

What to Expect at Your First Underwater Hockey Session

So, you've decided to take the plunge and give underwater hockey a go. You may be excited, nervous, or a little of both. It's understandable. After all, you've seen the videos, and it looks like so much fun, yet so challenging. Well, it is, but that's what makes us so passionate about this sport. Yes, the quiriness of the sport is attractive, but it's the constant personal challenge that drives us on. From the first drop of pool water that touched our toes, we constantly challenge ourselves to reach that ever elusive perfect combination of skills, form, conditioning, and mental game that we know is in each of us. But we all had that first day, that second day, that third day. For most of us it was a real eye opener. It would have been nice to know what to expect, and that's the purpose of this article.

First Day

The person who invited you to practice or who you made initial contact with should be at the pool on your first day to show you how to put on gear, hold the stick, and do a few defensive moves. Most players are very passionate about this game, so you should be prepared to get lots and lots of helpful advice from more than one person. Don't worry if you feel overwhelmed – just absorb what you can. No one expects you to remember everything you're told.

All clubs have rules to protect new players. Veteran players should be aware of where you are in the pool and will take extra care to not jostle or kick you as you learn how to react to the play. When you make contact with the puck, other players should not “hit” you or blatantly take the puck from you. They should, however, stop you from forward progression, thereby forcing you to make a decision to try to move in a different direction, curl around, or pass the puck off to a teammate. While underwater hockey appears to be physically rough, it is a non-contact sport. Incidental contact is made, however, and players learn how to anticipate physical contact and move out of the way if necessary. Keep an eye out for fins, because sometimes people are simply reacting to the play and forget you're there.

Overall you can expect to feel a bit confused and ineffective. While you may feel confused about where to be and what to do, **JUST** get to the bottom and get your stick in the play. You are being effective by letting the opposing team know you are there and taking up space. When you see them move the puck in a direction away from you, you have done your job!

There are many facets to this game to be mastered: staying down, puck handling, passing, positioning, timing, not to mention breath holding, and it's impossible to learn everything in the first few sessions. Your best bet is to concentrate on one or two aspects of the game and once you get comfortable with those, start working on another.

Here are some highlights of the various skills you will learn:

Staying Down

One of the first questions people ask is, “How do you stay down?” There are two ways to keep yourself on the bottom of the pool. One is to stay moving. As long as you are kicking you can maneuver yourself in a variety of ways including forward, up, down sideways, and in circles (called curls), but that’s not always possible. Sometimes you may need to wait for someone pass the puck to you. In order to stay on the bottom, you need to position your torso so that it is parallel with the pool bottom, bend your knees, and arch your back so that your chest is up. Expelling a little air will help keep you down, too. Have someone show you how to sink yourself to the bottom without swimming, and practice it before each game. Some people will warm up by getting in a circle and passing the puck to each other. That’s a great way to practice staying down in place.

Breath Holding

New players are always worried about how long they should hold their breath, and what to do if they run out of breath. If you’re not used to holding your breath underwater, expect it to take several sessions until you start feeling comfortable do so for more than a few seconds at a time. It takes some conditioning to be physically active while holding your breath.

Know that you rarely need to stay down until you feel like you are going to explode. The trick to breath holding is staying relaxed, which keeps you from burning oxygen at a faster rate. Other secrets are to not be down when you don’t need to be, i.e., the play is on the other side of the pool, or you have finished your play and the puck has moved out of your zone. You may hear people say you should stay down until you feel like you’re going to black out, but you should never do that. That is simply an exaggeration that some hockey players like to use to make underwater hockey sound like more of an extreme sport than it is. Yes, it *is* an extreme sport, just not that extreme!

Puck Handling and Passing

Don’t worry too much about executing smooth puck handling right away, as this takes a while to learn and perfect, but you should learn a new move every time you show up, and practice it before the game starts. You can initially pass the puck by sliding it, but have someone show you the technique to lift and toss the puck, as well as the way to execute an inside flick. Watch what other people are doing in pre-game warm up and during the game. Don’t worry if you don’t get the hang of passing right away. It can be difficult to learn.

Positioning & Timing

It’s common for new players to not be sure where they are supposed to be in the pool. Whatever position you are assigned, ask your team mates where they expect you to be.

This is your zone. Generally speaking if you are playing on the right or left, you will not cross over the center positions, so know who those persons are and recognize them underwater. It's not uncommon to hone one's sights on the puck and go after it with gusto, but if you are out of position, that means you are taking someone else's position and essentially completely shutting them out of the play.

As far as timing goes, if you dive too soon, you run out of breath before getting the puck; if you dive too late, you miss the play and risk a turnover. Watch how people just seem to know when to "be there" to accept the puck. Great timing comes from learning how to read the play and read the players. It takes a lot of practice, so don't be discouraged.

Overview

People make fun of underwater hockey as a goofy sport, but as you can see there is more to it than you realize. You will hear people say that the key to underwater hockey is fitness. Some will say it's stick handling, and others will say it's positioning. Actually, it is ALL key to underwater hockey, as it all ties together. You can be a great puck handler, but if you're not in proper condition, you can't stay down long enough to be effective. All of this takes time, effort, and practice, but **it's so much fun that it never feels like work**. To get the most out of your underwater hockey experience, ask questions, get comfortable with one or two skills at a time, and practice what you learn.

See you on the bottom!