

Scottish U17 Girls/U16 Boys League Review 2017 – Short Report

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Executive Summary

The following report has been commissioned at the request of Alan Anderson, Chair of Scottish Water Polo following an email from Alan Scobie on the structure of the Scottish U17G/U16B Water Polo league.

Comparative data was gathered on a number areas:

1. Under 17G/U16B League match analysis.
2. Under 18 Girls League match analysis.
3. Relative swim speed and growth of males and female in the U17G/U16B age group.
4. A brief comparison against other sports.
5. A club survey.

During the review the benefits were reviewed based on splitting the league by gender

The potential benefits for males are that they can develop players in all water polo positions and provide the environment for a more competitive male oriented style of play, provide males with more match practise and allow the clubs to improve male recruitment and retention.

The potential for female players is even more beneficial with the development and training of girls in all playing positions, more shooting and scoring opportunities for girls during matches, increased confidence of girls when playing water polo and improved female recruitment and retention. The barriers to the success of a gender specific league are additional pool time, experienced coaches and enough players being available to play in separate leagues.

The statistics on the match comparison between the U17G/U16B League and the U18 Girls League highlights the potential benefits above, and coupled with the relatively higher growth, strength and swim speed of boys of this age provide a good basis for this conclusion.

Most other countries provide gender specific competition at this age and even younger.

The club survey produced a variety of results, however most agreed that the boys game and the girls game are different and while some highlighted their club's lack of numbers to sustain separate leagues, Scottish Swimming water polo membership suggests that the numbers are potentially there to sustain these leagues and that with a small recruitment drive, clubs could support separate leagues.

Alternatives to league separation were considered, both the status quo was reviewed and to split the league at the U14 age group instead. Both were rejected as the status quo will not lead to the potential benefits that this report highlights, and the U14 age group is competitive between the boys and girls with all girl teams remaining competitive against all male teams.

The conclusion and proposal of the report is as follows:

1. Set up of a female Scottish under 16 league to be played in the same format as the female Scottish under 18 league in 2018.
2. Set up a male Scottish under 16 league to be played in the same format as the female Scottish under 18 league in 2018.
3. As an interim measure, females should be able to play in the Scottish U16 male league, however the eligibility of females should be moved to U18 females, providing a 2 year age difference between the genders. This interim measure should be reviewed at the next AGM in 2018 to determine the sustainability of separate male and female leagues going forward.

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1.0 Introduction

The following report is a review of the Scottish U17G/U16B Water Polo League with a view to proposing improvements to the current league, based on the developmental needs of clubs and players.

The report investigated a number of parameters that affect the current league structure and provides evidence and comparison of female only leagues and mixed leagues, relative growth of males and females in the under 16 age group, the results of surveys undertaken across the clubs and a brief comparison against other sports.

The report makes a proposal for the league structure for 2018 and records the evidence gathered as part of the report.

Thank you to everyone who took the time to provide their thoughts both in writing and in person, with input from Alan Anderson, Neal Raynor, Lesley Luke, Dunfermline WPC, Larkhall WPC, Kirkintilloch & Kilsyth ASC, and Warrender WPC.

This report represents a short report recommending a way forward for the league structure and a full report is available that contains all of the feedback and evidence.

2.0 Proposed Actions

There are many elements to take into account to determine the appropriate action to take in relation to both the male and female side of the U16 water polo game, competitiveness; club readiness; relative strength, speed and physicality of males and females at Under 16; development needs of the participants and the opportunities provided by the action.

At the heart of all of this should be the development needs of the participants. This above all else should be the driving force.

From a male point of view, they must be able to express their physicality and the skills involved in the sport without the fear of the impact of their play on female participants. This should ultimately allow the male players to develop their water polo skills to a higher competitive level faster.

From a female perspective, it is evident that the pathway is not clear for female players. There is mixed U15 development tournaments, U17G/U16B League, U18G League and Senior Women's League. Some girls are playing up at Senior Women just to get games when it may not be appropriate for their age. A number of the teams are playing mini polo players in the U18G league. The Under 18 league may be a step too far for an 11/12 year old, whereas an Under 16 League will not be.

Female competitors must be free from over domination by male players and be free to develop a female game style. It is well known and accepted in most team sports, that females prefer a more passing game, are more supportive of their team mates and are put off by male dominated participation.

