

Hosting a Community Water Polo Event in Natural Waters

Written by **Maddi Burrell & Tammy Travers**

Edited by **Valerie Gruest**

 Reading time: ~8 min



Water polo isn't just a pool sport—it's a way to bring people together, ignite excitement, and grow a community around a shared love of the game. Imagine a sunny morning at your local lake or oceanfront, with athletes of all ages diving in, coaches guiding players, parents cheering on, and even new officials learning the ropes. This is exactly the kind of experience Chicago Lakefront Water Polo created when they organized their first open-water session—because one day, they didn't have a pool.

DEVELOPMENT

What started as a simple, low-key event quickly evolved into something much bigger: a recurring community gathering that brought together not just the team, but neighbors, families, and curious passersby. It proved that water polo can thrive outside traditional facilities, opening doors for new participants and strengthening connections at both the club and national federation levels.

The impact is multi-layered. For athletes, it's a chance to play in a fun, dynamic environment, building skills while enjoying the thrill of open water. For coaches, it's an opportunity to teach, mentor, and even develop future referees. Parents and supporters get to witness the sport's energy and inclusivity firsthand, sparking excitement that spreads beyond the immediate team. And for the larger water polo ecosystem—clubs, leagues, and national federations—it's a compelling way to grow membership, foster community engagement, and showcase the sport as vibrant, accessible, and inviting.

This guide will take you step-by-step through organizing your own water polo community event in natural waters—from community outreach and equipment setup to safety and officiating—helping you create a day that leaves a lasting impact on participants and the wider community. Whether your goal is to recruit new members, give current athletes a fresh experience, or simply bring people together through the love of water polo, the possibilities are as wide as the lake or ocean you're playing in.

Key Concepts / Principles

1. **Community Engagement** – make it open, inviting, and low-pressure.
2. **Visibility and Accessibility** – choose a central, public location to draw interest.
3. **Safety First** – lifeguards, CPR certification, buoy lines, participant limits.
4. **Simplicity and Portability** – start with minimal equipment; upgrade over time.
5. **Communication** – frequent updates, social media, personal networks.
6. **Flexibility in Play** – multiple skill levels, rotation of teams, and refereeing involvement.

Step-by-Step Development / Implementation

1. Planning the Event.

- Identify a public, visible water location (lake, ocean).
- Decide on date and time; consider weather conditions.
- Determine participant capacity (e.g., ~30 people in the water at a time max).
- Define the structure: intermediate vs. advanced courses, or age groups.
- Coordinate basic safety: lifeguard(s), CPR-certified leads, buoy lines, and insurance coverage.

2. Community Engagement

- Create simple, clear promotional materials: flyers, emails, WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram, etc.
- Emphasize free participation, what to bring (swimwear), and that equipment (caps, balls) is provided.
- Encourage community sharing: photos, social posts, hashtags (e.g., #LakefrontWaterPolo).
- Showcase diversity and fun – highlight participation from different ages and skill levels.
- Incorporate social elements: lunch or gathering after play, visibility from walking paths.

3. Equipment and Setup

Simple Start:

- 2 inflatable nets
- 1 ball
- Caps
- 4 ropes
- 4 anchors (or minimum 2)

Upgraded Setup:

- Simple start plus:

DEVELOPMENT

- Lane lines (pool noodles or official)
- Portable shot clock system (Bluetooth)
- Additional nets or storage options for permanent setups

Setup Tips:

- Use ropes from local hardware stores, carabiners, and anchors (20lb kettlebells or buckets work).
- Place nets at a measured distance from the shoreline.
- For larger events, consider marking lanes with milk jugs or noodles.

4. Officiating and Play Structure

- Rotate referees among participants to build learning and engagement.
- Local referees or volunteers can guide.
- Coaches can teach athletes officiating skills, emphasizing in-the-moment decisions over anticipatory calls.
- Keep the format flexible: switch between skill-level courses or rotate teams during the day.

5. Safety Considerations

- Lifeguard or CPR-certified lead present at all times.
- Use buoy lines to mark safe play zones (~100yd from boats).
- Limit participants according to capacity (e.g., 7-on-7, 30 people).
- Ensure location is certified and properly insured (NF or NOC).
- Clearly communicate that participation is at the individual's own risk.

6. Notices and Communication

- Maintain a reliable posting schedule for updates and weather notices.
- Respond promptly to questions, including for newcomers.
- Leverage community members for promotion: photographers, journalists, drone operators.
- Share post-event coverage: full photo albums on Facebook, highlight images on Instagram.

Case Study

Hickory Water Polo Club: Making Waves on the Chicago Lakefront



What started as a single day without pool access has turned into a beloved summer tradition on the Chicago lakefront! Hickory Water Polo Club brought the game to the open water in Lake Michigan, creating a fun, inclusive space for athletes, coaches, parents, and the broader community to dive in. From free play sessions to skill-building and even officiating opportunities, the initiative has energized the local water polo scene and sparked interest far beyond the team.

Video of initiative - [\[Watch Video\]](#)

Article showcasing the initiative - [\[Read Article\]](#)



DEVELOPMENT

Insights from the Founders

- Spread the word through flyers, email networks, and social media channels.
- Welcome participants of all ages and skill levels to create an inclusive environment.
- Incorporate a social component—like a nearby gathering or lunch—and choose a visible, central location to draw interest.
- Build momentum by keeping communication consistent and sharing photos, results, and highlights online.



Best Practices / Tips

- Start small; equipment and setup don't need to be expensive or permanent.
- Make the event low-pressure and open – commitment grows organically.
- Use social media strategically to showcase fun, diversity, and results.
- Ensure safety is visible and structured – participants must feel secure.
- Engage the community as volunteers, photographers, and referees to build ownership.

Reflection / Action Points

- How can you adapt a community water polo event to your local body of water?
- What communication channels will best reach your potential participants?
- How can you make safety measures visible yet unobtrusive?
- How will you balance fun, inclusivity, and skill development in a single event?

DEVELOPMENT

Key Takeaway

Clear communication, high visibility, and strong community involvement are the cornerstones of successful open-water water polo events. We can't wait to see these events popping up across the Americas—whether in our stunning natural waters or local pools—bringing athletes, coaches, and communities together to celebrate the discipline.

