

Evolving from the large playing fields on the rivers of Germany and France and the indoor swimming pools of England, canoe polo adapted to become an international sport of excitement and challenge. In the 1920s, a field might be a hundred metres—or more—long. In 1990 it became thirty metres, later revised to thirty-five. Boats and rules also changed; from four to three metre long kayaks; from flicking the ball with a paddle, to passing it by hand; from on water soccer like goals, to goals suspended overhead.

Australia took to canoe polo at a time of change. Starting with two players to a canoe, it soon took to single kayakers to become an influential leader in an emerging sport.

STARTING

Two to a canoe

Canoe polo came to Australia in 1952, through the *Australian Canoe Federation's* recent affiliation with the *International Canoe Federation*. Canoeists were abuzz with preparations for the coming 1956 Melbourne Olympics and keen to try something new. They took quickly to the unlikely, but captivating ball sport. These early games were two to a canoe. The stern paddler steering the canoe and the bow paddler handling the ball.

The following year, the new game was demonstrated at the *Australian Sprint Championships* on the Nepean River, Penrith. Interest spread and two to a canoe was taken up by clubs in New South Wales and Victoria, which continued into the 1970s.

Something different

Meanwhile, in England, something quite different was underway. A new version of the game was demonstrated at the *International Boat Show* at the Crystal Palace, London in 1970. Played in kayaks, it had one metre square flat board goals suspended above the water. Played in swimming baths, the boats were short, with blunt ends. They were called the baths advanced trainer, or simply, a BAT.

South Australia was first to pick up the challenge. Inspired by a description in Alan Byde's book, *Living Canoeing*, Peter Carter designed and made BATs for children and adults in 1972. For children the new boat was simply for fun. For adults, the BAT was intended for training kayaking skills in swimming pools. Some of these early boats were sent to New South Wales and Tasmania.

Further impetus landed when Ray Abrahall, from the Sutherland Shire Canoe Club, travelled to England for the 1975 *Devizes to Westminster Marathon*. Impressed by what he saw, he brought back a BAT to Australia. Subsequently, Abrahall actively promoted the game around Australia as a competitive sport.



Peter Carter's BATs. Top to bottom: the Platypus BAT mark 1 (1972), mark 2 (1976), mark 3 (1978), mark 4i (1982, 2001)

Competitions begin

The first canoe polo competition in Australia was in Adelaide, 1976. It was organised by the South Australian Canoe Association. Take-up was quick as canoe clubs and universities in the other states took to the water and established regular competitions. The first Australian Canoe Polo Championships were held in 1979. The first Australian Interclub Championships were in 1984.

Australia took to canoe polo with passion. It soon set about creating rules and game plays and joined the international community to learn and to compete.

CONTRIBUTING

Australia has been instrumental in advancing canoe polo. Its contributions to developing the playing rules, coaching material and boat design have influenced the game around world. Maybe it's the distance from the key centres of Europe that has pushed us to be self-sufficient. Or maybe it's insight and talent.

Playing rules

As the sport emerged, so too did the need for consistent and common rules of play. Rules varied from place to place throughout Europe and

Australia. The British Canoe Union had promoted universal rules in 1972 but met with considerable opposition to them. The International Canoe Federation (ICF) followed and appointed a committee to recommend suitable rules of play.

Through the efforts of Dr Frank Whitebrook from the Far North Coast Canoe Club, New South Wales, Australia was invited to join the committee. Richard Boulton was subsequently appointed to represent Australia.

Boulton was already actively promoting and developing canoe polo in Australia. With Steve Hemsley, he had developed and trialed various rules in the Sydney competitions. Their innovations included larger goals, face masks, rules for helmets, paddles, kayak protection and well defined hand signals. Australia tenaciously championed the Australian/British/French style of play (small field, above water goals, ball managed with the hands) and left little consideration for the Dutch/German/Italian approach (large fields, on water goals, ball managed with the paddle). The resulting ICF rules were published in 1986 and continue, with updates, today.

