

## A short history of canoe polo in Victoria

Since the early 1960s, canoe polo had been played in Britain as a fun game. It developed when someone built short kayaks with blunt and rounded ends for use in swimming pools. These craft were named BATS (baths advanced trainers). They were used by slalom paddlers to keep fit through their off-season. They soon tired of just paddling around the pool so introduced a ball and goals, teams were formed and some simple rules written. In 1969 an exhibition game was played at the 1969 National Canoe Exhibition and they have had a national competition ever since.

In the mid 1970s a British paddler came to Australia bringing his BAT kayak with him. After a brief introduction it wasn't long before a few people got interested in the idea and started to develop the game in Australia. It began in New South Wales and was introduced to Victoria in 1979.

### History in Victoria

In Victoria several small competitions were held, the first one being held at the 25m Doncaster/Templestowe pool, the boats used were old 'surf yaks', the rules were rough and ready and the play was confused. There were even a couple of lifesavers who would dive into the pool to rescue anyone who capsized. At times, they had more swimmers than players. The next competition was held under lights in the outdoor 50m pool which is what we play in today, the only difference is that then we played across the pool, not the length of the pool as we do today. There were two grades of competition 'A' and 'B', 'A' grade played in the deep end as they could roll, 'B' grade in the shallow end.

Due to the success of these trial competitions a steering committee was formed to establish a formal VACA competition and to send teams to the inaugural Australian Championships. The committee consisted of David Fegent, Rod Westwood and Greg Pearson. The first VACA competition was held in March 1980 at Latrobe University pool and consisted of fifteen teams – five 'A' grade, seven 'B' grade and three ladies teams. During this competition three teams, a men's open, men's junior and ladies were selected to represent Victoria at the inaugural Australian Championships which were held in Cairns on May 1980. Unfortunately we do not have any results for these competitions.

Due to the success of the first season a second competition was organised, this attracted twenty teams from nine clubs competing in three grades, 'A', 'B' and ladies. With this thirty percent increase it forced the competition to use two venues, Latrobe and Monash Universities. A report in *Paddler Magazine* states 'A Victorian Canoe Centre team beat a combined Templestowe/Essendon team 6–3 in an exciting A grade final. The main difference in the teams was the brilliant goal shooting of Stuart Dry.'

On the 9th July 1980 the canoe polo committee was officially formed, office bearers included chairman: Greg Pearson and secretary: David Fegent.

The growth of canoe polo was incredible, by 1982 there were forty-six teams competing in eight grades of competition (six men and two women's) at three different venues over four nights, there were 250 active canoe polo players competing each week. Late in 1982 saw the use of the 50m State Swimming Centre for the first time, this changed the way the game was played significantly as the game was becoming cramped in the small 25m pools.

### **International growth, early Australian tours**

Efforts were being made to have canoe polo recognized by the International Canoe Federation as a legitimate canoeing discipline but problems were encountered due to the many different versions of rules being played in each participant country, naturally each country wanted their particular version as the ICF standard.

Australia's first touring team went to the Asian Canoe Polo Championships in 1984 which Australia won convincingly, in fact there wasn't a goal scored against them. The following year was their first European tour where they found the difference in rules a major problem. In their four week tour they played in boats that ranged from 2.5m to almost 4m long. They learned to score goals with their paddles as well as their hands, play games that lasted 30 minutes a half and played on a field that was three times the size of those in Australia.

The climax of the tour was to be the prestigious Europa Cup – a competition held at Crystal Place in England with teams from Europe competing. The rules for this competition were supposed to be the Australian version but the competition ended up playing the British rules. The Australians did well but got knocked out in the semis against England 'B' who went on to play England 'A' in the final.

More work was put into formulating a set of ICF rules and after many drafts and several years work by people such as Richard Boulton from NSW, the ICF rules were accepted. They were basically a compromise of the Australian and British versions and are what we presently use in our local competition.

Once the ICF rules were adopted by all canoe polo countries the next goal was to have a world championships. This was held in 1994 in England and at this competition Australia achieved the incredible result of winning both the men's and women's categories. This was an outstanding achievement and a credit to all those who worked towards this ultimate goal in such a short period of time.

### **Present day (at time of writing)**

Since the halcyon days of the mid-eighties when we had fifty teams in the Melbourne competition and used four different venues each week we have now stabilized at forty teams and have the one central venue at the Richmond Recreation Centre. Over the years the standard of play has increased as have the skill levels. When canoe polo first started you could count the number of players who could hand roll on one hand, now everyone can do it. The game's greatest asset is that it provides for spectator interest and support. It is fast, spectacular and involves plenty of action but the best thing is it's indoors.

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