



It's all power in the pool

THOUGH A MINOR SPORT IN THE US, WATER POLO ATTRACTS FINE ATHLETES



GAO ERQIANG / CHINA DAILY

Nigel Tay of Singapore tries to score as Matthew Sagehorn of the US defends in the opening water polo match at the Shenzhen Universiade on Thursday. The US won 17-0.

By TANG YUE
CHINA DAILY

SHENZHEN — For most of those who spend hours training in US pools every day, becoming a star like Michael Phelps might seem like the perfect ending.

Not for Matthew Sagehorn.

Sagehorn will take water polo, thank you very much, despite the sport's lack of popularity in the United States.

"Swimming is so popular in the US," Sagehorn said. "However, for us, a lot of people just started out swimming and ended up in water polo, because swimming is so boring. All you do is just swim back and forth, back and forth. A lot of people get tired of that, so we get involved in playing water polo."

The 24-year-old says the lack of popularity does nothing to dampen his enthusiasm.

"It is low, it is low," Sagehorn said of water polo's popularity. "It is popular for us, but there is no way it can be compared to football, baseball, basketball and ice hockey."

"But just the competition it creates, the endurance it involves (attract us so much). To be such a great athlete, to be in such shape is really challenging and that makes it fun for us."

The US captain was talking after leading his side to a 17-0 win over Singapore in its opener at the Universiade on Thursday.

Eleven members of the team come from California, while the other two are from Florida, said Sagehorn, a real estate major at the University of Southern California. He said years of playing together help.

"Most of us come from different universities but most of us grew up together before university — we played together when we were in high school," said Sagehorn, who has played water polo for 10 years.

"When you grow up in California, you live near the coast and there are a lot of pools so, naturally, you learn swimming at an early age and some of us chose to play water polo."

The team's win excited 24-year-

old Andrew Stevens, one of the team's senior members.

"It is very good that we can win today. For a lot of the players, it is the first time that they have pulled on the US cap. And we did play together as a team, which is great," the goalkeeper said.

"Over the last nine months, we have been working our butts off getting in good shape, mostly as individuals rather than together. But the advantage we have over many teams is speed, and we are in shape."

Stevens and Sagehorn are two of the few players on the team who played at the past Universiade in Belgrade two years ago, where the Americans finished sixth.

Unsurprisingly, they are looking to do better this time around.

"We've been working really hard and are very excited about coming here. Today is a very good start, and hopefully we can do well in the coming days and win the gold," Sagehorn said.

"But we have to focus on the group matches first. Serbia and France are very strong and we have to play good defense."

LEARNING FROM A HEAVY LOSS

Sometimes losing 17-0 is a victory.

At least that's what Singapore captain Nigel Tay said after a one-sided water polo defeat to the US on Thursday.

"Of course, we had our expectations before the match. Actually, the result is even better than we had expected," said Tay.

The big loss came as no surprise since only five members of the Singapore team play water polo regularly and the team had never played together until three months ago.

"I think most of the American players have played water polo for years. By contrast, we have five national team players coming to Shenzhen. The rest just play for fun and some of them had stopped playing and just picked it up again a few months ago for the Universiade," he said.

"Water polo is not as popular in Singapore as it is in Europe. And the training is not so systematic compared to China. We are a very young team and just came here to gain some experience," the 23-year-old said.

Tay said the small population of Singapore and the physiques of Asian people are both disadvantages they are trying to overcome.

"We don't have so many people in Singapore so naturally there is no big talent pool. But we still have about 100 people playing water polo and it is growing," he said.

"Also, Asian people are always smaller than the Europeans and Americans in general, but we will learn from Japan and China to be quicker and more agile."

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