In 1987 The Australian Canoe Federation, canoe polo committee published the booklet *Canoe polo: conditions for play, playing rules, and interpretations*. Australia was invited to demonstrate the new rules of play at the 1987 ICF World Sprint Championships, Duisburg.

Continuing Australia's rules and refereeing contribution, Duncan Cochrane was elected ICF chief referee 2007–2014, responsible for training and organisation of referees world-wide. He followed up creating an online ICF Referee Training course in 2016, which is standard training the world over.

Coaching

Wondering how best to win, Steve Hemsley and others pondered how to organise on the field. What tactics would be best? Looking at basketball, rugby and soccer they adapted plays such as zone, press and overlap defence strategies. Training drills such as two-man and three-man weaves, give and go, and general terminology were modelled on these sports. Australia showed the world what was possible. Their approach not only gave Australia an advantage—shown by its success at international competitions and consecutive world championships—but would lay foundations for others to follow.

Hemsley published the booklet *Canoe polo coaching and tactics* in 1989 and *Coaching tips* in (year?). Phil Doddridge prepared *Physiological testing in canoe polo* in 1992. Duncan Cochrane wrote the *Canoe Polo Coaching Manual* in 1997 and John Evans and Antonia Kieran produced *Canoe polo performance testing – a guide to assessing canoe polo performance* in 1999.

Canoe polo – basic skills and tactics, 2005, and *Canoe polo – advanced skills and tactics*, 2017, by Ian Beasley continue the tradition of comprehensive material from Australia for coaches and players.

Over the years, Australian coaches have travelled to Japan, New Zealand and China to mentor and build the skills of the growing number of players and coaches taking up the new and exciting sport.

Boats

Early boats from Peter Carter in South Australia and the Dominic College Canoe Club in Tasmania saw design evolve at the state level. But it was Duncan Cochrane's Apollo in 1989 that led to the Vampire BAT series in 1994. A boat still preferred by many high performance players around the world.

ORGANISING

Canoe polo became a discipline committee of the Australian Canoe Federation in 1986. Adopting a five year plan, the committee oversaw remarkable growth in the state capitals and regional areas. The state associations appointed its committee members. In 2002, under Australian Canoeing's new constitution, canoe polo became a technical committee responsible to the Australian Canoeing board.

There was a flow on effect with the committee no longer having state representation and canoe club delegates no longer a part of the state committees. The reorganisation provides national overview of the sport, but is possibly comprised without formal representation of the states.

Australian Canoeing changed its name to *Paddle Australia* in 2018. Canoe polo (along with the other canoeing disciplines) continues as a technical committee. Each state is a separate organisation affiliated with Paddle Australia and each has its own canoe polo committee.

As canoe polo spread around Australia, the sport flourished as participation grew, competitiveness redoubled and successes celebrated.

The states and territories each found their own path to canoe polo.

Australian Capital Territory

The *Burley Griffin Canoe Club* is the only canoeing club in the Australian Capital Territory. It was formed by marathon paddlers in 1990 and from early on featured canoe polo. At first there was only one team, the Smarties, but now includes men's, women's and junior teams. Despite its small numbers, BGCC players have been selected to represent Australia and have also joined New South Wales state teams. Its juniors have joined the Australian junior development squad.

New South Wales

Following Ray Abrahall's lead, *Sutherland Shire Canoe Club* on Gunnamatta Bay became the home of canoe polo in New South Wales. Universities also took to the water and several other venues promoted it.

Canoe polo (kayaks, double bladed paddles) featured at the *Aquatic Festival* on the Nepean River, Penrith in 1971.

By 1986 there were four separate venues playing mid-week in Sydney, *Wakehurst Touring Canoeists*, *Parramatta Canoe Club* and *Illawarra Canoe Club* were the three dominant clubs. The annual state championships were large events with eight to ten teams in open division plus womens, U18 and veterans (35+).

Canoe polo spread across New South Wales with regular competitions in Tumut, Orange and Jindabyne as well as Sydney. There was a focus on spreading north and also south to Albury-Wodonga.

