

**We are very grateful to Rob Morgan for sharing his recollections of his involvement in the early days of organised competitive Canoe Polo in the UK:**

I was a pupil at Denstone College, a private boarding school in Staffordshire. The school canoe club had just been re-formed under the guidance of our teacher Keith Clark, and we took part in slalom as well as doing some touring.

We had an old mould from Streamlyte (a KW3, named after Keith White, an early slalomist) and we bought an Alan Byde designed Bat (Baths Advanced Trainer) mk2 mould from Trylon. We also had a touring kayak mould (Trylon Tiger) and later we had moulds for a Hartung (East German Slalom kayak) Bat Mk5 and a C2 mould (I think it was called "Strike") also from Streamlyte.

In the Summer/Autumn of 1969 the BCU in-house magazine "Canoeing in Britain" arrived. Inside was a proposal by Oliver Cock (BCU National Coach) for a Canoe Polo event to be held at the National Canoe Exhibition at Crystal Palace in February 1970. Included was a set of very simple rules. From what I remember - five-a-side, no playing the ball with the paddle, the goal was a one metre square board suspended with the lower edge 2 metres above the water.

We entered, built some more Bats, taught ourselves in the school pool, and turned up at Crystal Palace. The game at the time was fairly brutal. Tackling and ramming anyhow. The boats were fibreglass, and frequently damaged and repaired, we played without buoyancy aids or helmets, and we were usually covered in fibreglass rash. Paddles were slalom paddles, wooden with riveted often battered aluminium tips, supposedly covered with tape for protection. (I still have a couple of scars on my face from sharp paddle tips).

I remember that tackling methods included getting a two-handed grip on the back of the opponent's boat and using that to capsize him, and also a technique for pulling an opponent off the ball by grabbing his arm in a kind of half-nelson lock and pulling him across you as you rolled. The initial sprint often resulted in head-on impact and damage to nose cones.

I think there were only 8 teams at the first event in February 1970. Oliver Cock refereed all the games, but not completely to the rules he had written. Most notably, he didn't penalise use of the paddle even when opponents' hands were trying to play the ball. We were beaten in the final by Pangbourne Youth Club.

Our players were young. I was 15, and the oldest. We were unhappy that the rules had not been followed, but when we complained we were told it was just a bit of fun and that we shouldn't take it so seriously. We were aware of the technical committees of the BCU for Slalom, White water racing, Marathon and Sprint and so we proposed to the BCU that a Technical Committee should be set up for Polo. Oliver Cock was initially not keen on the idea of a Canoe Polo committee, but then had a change of heart.

The BCU authorised us to go ahead. Keith Clark was chairman, I was secretary and the players representative. Two other names I remember as being involved were Mike Baines and Rob Leadley, both teachers at Blessed John Wall School Birmingham (later Saint John Wall School). We borrowed from various sports rule books to create a set of rules. For example we specified boats between 2 and 3 metres, radii of curvature of boats and paddles, type of ball (initially size 5 plastic football) and we codified sideline throws, goal and corner throws and the lengths of games. Initially we kept with the original concept of no playing of the ball with the paddle, then gradually blocking of a throw with a stationary paddle became allowed for the goalkeeper, then for all.

The game was still quite rough in play. My father, a doctor, came to watch us in a training session at school, and we asked him for advice on injury prevention. He said we should require body padding to protect kidneys and spleen, and helmets, so this was added into the rules. For a time we experimented with a kind of padded belt tied around the waist.

We organised the Crystal Palace championships for the next few years, and won every year from 1971-1974, usually meeting Bere Forest (captained by Nigel Midgley) in the final. Some of the names I remember from my team - John Beddoes, Robert Irving, Rob Drysdale, Billy Green  
I remember that in either 1971 or 72 the prizes were presented by the Chairman of the Sports Council, Roger Bannister.

After that I went off to University and on to join the RAF. I competed in Slalom through the 1970's and early 80's, and then spent a few years in coaching at Canterbury Canoe Centre and in the US.

I came back to playing Polo in 1996 on return from the US and played for Bristol Canoe Club until 2018. Now I am based at Cergy Pontoise, just outside Paris, where I train with and occasionally play for the local club.

Rob Morgan  
(written in 2023)