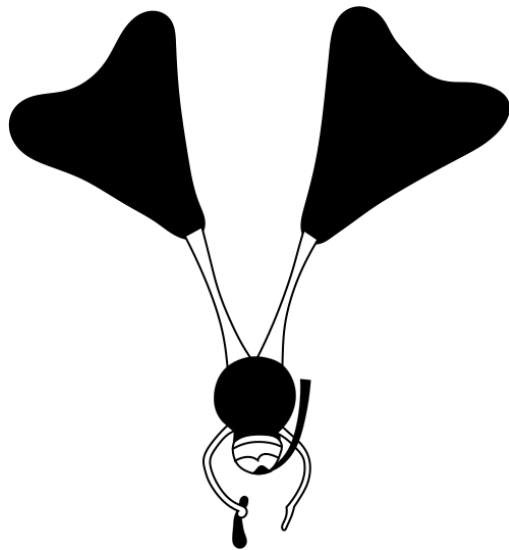


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# THE BEGINNER'S GUIDE TO UNDERWATER HOCKEY

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TASMANIAN UNDERWATER HOCKEY ASSOCIATION INC.

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## BREATHTAKING FUN

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Underwater hockey is an exciting, fun and safe sport that you can play from the age of about 10 until well into your 60s. It's the fastest team water sport around, combining speed, skill and teamwork in a way that you simply don't find in other games.

This guide explains the basics of underwater hockey. It will help you to get a feel for how we play, and the gear we use, and it also offers some tips and tricks that will have you swimming along the bottom of the pool with people chasing you in no time.

## SINK AND SWIM

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Two teams of six players face off from opposite ends of the court, holding on to the pool wall. When the buzzer sounds it's a race to the puck, which has been placed in the centre of the court on the pool bottom. The player who gets there first takes control of the game (at least momentarily). Through speed, cunning and skill it's then a matter of outmanoeuvring the opposition to get the puck into your opponent's goal.



Good teamwork is crucial. You need to be in the right place at the right time, carefully work out when to dive and when to come up for air, and be ready to sprint when someone gets a lucky break.

When a goal is scored, each team returns to their respective end of the court ready for another swim-off.

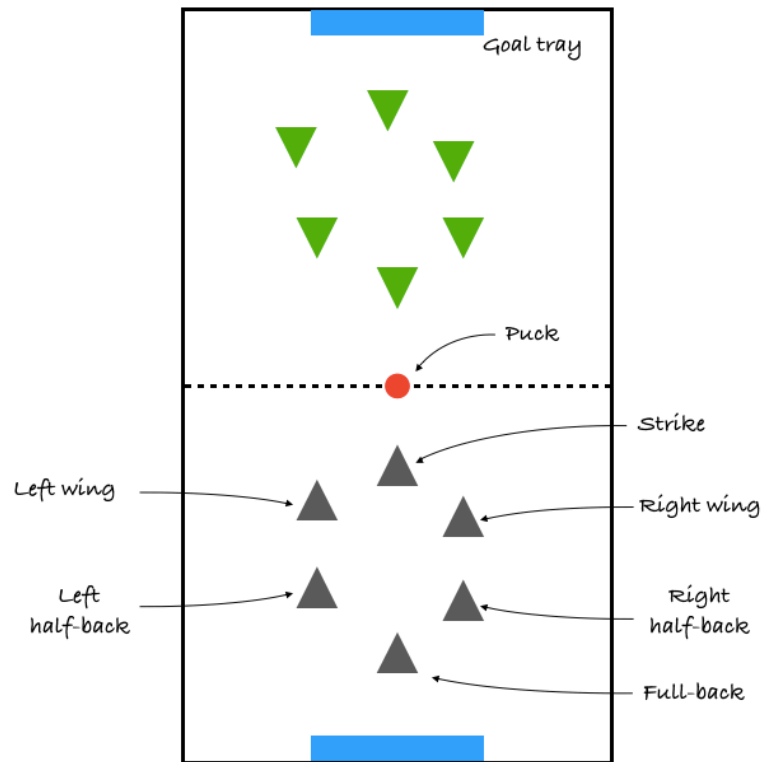
The game is played in two 15-minute halves, with a short break in the middle, and it's carefully controlled by in-water referees. When they need to stop play they sound an underwater buzzer.

Teams are mixed – even at the top level – although there are separate men's and women's teams at national and world competitions.

Underwater hockey is fast, lung-busting fun that gives your tactical brain a real workout too.