The proposal is as follows:

1. Set up of a female Scottish under 16 league to be played in the same format as the female Scottish under 18 league in 2018. (Five female under 16 teams have entered the Kirkintilloch & Kilsyth ASC Challenge tournament in December 2017 which suggests that there are enough players to sustain a viable league structure.). It is expected that the number of female players will grow as clubs look to fulfil their teams, either with new players or younger existing players.
2. Set up a male Scottish under 16 league to be played in the same format as the female Scottish under 18 league in 2018. Clubs will also have to grow their numbers and use some of their younger players to fulfil teams for this league and this should free the boys to play full on water polo against each other.
3. As an interim measure, females should be able to play in the Scottish U16 male league, however the eligibility of females should be moved to U18 females, providing a 2 year age difference between the genders. This interim measure should be reviewed at the next AGM in 2018 to determine the sustainability of separate male and female leagues going forward. (This is a club measure rather than a development measure as it is not supported by the data from growth nor in relative swim speed and endurance.)

Remember, "The ability to **learn faster than your** competitors may be the **only** sustainable **competitive advantage**." ... Aire de Geus (1998)

3.0 Benefits and opportunities

This proposal looks to address the competition pathway and should provide the following benefit to the clubs and players as follows:

3.1 Male players

- Males developing and playing in all water polo positions.
- Allow males to be more competitive when challenging for the ball.
- Translation to male inter regional teams and national teams.
- Match practise development of passing, shooting, positioning, fitness, tackling, blocking, tactical awareness and all aspects of water polo for males.
- More time on the ball for male players.
- Improve male recruitment and retention for water polo teams.

3.2 Female players

- Females developing and playing in all water polo positions.
- Make water polo more attractive for female players.
- Translation to female inter regional teams and national teams.
- Match practise development of passing, shooting, positioning, fitness, tackling, blocking, tactical awareness and all aspects of water polo for females. (There is already a swimming club in Scotland that recognises the different physiological requirements of male and female and do male only and female only training sessions).
- Increased confidence of females.
- Less intimidation of females when playing water polo.
- More time on the ball for female players.
- Improve female recruitment and retention for water polo teams.

3.3 Clubs

- A clear developmental and competitive pathway for both males and female players within clubs.
- Reduce the number of competitive mismatches.
- Increased club membership.
- Increase in club annual and monthly subscription.
- Female specific water polo coaching opportunities.
- Male specific water polo coaching opportunities.
- More opportunities to recruit volunteers.
- Additional fundraisers and fundraising opportunities.
- Additional teams within the club.
- Club benefit / hurdle – shared training time with both junior boys and junior girls squad maximises more players in pool and less cost/player. Good organised coaches will maximise pool value while poorly organised coaches will struggle with chaos

3.4 Barriers to change

3.4.1 Introduction

There are a number of barriers identified through speaking to coaches and from the survey feedback.

This is not an exhaustive list, however these barriers are briefly addressed below:

3.4.2 Current barriers

- Traditionally, clubs want to have as many playing members as they can and enter the competitions that can sustain the motivation of those who attend their sessions.
 - o This proposal would bring in a further competition, enhancing the current provision. Nothing will be removed in the 2018.
- Additional resources, pool time, coaches, officials etc would need to be recruited to allow for gender split training sessions.
 - o This is always a challenge for clubs and in the short term, and each club would need to review their own circumstances to determine the best way forward. However, the sharing of best practice across the clubs would help alleviate these issues.
- We will not be able to field enough players to sustain two teams
 - o The expectation is that additional players, currently put off by the league – both male and female – will be more likely to play in split gender leagues.
- The standard of the league will be weak.
 - o The standard is the standard. Playing males and females and training males and females in every position will overall increase the standard in time.

3.5 Alternatives considered

3.5.1 Status quo

The status quo was considered to not make any changes.

While this is the easiest option to go for, it does not address any of the development needs of male and female players, ignores the relative strength of males over girls and will maintain current player numbers, rather than growing the sport.

Additionally, anecdotal evidence suggests that:

- Girls from some of the clubs are already not wishing to play in these tournaments.
- Boys are finding it difficult to play their physical game against girls.
- Some boys are being overtly physical against the girls.

3.5.2 Development from bottom up

In order to establish a stronger case for a gender split at Under 16 level, all clubs would need to develop gender specific Under 14 water polo programmes with a view to having enough under 16 players within two years.

The club infrastructure would have to include additional pool time, gender specific coaching, appropriate club cost model and additional equipment and resources to be able to sustain the squads.

Currently I believe that there is some fantastic coaching going on in the clubs and there is clearly club growth with a number of clubs springing up over the last two years and looking to enter appropriate competition.

However appropriate competition is a key developmental component. In much the same way as it would be inappropriate for a 16 year old to play rugby against senior men, the physicality of water polo makes it open to the same challenge across the board and across the age groups.

Without appropriate competition, a key stage of development is being overlooked in favour of providing something.

This option was rejected as the U15G/U14B Development tournaments is currently meeting the needs of both the boys and the girls. Teams of girls can hold their own against teams of boys and as these are developing players, they tend to be less physical in their nature.

Development tournaments can fit extra teams so a club can develop and enter two teams and start preparing for separate girls & boys.