Northern Territory

Canoe polo has been played in Darwin and Alice Springs for around thirty years. The enigmatically named *Central Desert Canoe Club* is the home of canoe polo in Alice Springs. Tennant Creek has also hosted the occasional game.

Queensland

The first competition was at Tingalpa Creek, around 1978, in conventional kayaks, run by *Wynnum District Canoe Club* and *Indooroopilly Canoe Club*. There were many styles of boats; some were slalom kayaks with a truncated bow and stern.

In the eighties, Queensland had competitions in Townsville, Cairns, Mackay, Toowoomba and Brisbane. There was an intertown competition and

a weekly competition at the Brisbane Aquatic Centre.

A 1986 state wide survey provided a framework for continued growth. The *Queensland Cruising Canoe Club* (originally a part of Ipswich Canoe Club) became the driver of canoe polo in Queensland.

South Australia

The first canoe polo competition was in Adelaide in 1976. Three different boat designs were available: Carter's Platypus BAT, the Trylon BAT Mk5 and the UK Phighter.

South Australia grew quickly to lead the sport in Australia, producing some of its best players and coaches. Participation dropped off around 2014 as funding decisions and pool access impacted the local competition. There was a resurgence in 2018 when the Australian championships were held at West Lakes.

Tasmania

Appreciating that high performance requires a suitable boat, the *Dominic College Canoe Club*, in 1986, designed a kayak that took into account boat and water dynamics and their consequent influences on player performance.

Canoe polo is played in Hobart, Launceston and Burnie. In Hobart, the Southern Tasmanian High Schools Sports Association conducts a winter roster for students.

In 2018, Tasmania had about 120 players.

Victoria

The new style of game reached Victoria in 1979. Games at the Doncaster/Templestowe pool saw confused, wayward play. Lifesavers dived in to rescue capsized players. At times, it seemed that there were more swimmers than players. Games were played across the width of the pool—a twenty-five metre long field.

The first competition under the Victorian Amateur Canoe Association came in 1980 at Latrobe University. There were fifteen teams. Following its success, a second season attracted twenty teams from nine clubs, requiring pools at Latrobe and Monash Universities.

The growth of canoe polo in Victoria was incredible. In 1982 there were forty-six teams competing in eight grades at three different venues over four nights. There were 250 active players competing each week.

By 1986, the Melbourne competition had plateaued with over 500 players, ten different grades, four nights a week, at two or three pools.

Pools supporting canoe polo included: Beaurepaire Melbourne, Prahran, Brunswick, Essendon, Fitzroy, Balwyn, Hawthorn, Richmond as well as Monash and Latrobe Universities. Sixty referees and officials were needed for smooth running of the venues and games.

Not surprisingly, there was also a change of attitude—canoe polo was now a serious competitive sport, not just fun.

The 1990s and 2000s saw decline to settle at around 120 players, two nights a week at Richmond. After over thirty years, canoe polo left the Richmond Recreation Centre in 2019 and moved to the Brunswick Baths.

Melbourne continued as the largest centre for canoe polo in Australia. Lake Nagambie, 140 km from Melbourne, was established as its premier venue for Oceania, national and interclub championships. In 2021, Edgewater Lake on the Maribyrnong River became home for training and club competitions.

Western Australia

There is an active canoe polo community in Perth with the *Ascot Canoe Club* and *Perth Canoe Polo Club* holding regular competitions. Western Australia hosted the *2006 Australian Canoe Polo Championships* in Perth.

Interversity

The universities have been a bountiful source of players over many years. The Australian Universities Sports Association hosted intervarsity competition at The University of Sydney University in 1984. Tasmania hosted the *1986 Interversity Slalom and Canoe Polo Championships*. Adelaide University also hosted an intervarsity league. University competitions have dropped off but in Victoria, 2017, Monash, La Trobe, Melbourne and RMIT universities competed together for the first time in many years.