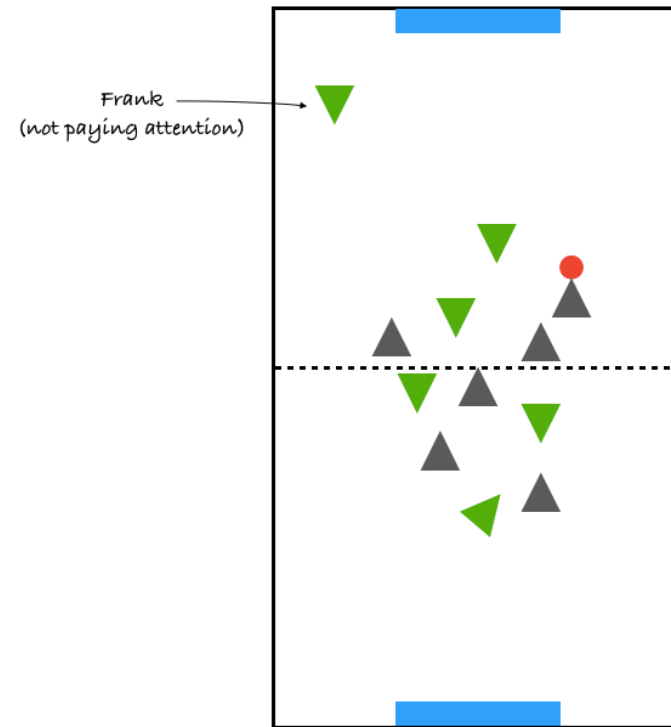
## TEAM

A team comprises up to 10 players, with six in the water at any one time. Although a player can move anywhere on the court, teams typically organise themselves into forwards and defenders (or 'backs').



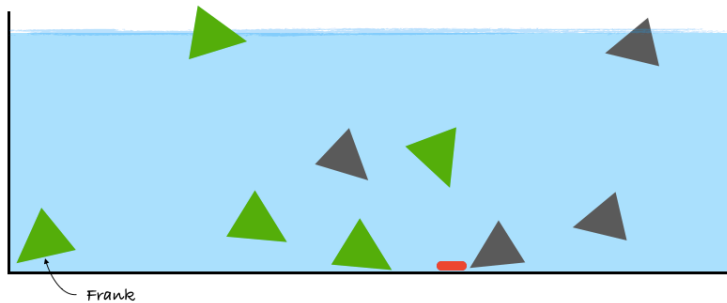
*The ideal player formation as play begins*

You can switch positions at any time, even during play. No-one is confined to a single position (in fact, you'll frequently be caught out of position when the play heats up; your teammates will quickly adapt). But the team works best when everyone keeps to their assigned role. Most of the time.



*What happens in reality*

How do you tell the teams apart? Each team is assigned light or dark colours for the game – that means you use a black (or white) stick, and a corresponding dark or white cap. You'll soon get to know who's who.



## PLAY

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The puck is a little like an ice hockey puck. It's designed to slide across the bottom of the pool but it's quite often flicked short distances through the water, arcing gracefully clear of the bottom to land in a teammate's path.

Being underwater, the puck moves far more slowly than it does in ice hockey – if it hits you it feels a bit like your grandmother trying to give you a dead-leg. That said, you'll see that everyone wears a mouthguard!

The stick is a carefully designed and contoured piece of wood or plastic and can be left-handed or right-handed. The leading edge enables the player to precisely push and flick the puck across the pool bottom; the back edge has a gentle hook that helps to capture the puck from an opposition player and keep control of it.



*You'll need a pair of sticks – a black one and a white one.*

A skilled player can work the puck at lightning speed using both edges of the stick to bamboozle the opposition or escape a tricky situation.

In this way, players dodge and weave, trying to keep control of the puck, all the time searching for a teammate to pass it to or, hopefully, a clear run to the goal tray.

## TEAMWORK

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In any sport, a good team is one who works together well. This is especially so with underwater hockey.

Unlike in sports where you can pass the 'ball' a long way, you can only slide the puck a metre or two underwater. It means that your team members need to stay close together and never be too far away from the play. When someone gets a fast breakaway, the whole team needs to keep up as best as they can, as a single unit.

The game is played as much on the surface as it is on the bottom, as the whole team tactically works to position themselves to support the player with the puck (or tackle her). The game rolls on, with players on both sides in an endless cycle of swimming and diving.

