



NCAA WATER POLO PLAYING RULES
INTERPRETATIONS AND CLARIFICATIONS
2023 – 2024

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Definitions of Possession and Control of the Ball.

Clarification: This paper provides clarification and definition of two terms that appear in the NCAA water polo rules: Possession of the Ball and Control of the Ball.

Possession of the ball is a term that appears throughout the rules. Control of the ball, on the other hand, appears in only five places in the rules, usually in conjunction with possession. Possession and/or control of the ball is required in two critical areas of the rules that provide for significant penalties if the rules are not followed properly. These are calling of timeout and re-entry of an excluded player.

Regarding calling timeout, in most cases timeout can be called only by the team in possession of the ball. A penalty shot is assessed against a team that calls timeout when not in possession of the ball, including calling timeout when neither team is in possession of the ball. Possession is defined in Rule 4, Section 11 on page 34 of the current rule book regarding the calling of timeout, where it states:

"Possession includes physically controlling the ball, holding the ball, or the referee's whistle indicating one team has been awarded the ball. Possession does not include when the ball is in the air on a pass or shot, nor does it include being closest to or merely touching the ball without physically controlling or holding the ball."

Possession and control are also addressed in Rule 7, Section 3c on page 50, which discusses re-entry of an excluded player, "**When the excluded player's team has retaken possession of the ball (which means receiving control of the ball) during actual play...**"

In both areas of the rules, possession is discussed by referring to the terms "control of the ball" and "controlling the ball", neither of which is clearly defined. In fact, control of the ball is not defined in any of the major water polo rule sets. This lack of a definition for control of the ball has resulted in some uncertainty and controversy in the application of the timeout and re-entry rules.

To clarify the use of these terms, the following definitions are provided.

Possession of the Ball: A team has possession of the ball if one of its players has control of the ball or is holding the ball, or if the referee has blown the whistle and awarded possession of the ball to the team.

Comments: This succinct definition is consistent with the text in Rule 4 Section 11. Consistent with that section of the rules, touching the ball in flight does not provide control of the ball and does not constitute possession. Possession does not include when the ball is in the air on a pass or shot or when it rebounds from a shot and lands in open water, nor

does it include being closest to or merely touching the ball without physically controlling or holding the ball.

Control of the Ball: A player has control of the ball if the player is holding the ball or if the ball is within reach and that player is clearly in the best position to determine what happens to the ball next.

Comments: Under this definition, a player who is swimming with the ball (dribbling) has control of the ball. A stationary player on the perimeter treading water and protecting the ball from a defender with their body has control of the ball. A player receiving a cross pass in front of the goal has control of the ball if it is within the player's reach or would be within the player's reach but for the commitment of a foul that prevents the player from playing the ball. Otherwise, under this definition, a player who cannot reach the ball does not have control of the ball. Furthermore, to address the possibility that the ball can be up for grabs and within reach of more than one player at a time, in which case none of them can be said to have control of the ball, the definition requires that a player in control of the ball clearly be in the best position to determine what happens to the ball next.

For questions regarding these definitions, please contact the NCAA Water Polo Secretary Rules Editor, Dave Alberstein – albersteind@gmail.com.