New Zealand

Separated by 2000 km of the Tasman Sea, New Zealand and Australia enjoy a strong canoe polo camaraderie. Australia was instrumental in guiding development in New Zealand and the countries' close relationships continue today.

The first New Zealand canoe polo competition was organised by Christchurch Canoe Polo in 1987. Take-up of the sport was strong and players were keen to build their skills. New Zealand's mens and womens senior teams, the Paddle Blacks and

Paddle Ferns, toured Australia in 1991. The junior men and women teams toured in 1992 and 1993.

Auckland hosted the Pacific Championships in 1995 with New Zealand, Australia and Tonga competing.

Australia and New Zealand worked together to advance canoe polo. Australia assisted with management, coaching and training. Continuing to attract players, New Zealand could boast fifty-three teams on four courts at the annual Atahua Cup in 2015. In 2018 about 2000 players are members of the New Zealand Canoe Polo Association. An additional 2000 are estimated to play around the country.

In 2020, New Zealand opened the *Canoe Polo Hawke's Bay* complex, four full-sized courts specifically designed for canoe polo.

AUSTRALIAN CHAMPIONSHIPS

Australian canoe polo championships

The first interstate canoe polo championships followed the *Australian Canoe Slalom and Whiterwater Championships 1979* at Brady's Lake, Tasmania are considered the first Australian Canoe Polo Championships. They are the premier canoe polo event in Australia, held each year with the states competing to be host.

Australian Canoe Polo Championships

Year	Location
1979	Brady's Lake, Tasmania
1980	Cairns, Queensland
1981	Grafton, New South Wales
1982	Melbourne, Victoria
1983	Not held
1984	Frenches Forest, Sydney
1985	Hobart, Tasmania
1986	Sydney, New South Wales
1987	Brisbane, Queensland
1988	Warringah, New South Wales
1989	Adelaide, South Australia
1990	Melbourne, Victoria
1991	Adelaide, South Australia
1992	Hobart, Tasmania
1993	Adelaide, South Australia
1994	Ryde, New South Wales
1995	Melbourne, Victoria
1996	Maroochydore, Queensland
1997	Sutherland, New South Wales
1998	Marion, South Australia
1999	Hobart, Tasmania
2000	Tea Tree Gully, South Australia
2001	Melbourne, Victoria
2002	Penrith, New South Wales
2003	North Adelaide, South Australia

Australian Canoe Polo Championships

Year	Location
2004	Melbourne, Victoria
2005	Penrith, New South Wales
2006	Perth, Western Australia
2007	Glenelg North, South Australia
2008	Essendon, Victoria
2009	Penrith, New South Wales
2010	Perth, Western Australia
2011	West Lakes, South Australia
2012	Penrith, New South Wales
2013	Geelong, Victoria
2014	Canberra, ACT
2015	Nagambie, Victoria
2016	Gold Coast, Queensland
2017	Nagambie, Victoria
2018	West Lakes, South Australia
2019	Penrith, New South Wales
2020	Not held

Australian Interclub Championships

Beginning in 1981, the *Australian Interclub Championships* became the premier national competition. Clubs from around Australia converged on the host state for two days of competition. In Victoria, competitors would camp at Fairfield Park for a week, beside the playing fields on the Yarra River.

The interclubs were combined with the Australian Championships in 1989 but returned to separate competitions in 1998. In 2005 the interclub championships were replaced by Summer Series, a series of four tournaments, each held in a different state.

As faced by other sports, club membership began to decline as community interests changed and formalised sport held less appeal. The Australian championships replaced the interclubs as the main national canoe polo event.

**National League**

National League targeted high performance with participation by invitation only. Starting in 1991, six teams competed at three competitions, one each in Sydney, Melbourne and Adelaide. The teams were: Sydney – *Assassins, Niners*;

Melbourne – *Explorers, Panthers*; Adelaide – *Killers* and Brisbane – (?).

1992 followed but the league was not held in '93, '94, '95. It resumed in 1996 through to 2000. Over time the league would be absorbed into the interclubs but answering the call for a dedicated high performance competition, it would resurface as the Summer Series in 2005.

