

## **Developing a Water Polo Captain A Water Polo Master Tactician supplemental**

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*"Because there are no predetermined solutions to problems, leaders must adapt their thinking, formations, and employment techniques to the specific situation they face. This requires an adaptable and innovative mind, a willingness to accept prudent risk in unfamiliar or rapidly changing situations, and an ability to adjust based on continuous assessment."*

*- Foreword, Army Leadership ADP 6-22*

Many coaches talk about the delegation of responsibility they give to their team captains:

"When a captain tells you to do something they speak for the coach"

But, when do captains routinely speak with a coach's vision? Usually, this statement is the last expression of delegation a coach will ever give to team leaders. Instead, coaches should be identifying a portion of every practice to be run by the leaders. These players need opportunities to practice their leadership skills every day. Coaches should provide guidance, tools, and feedback to facilitate daily leadership development. Giving players repetitions in team leadership will pay dividends when the captains are executing the coach's tactical plan during the chaos of a game.

**College players are eventually moving into the real world and will benefit from this experience. Leadership skills are not only essential in the workplace but will benefit players for the rest of their lives. If the Head Coach, or even the Assistant Coach, is organizing warm-ups, conditioning, or basic drills by the second week of practice they are becoming inefficient and missing out on development opportunities. Coaching staffs should be correcting individual technique, identifying skill deficiencies that need more emphasis, and developing the team's tactical framework. Captains should be enforcing task organization and pace. If [ROTC](#) college seniors are qualified to lead soldiers into combat your players can run the first 45 minutes of practice.**

First, establish a precedent for the captain's authority. Give them a task to execute such as organizing the team warm up and having everyone in the water at a certain time. If players are still on the deck, pull the captains out and hold them accountable. Physical discipline is easiest but is not an appropriate learning event; captains should be above physical discipline and should be conditioned for mental and emotional leadership. Asking "Why" the captains have not accomplished their task, and seeking a solution, is more effective than yelling, berating, or

demeaning the players. Show the rest of the team that the captains are the conduit between the coach and the rest of the team. Essentially, the captains should be doing the heavy lifting, and yelling, during the routine portions of practice.

Second, bring the leaders into the daily planning of the practice. Have them stand with the staff as the plan for the day is discussed. What is the conditioning plan, what is the strategic focus of the practice? Are there any recommendations from the captains based on the results of the previous game? Let them know that their input is important in building the team.

Third, talk only to the captains when explaining the next task. This is the hardest step. Stand over the captains and give them the next drill. If other players are lost when the drill starts ask the captains why. Are they leading the drill or expecting inexperienced players to know what to do? Captains should be vocal and learn to relay any information given to them. Again, this will pay dividends in crucial game situations. In Senior ROTC, the squad leader is given 10 minutes to receive, develop, and disseminate an operation order to their subordinates prior to leading a 90 minute tactical mission.

Game performance is the ultimate expression of all the hours in practice. Coaches should develop leaders in practice with the following game outcomes in mind:

- Communicate up, down, and laterally so that the entire team is synchronized
- Execute the team's tactical framework with minimal input from the coaching staff
- Quickly identify opponent strengths and weaknesses then adjust tactics
- Perform all the individual skills required to dominate an individual opponent
- Develop adaptive leaders that can process information faster than the opposing team

When the captains understand the tactical framework, practice expectations, and task outcomes they will thrive with the latitude they are given. Transition the next year's captains/seniors during the last week of the season to give the current seniors a chance to focus on enjoying the end of their career. This also gives the juniors and new captains a chance to lead the team before the experienced leaders depart.

Developing a water polo captain is as rewarding as training future military leaders. Most players have committed significant portions of their lives to play water polo and the coach should enable them to lead men and women in this short profession as well.

*"The fastest learning occurs when there are challenging and interesting opportunities to practice leadership with meaningful and honest feedback and multiple practice opportunities. These elements contribute to self-learning, developing others and setting a climate conducive to learning."*

*- Page 9, Army Leadership ADP 6-22*