for the perimeter is to have two players on the perimeter and one player at 2 meters. All players are guarded by a defender. Start the ball with one player on the perimeter and both players are under pressure. One pass must be made on the perimeter before passing the ball into 2 meters. All players are trying to protect the ball and make good passes. Make the drill as game situation as possible. Practice like you are going to play in a game as much as possible. This is a good drill for the perimeter players as well as the 2 meter player. All players are focusing on protecting the ball.

Another great drill for the perimeter and the 2 meter players is called the “animal drill”.

This is a 6 on 6 ball control drill. 2 meters is working hard to hold position and protect the ball on each pass into him/her. The perimeter is working hard to move the ball and get the ball into 2 meters. Run this drill with a coach blowing a whistle on all fouls and players learning to work together to advance the ball to the next player on the perimeter or to 2 meters whatever is appropriate. The drill can be run until the offense is able to make 5 or even 10 good passes to 2 meters. This drill will require perimeter players to release for the ball (another lost fundamental skill that will be discussed at a later date).

Remember the body mechanics of protecting the ball. A player should use his entire body to protect the ball. Your legs, torso, head, shoulder, arm, elbow, hand are all involved. When it comes down to it protecting the ball it is simply a game of “keep away”. **Usually in our sport the team that does a better job of keeping the ball in their hands and out of the opponents hands will win the game. It ALL begins with the fundamental skills.**