COMPETING INTERNATIONALLY

Meeting the challenge of distance, Australia eagerly participated in international competitions; starting first in Asia.

Two Australian teams attended the *International Invitation Competition 1984*, Hong Kong. Green team was the winning team (Illawarriers) from the *1984 Australian Interclub Championships*. Yellow team combined players from Victoria, New South Wales, South Australia and Tasmania. In the round robin, both teams won all games without a goal scored against them. In the final, green took home the trophy.

At the *1985 Welsh Open Championships* Australia men, made up of mostly New South Wales paddlers, were undefeated. They also placed third in the *Europa Cup Polo Championships* in London. In 1987, men and women competed in the *Amsterdam International Tournament* and *Europa Cup*. The women were the first Australian women to win the cup.

Development

With the sport growing quickly Australia eagerly took to championing development teams to Europe and the Pacific. There was a lot excitement as youth and senior teams, coaches and managers toured for several weeks at a time to play, compete, exhibit and learn about canoe polo. As well, there were social opportunities to build

**International Canoe Polo Invitation Competition 1984, Hong Kong**

Yellow team, left to right: Greg Pearson, Steven Hemsley, Chris Eastman, Craig Chivers, Sven Rand, Jon Purtell, Paul Carter. Back: (name?) coach.



International Canoe Polo Invitation Competition 1984 Hong Kong

Green team (Illawarriers)

Back: Steve Bath (captain), Peter Bodycott,
Michael Hurst, Centre: Steve Tomlinson, Dave
Blackburn, Sean Byrne. Front: John Slattery
(coach), Rod Arnett.

character, comradery and life long friendships. Away from home, new countries and new cultures created a new awareness.

In 1985 and 1989, two Australian development teams (the Assassins and a composite team) toured Europe. Over four weeks they played in boats ranging from 2.5m to almost 4m long. They learnt to score goals with the paddle as well as hands, played games of thirty minutes halves on a field three times the length of those at home. The prestigious *Europa Cup* at Crystal Palace, London was a highpoint. Australia did well, but were knocked out in the semi-finals against England B.

The 1989 men were a selected national team and the women were considered a development team due to their inexperience, but still won all events. Both teams competed in Ypres in Belgium, Lochrist in France, Gorizia in Italy and Essen in Germany.



1987 European tour trophies
Photo: Chris van Genderen

Australian men won the Ypres Avasco tournament in 1989, 1991 and 1993.

Four junior teams toured New Zealand in 1990, they played against senior and open teams and won most games. Coaching and rules clinics were also a part of the tour. There was a tour to Christchurch in 1993 and Tonga in 1995.

Australian youth toured France, Belgium, Netherlands and Germany in 1999 as lead up to competing the European Championships.

Australian men and women toured regularly in the following years. There was a development team tour to Europe in 2001 and an emerging teams tour in 2003. Tours in Europe and New Zealand becoming standard preparation for the ICF World Championships.

Australian international championships

Locking into the global scene, Australia hosted several international championships. The *Subaru International* 1986, held in Sydney and the *Sydney International* in 1989. Teams came from Europe, Asia, and New Zealand to compete down under.



The 1989 Australia uniform

The Australian *Inter-nation Series Cup* held at Sydney, Bendigo and Adelaide in 1991 with teams from New Zealand, Hungary and Australia became a pre-cursor to the Oceania Championships, which started in 2003.

ICF World Championships

With common rules in place, the ICF announced the inaugural world championships, England 1994. Eighteen countries competed in the men's category and six in the women's.

Adelaide hosted the 1996 championships with fifteen countries in the men's category and seven in the women's.

As a warm up to the 1996 championships, Australia set up the *Grand Prix Series* of three competitions. Sydney hosted the first of these as the *International Canoe Polo Challenge* at the Sydney International Aquatic Centre with

Australian and New Zealand teams competing. The Central Victorian Canoe Polo Association followed with *The Pacific Cup* in Bendigo with representation from Great Britain, Canada, France, The Netherlands, New Zealand, Brazil. The third event was *The Glenelg Games* in Hamilton with Chinese Taipei, France, The Netherlands, New Zealand and South Africa competing.

