

The Goal That Queensland Scored

"Underwater what?"

If you've tried to explain this sport to the average person, you've probably had this conversation:

"Underwater Hockey. The bruises all over my body are from Underwater Hockey."

"Underwater hockey?... Like hockey, but underwater?" And so it goes.

I recently had this conversation with my grandmother, who was very proud that I would be attending the Australian Championships in Hobart, but a little confused about what I would be doing there.

I have to admit, arriving in Hobart and meeting the team for the first time, I was a little confused too! I discovered the sport in Townsville only a year ago, after having exactly the same conversation with a friend who plays. But the fact is, underwater hockey has a pretty low profile in the sunshine state and as a result, few female players. Our team consisted of Jess (captain and fearless leader), Janet (just fearless) and Jo from Brisbane, Sarah and Ange from Maryborough, Larnie from Cairns and me, from Townsville. We also recruited a Tasmanian player - Michelle, and Sabrina from France who happened to be in Hobart for the games. So there we were, the recently acquainted Queensland Women's Team, ready to take on Australia.

Disaster struck before we even left Brisbane; Michelle ruptured her ear drum playing the day before, removing our only back sub. Fortunately Libby, another excellent Tassie player came to the rescue. Then, two and a half minutes before our first game against the home side, Sarah surfaced with a deep gash to the chin, inflicted by her own team in the warm-up area! For a moment it looked like we had lost our star forward, as she climbed from the pool with blood dripping over her hands. However, with some magic tape-stitches, experience as a nurse and a determined furrow in her brow, she was back on the team with a clean face before the buzzer signalled the beginning of play.

The first thing I noticed about playing women on an elite level, compared to men on a social one, was the lack of underwater collisions. Tasmania beat us 20:0 while barely making contact. The underwater hockey I know is a reasonably violent game resembling human dodgem cars! I watched in awe as this team slid gracefully around us with calculated passes, feeling more like an overwhelmed spectator than a participant. It also seemed that for every Queenslander on the puck, there were two Tasmanians. Later, I realised this wasn't an illusion; this was the result of a synchronised breathing effort by a team who regularly practiced together.

Having played our first game, it was time to decide what we wanted to get out of this experience. We all chose a skill to gain and improve throughout the games, and as a team we decided that we would score a goal before Nationals ended.

"I'll run naked around the pool if I score it - whoever scores has to do the nudie run!" I announced with a laugh, knowing that at least my chances of this were less than nil! Being appointed Fines Master for the games, I felt entitled to make up such rules. My personal goal was to comprehend what to do with the puck when I got it. Due to talented players in both the forward and back line, I had begun to receive it frequently, and lose it immediately.

The next game against Western Australian was lost by less (16:0) and for us, this was an improvement. We began to clear the puck from the opposition goal out to the wings, and in the following game, even got it into their end of the pool! I learned about fouls that afternoon, when I was sent to the sin-bin for putting a player in an accidental headlock. Sabrina, subbing in and out as a back also got sin-binned for obstructing.

We lost by even less to Victoria the following day (15:0); a team made of international-level players. The score was important only as far as it was reducing against us. I learned more in our 15 minute coaching sessions before and after the games than I had in a whole year of head butting people in my

local pool! The Queensland Women's Team has several very skilled, very experienced players who could potentially be frustrated with players like me, but it was quite the opposite - everyone went out of their way to support, encourage and coach us throughout the whole competition, for which I was extremely grateful.

The State of Origin was played on game four – Queensland versus New South Wales, and the whole game had the distinct flavour of a football match at Lang Park! This was when the bruises arrived; elbows and legs were thrown, multiple players were sent to the sin bin – Janet even copped a puck in the forehead and kept playing! We continued to improve and they only beat us by 14:0.

We played Victoria, Western Australia and Tasmania twice throughout the competition, but the grand finale was our second game against the Blues, our last game for the competition. We became goal-hungry with our new team cohesion, and the puck was in the NSW half as often as they had it in ours. Ok - theirs got through to the goal 15 more times, but our possession showed immense improvement!

At the beginning of the second half, we reached the puck before the opposing strike. She floated over the top and Queensland surged forward in position. The ensuing play, in which all the forwards remained glued to the bottom in a mess of elbows, sticks and fins, resembled a bunch of sharks fighting over a carcass. Suddenly, amidst a tangle of bodies and three Queensland sticks, the puck was sitting in the back of the goal and the buzzer sounded. We had done what we came to do – we had scored a goal at Nationals!

I accidentally took credit by surfacing first and yelling triumphantly as if we were in Lang Park and Queensland had just won. I then spent the rest of the afternoon trying to pass credit to the person who actually scored the goal, desperately attempting to release myself from the streaking contract – news of which had travelled all the way to the WA Men's Team and even the cafeteria staff.

The modest scorer remains a mystery to this day!

(But I reckon it was Jo!)



2010 Queensland ladies team, from left Michelle, Jess, Jo, Sabrina, Ange, Sarah, Emma, Larnie & Janet