## HOW LONG CAN YOU STAY DOWN?

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The most common question from people considering taking up underwater hockey is

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“Do I need to be able to hold my breath  
for a long time?”

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It might surprise you that the answer is no. Even the best players spend only a few seconds on the bottom at any one time. The reason is that you have five teammates backing you up, getting ready to dive and receive the puck from you. Turnover is very fast.

Of course, if you *can* hold your breath for a long time, and you're very fit, and you're a great fin-swimmer, then you'll likely be a terrific player – but all that comes with practice.

## TACKLING

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We call underwater hockey a soft-contact sport.

Tackling is allowed but there are strict rules, just like in field hockey. You can go for only the puck, not another player's stick. You can't obstruct another player or otherwise interfere.

Anyone who commits a foul is quickly brought to justice by the in-water referees watching the game, with a free flick awarded against the offending team.

And while there is frequently contact between players, the underwater environment means that the forces involved are very weak. Underwater hockey is one of the safest team sports around.

## SUBSTITUTION

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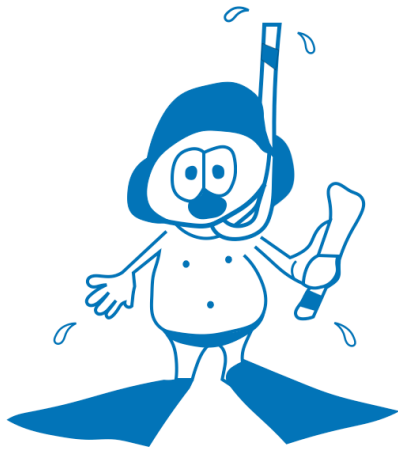
When you need a break during play, you can leave the court and have someone jump into your place in the team. You can sub at any time, though for tactical reasons it's wise to do it during a break in play. As with any sport, the player leaving the game must be completely clear of the court before the substitute enters.

Win or lose, at the end of a 30-minute game you'll deserve a rest. Underwater hockey gives you a great workout. But because of the watery environment, you don't have to be naturally athletic to be good at underwater hockey. Using a mask, snorkel and fins means you don't even have to be a good swimmer!

## EQUIPMENT

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Here's a breakdown of the bits and pieces we rely on to keep us swimming.



## MASK

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It is imperative that you select a mask that fits properly – an ill-fitting mask will leak and render the whole experience quite frustrating. Here's how to check if a mask fits your face. (Try this while standing on land, not in the water.)

1. Move all your hair out of the way.
2. Move the mask strap aside (flop it over the front of the mask – you don't need it for this test).
3. Place the mask on your face and suck in through your nose.

If the mask fits, it will suck on to your face and you won't be able to breathe in any further through your nose.

If it doesn't fit – that is, doesn't seal with your face properly – you'll still be able to breathe in through your nose as air finds its way past the silicone seal. Try again, to make sure there's not a bit of stray hair interfering with the seal. If you can't get it to suck on then the mask is no good for you. After all, if air can get in, so can water.

## SNORKEL

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A snorkel enables you to keep your face in the water and breathe so you don't have to take your eyes off the play.

Your snorkel must be soft and flexible enough to be bent in half. This is a test that referees will apply before a game to ensure no-one gets scratched by a sharp plastic snorkel.

A mouthguard is compulsory. You might elect to get a special dentist-fitted version, but an effective alternative is a simple plastic guard that attaches to your snorkel near the mouthpiece.



## FINS

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Fins specifically for underwater hockey will serve you better than a pair of old diving fins. With the right fins you'll be more comfortable, faster and tire less easily.

Like snorkels, fins must be approved for underwater hockey. Hard fins with metal buckles are a no-no.

Most players use a pair of fin grips to keep the fins securely on their feet (they can easily slip off when you're twisting and turning).





## STICK

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Made of high-density plastic, modern sticks are beautifully moulded to fit your hand. The playing edges are carefully shaped for maximum puck manoeuvrability and for passing and tackling. The stick effectively becomes an extension of your arm. You can get right- and left-handed sticks.

You'll notice that everyone wears a padded glove on their stick-hand. This is to protect your knuckles from the puck (it is made of lead, after all) and to prevent scraping your knuckles on the pool bottom. Gloves come left- and right-handed too.



## CAP

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Finally, you'll see that everyone wears a special cap. These have earpieces with holes in them that protect our ears. Even a gentle bump to the ear can cause a burst eardrum when you're underwater. The plastic vented earpieces prevent that from happening.