1996 year was a busy, and exciting year for Australian canoe polo. The following schedule of high standard competitions culminating in the ICF World Championships must have been an intense and exhilarating time.

1996 Canoe polo championships

Date	Event	Location
?	National League	Sydney
?	National League	Melbourne
April	Australian Championships	Maroochydore
April	Australian Interclub Championships	Maroochydore
15–16 Jun	Interstate competition	Sydney
3–4 Aug	Grand Prix Series National League	Adelaide
21–22 Sep	International Challenge	Sydney
28–29 Sep	Grand Prix Series Pacific Cup	Bendigo
4–5 Oct	Grand Prix Series Glenelg Games	Hamilton
7–13 Oct	ICF World Championships	Adelaide

Australian men and women dominated the ICF World Championships in the early years. The men taking gold in 1994, 1996 and 1998. The women winning gold in 1994 and 1998, silver in 1996 and bronze in 2002 and 2012. At the time of writing, Australian men remain the only country to hold three consecutive gold medals.

U21 men competed in 2008 and 2010, finishing eighth and sixth respectively. Women did not attend in 2014 and 2016.



Australia's ranking at the ICF World Championships

Year	Location	Men	Women
1994	Sheffield, England	1	1
1996	Adelaide, Australia	1	2
1998	Aveiro, Portugal	1	1
2000	Sao Paulo, Brazil	5	5
2002	Essen, Germany	5	3
2004	Miyoshi, Japan	6	5
2006	Amsterdam, Netherlands	6	6
2008	Edmonton, Canada	4	5
2010	Milan, Italy	8	5
2012	Poznan, Poland	4	3
2014	Thury-Harcourt, France	13	-
2016	Syracuse, Italy	15	-
2018	Welland, Canada	12	16
2020	Not held	-	-

Asian Canoe Polo Championships

The *Asian Canoe Polo Championships* were the first of the ICF continental championships; starting in 1985, ten years ahead of Europe. Following years of lobbying, Australian men joined the championship for the first time as a development team in 2017. Finishing a respectable fifth. Australia hopes to become a regular and full member of Asian canoe polo.

The Oceania Championships

Settling into a biennial competition between Australia and New Zealand, the inaugural Oceania Championships in 2003 also attracted teams from Japan and Singapore. With only Australia and New Zealand competing now, the event continues as a robust competition that is keenly anticipated.

The World Games

The multi-sport World Games invites the six top ranked countries in the ICF World Championships in the lead up year to compete in canoe polo. Australian men and women competed in 2005, 2009 and 2013. The men took bronze in 2009.

Australia's ranking at the World Games

Year	Location	Men	Women
2005	Duisburg, Germany	6	6
2009	Kaohsiung, Taiwan	3	6
2013	Cali, Colombia	5	5
2017	Wroclaw, Poland	-	-

World Master Games

Canoe polo debuted at the multi-sport *World Masters Games* in Sydney 2009. Thirty-five teams competed in 30+, 45+ and women's categories. Taking place very four years, canoe polo has subsequently featured at the games held in Torino,

Italy (2013) and Auckland, New Zealand (2017). Kansai, Japan will host the 2021 games but due to covid impacts has been rescheduled for 2022.

Canoe Polo Super League

Super League made its debut in August 2017, Ningbo, China. Its vision is 'to create the world's first canoe polo professional league'. The intention is to entertain the world. That means performance, presentation, sponsorship, global coverage and paid athletes.

Players are recruited and formed into teams by the league. Boats, gear, travel and accommodation are provided. Six teams compete over several weeks with the top four rankings progressing to the finals. Five men from Australia joined the inaugural competition.

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Note

If you have a comment or would like to add to the story of Australia's ongoing affair with canoe polo, contact Ian Beasley at ianbeasley@bigpond.com.