

## Water polo more than just treading water

Though water polo is unfamiliar to many North Americans, ask just about any player at the KW Inferno Water Polo Club, and they'll tell you that the allure of the game is its challenging, physical nature.

A sibling got Julie Szpara hooked. "At first I wasn't really interested but then I tried and really liked it. It's physically demanding," says the 15-year-old Resurrection Catholic Secondary School athlete.

A converted gymnast, she has played water polo for five years. She likes it so much that she and teammate Sara Hudyn, 16, travel to Etobicoke for 12 hours of high-performance training every week. Hudyn, an Eastwood Collegiate student who has gained provincial Quest for Gold funding assistance for her training, also came to the sport in a somewhat backhanded way.

"When a friend started playing water polo, she asked me to join her. I had never heard of it before. It's not really like any other sport." Imagine swimming constantly or treading water, and needing to keep an arm free to receive and pass the ball. (You can't hold the ball with two hands unless you're the goalie.) You can't touch the sides or the bottom of the pool. The object is to score a goal by throwing the ball into a three-metre wide net.

During all of this, an opponent (there are seven players per side) is aggressively trying to take the ball from you. It easily makes water polo one of the most demanding of sports.

A game with huge popularity in Europe, water polo became a permanent Olympic sport in 1908, with the first Canadian men's team competing in Munich in 1972 and women following in Sydney in 2000.

Aside from the physical endurance required, water polo's skills and techniques correspond roughly to those of basketball, hockey, and — perhaps given its rough-and-tumble nature — rugby. Local kids have been playing with the KW club for 32 years, where they get the benefit of experienced head coach Paul Pottier, a two-time Canadian water polo Olympian who has been with the Inferno for 12 years.

The club has 50 members from age nine and up, and its success this year includes provincial gold and silver medals, with five athletes heading to national championships. Hudyn and Chloe Potovszky, 16, will travel to Winnipeg for Water Polo Canada's 18-and-under championship; Potovszky will also compete in an open-age senior women's competition in Montreal in June. Szpara, along with Shannon Craig and Tess Beveridge, both 15, will head to Montreal for the 16- and-under competition.

Hudyn and Szpara will also participate in an international tournament in Budapest, Hungary, from July 16 to Aug. 1. Hungary is a world power in water polo; its men's team won Olympic gold in 2000, 2004 and 2008. For Szpara, the extra time in the pool with more competitive play has honed her skills as she prepares for Hungary.

"I play better (in the high-performance league) because of the high level of intensity," she says.

Hudyn plays hole, a central attacking position in the middle of an umbrella-shaped group of players positioned in front of the opposing team's net. She says the sport's physicality continues to be a draw for her.

"I've always liked that the rules of the game let you be physical." That physicality — and a hint of revenge — might come into play during the Budapest trip for Hudyn and her teammates. "In Prague last year, we lost to Hungary and came second. We're going over there hoping to beat them this year," he says.



PHOTO CREDIT: RECORD STAFF

Julie Szpara and Sara Hudyn are members of the KW Inferno Water Polo Club who will be participating in an international tournament in Hungary this summer. They are coached by Paul Pottier, a two-time Olympian in water polo.