

Evolving from the large playing fields on the rivers of Germany and France, canoe polo adapted to substantially smaller indoor swimming pools 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, but 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 adopted single kayakers to become an influential leader in an emerging sport.

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 *Australian Sprint Championships* on the Nepean River, Penrith, demonstrated the new game. Interest spread and two to a canoe was taken up by clubs in New South Wales and Victoria that 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 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 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 enthusiastically promoted the game 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 joined international championships and sent development teams abroad.

Contributing

Australia has been instrumental in advancing canoe polo. 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.

Rules

As the sport emerged, so too did the need for consistent and common rules of play. Rules varied from place to place in Europe and Australia. In response, the International Canoe Federation formed an ad hoc canoe polo committee to look at these and recommend a universal approach.

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

CANOE POLO IN AUSTRALIA

Australia was at the forefront in development of canoe polo.

Richard Boulton represented Australia at the ICF. He strongly promoted the Australian/British/French style of play (small field, above water goals, ball managed with the hands) and left little space for the Dutch/German/Italian variants (large fields, on water goals, ball managed with the paddle). The resulting ICF rules were published in 1986 and continue, with updates, today.

Duncan Cochrane followed up with 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 chose plays such as 2-2-1 zone, press and overlap in defence. Training drills such as two-man and three-man weaves, give and go, and general terminology were modelled on other sports. Australia showed the world what was possible. Their approach not only gave Australia an advantage—shown by its success at consecutive world championships—but would lay foundations for others to follow.

Hemsley published the booklets, *Canoe polo coaching and tactics* in 1989 and *Coaching tips in (?)*, 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.

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 Apolo in 1989 that led to the Vampire BAT series in 1994. A boat still preferred by many high performance players around the world.

The Australian Championships

The first interstate canoe polo championships followed the *Australian Canoe Slalom and Whiterwater Championships 1979* at Brady's Lake,

Tasmania, which are considered the first *Australian Canoe Polo Championships*.

Tasmania again hosted a new series of the championships that commenced in 1985.

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	Not held
1985	Hobart, Tasmania
1986	Sydney, New South Wales
1987	Brisbane, Queensland
1988	Warringah, New South Wales
1989	Adelaide, South Australia
1990	Melbourne, Victoria
1991	Brisbane, Queensland
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
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

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.

The interclubs were combined with the Australian Championships in 1989 but returned to separate competitions in 1999. In 2005 the interclub championships were replaced by

CANOE POLO IN AUSTRALIA

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.



International competition

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



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 Arnott.



International Canoe Polo Invitation Competition
1984, Hong Kong
Yellow team: Greg Pearson, Steven Hemsley, Chris
Eastman, Craig Chivers, Sven Rand, John Pertell,
Paul Carter

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.

Importantly, Australia was invited to demonstrate the new rules of play at the 1987 ICF World Sprint Championships, Duisburg.

Development

In 1985 and 1989, two Australian teams (the Assassins and a composite team) toured Europe to learn about the sport and its standing overseas. 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 30 minutes halves on a field three times the length of those at home.

The prestigious *Europa Cup* at Crystal Palace, London was highpoint. Australia did well, but were knocked out in the semi-finals against England B.

Australian youth toured in 1999 playing in, France, Belgium, Netherlands and Germany to compete at 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*.

CANOE POLO IN AUSTRALIA

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.

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.

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.

Australian men and women each took gold and continued to dominate at subsequent championships. The men taking gold again in 1996 and 1998. The women gold again in 1998, silver in 1996 and bronze in 2002, 2012.

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	-

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 achieved 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	-	-

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.

New Zealand

At the outset, Australia and New Zealand worked together in the spirit of friendship and cooperation to advance canoe polo. Australia assisted with management, coaching and training. By 1989, canoe polo had taken off in Christchurch with university and club organised competitions.

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

CANOE POLO IN AUSTRALIA

Polo Association. An additional 2000 are estimated to play around the country.

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.

Organising

National committee

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 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 AC board.

There was a flow on effect with canoe club delegates no longer part of the state committees and the AC committee no longer having state representation. The reorganisation provides a national overview of the sport, but possibly comprises with less direct involvement of the canoe clubs.

Australian Capital Territory

(Text to come.)

New South Wales

Following Ray Abraham'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.

By 1988 canoe polo was spreading across New South Wales with regular competitions in Canberra, 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 around 1978 held in Tingalpa Creek, in conventional kayaks, run by Wynnum District Canoe Club and Indooroopilly

Canoe Club. There were many styles of boats; some were slalom kayaks with 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 Platybus BAT, the Tylon 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. In 2018, there is a resurgence with a most successful hosting of the Australian Championships at West Lakes.

Tasmania

Appreciating that high performance requires a suitable boat, the Dominic College Canoe Club, in 1986, designed a kayak that paid attention to the technical aspect of the boat and water interface and its influence on the player.

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 has around 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, Prahran, Brunswick, Essendon, Fitzroy, Balwyn, Hawthorn, Richmond as well as Monash and Latrobe Universities. Sixty referees and officials were needed for smooth running.

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.

Western Australia
(Text to come.)

Intervarsity

The universities have been a critical source of players over many years. The Australian Universities Sports Association hosted intervarsity competition in Sydney University in 1984. Tasmania hosted the *1986 Intervarsity 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.

References

- Australian Canoe Federation, annual reports 1985 – 1988.
- Australian Canoeing, annual reports, 2000 – 2018.
- Australian Canoe Polo, 2000 yearbook.
- A short history of canoe polo in Victoria* (author unknown).
- Club history 1972–1997*, Joan Morison, Shire Kayaking (Sutherland Shire Canoe Club and Dolls Point Paddlers)
- Illawarra Canoe Club, New South Wales, *Kungurra News*, August 1979 (mention of the first interstate championships).
- The Origins of Canoe Polo in the World*, The Deacon, Canoepolo.com.
- <http://www.canoepolo.com/articles/features/25-the-origins-of-canoe-polo?start=8>
- The Platypus BAT*, Peter Carter
- <http://www.users.on.net/~pcarter/platypus.html>

Acknowledgements

Many people have contributed to this review of canoe polo in Australia. Some recalling times of change and personal involvement, others highlighting the contributions of others.

Inevitably, the list is incomplete, but for assistance in some way, I would like to thank Peter Carter, Paul Carter, Duncan Cochrane, Gary Nelson, Chris van Genderen, Roy Farrance, Frank Magee, Ian Shelton, Craig Mackay, Anthea Courtney, Donald Leigh, Lenore Solomon, Louise Densley, Dale Tomlinson, Rob McConnell.

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.