It also helps us to distinguish one team from another – all your teammates wear a cap of the same colour (either dark or light).

Check out our website for a list of equipment suppliers.

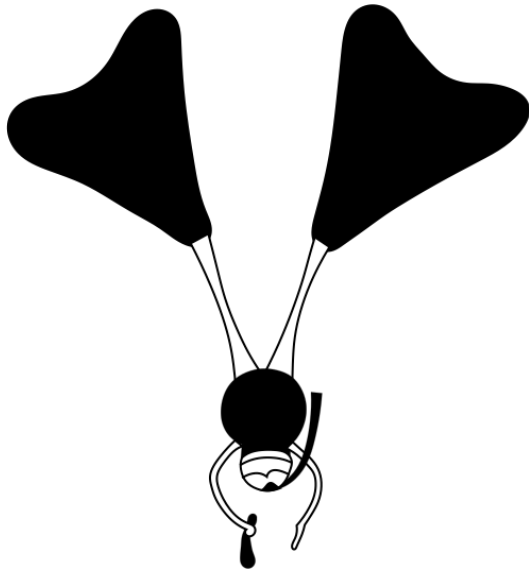
## SNORKELLING SKILLS

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Wearing a mask, snorkel and fins makes moving through the water far easier than ordinary swimming. In fact, you don't need to be a good conventional swimmer to excel at underwater hockey.

That said, snorkelling comes with its own skillset. An experienced snorkeller can move with all the grace of a dolphin or a seal, twisting, turning, tumbling and flying through the water. The better your snorkelling skills, the better you'll be at underwater hockey.

Here are some basics to think about when you don your underwater hockey kit.



## FINNING

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Rule number one: *fins don't work unless they're underwater.*

Derr.

But actually, good fin swimming takes a lot of practice. Beginners tend to make lots of splash, a sure sign that their fins are leaving the water at each kick.

Forget about underwater hockey for a moment and focus on how to swim on the surface with snorkelling gear.

Try this.

1. Your legs should bend slightly at the knees on each stroke, but not too much – some people look like they're pedalling a bike when they first use fins.
2. Your eyes should be looking a little ahead – not directly beneath you.



Snorkellers tend to leisurely swim around with their arms by their side. You don't need to use your arms when you're just watching the scenery, but in underwater hockey we need to get a bit more vigorous. You'll be using your arms a lot more – your playing arm for working the puck, and your free arm for balance, twisting and turning.

So, when you practise snorkelling, do it with your arms straight out in front, as an extension of your back and shoulders. Wear your glove and stick and grab the stick with your free hand too.

When it's time to really get moving you'll use a freestyle stroke – but only when you're on the surface. When you're underwater, arms out in front is the best approach (or your playing arm out, free arm by your side).

Lots of players use a 'dolphin' style of swimming underwater. They keep their feet together and use their whole body to gracefully serpentine through the water. Watch an A grade match and see how fast these guys can go.

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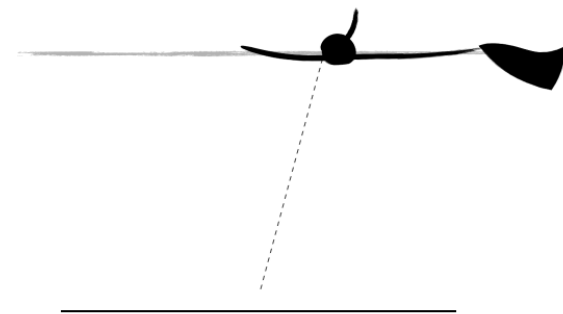
## DUCK DIVING

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When you're new to underwater hockey, duck diving will be a big part of your game. The quicker you can get to the bottom of the pool the better player you'll be.

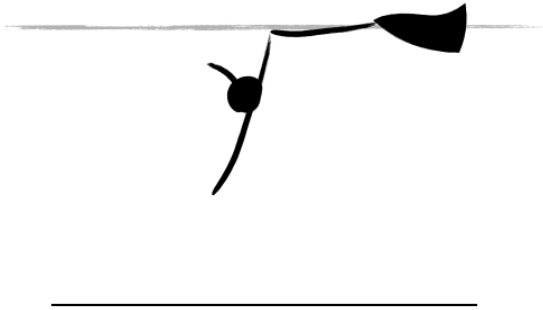
Try this.

1. Swim so your body is straight and long on the surface, arms out in front.

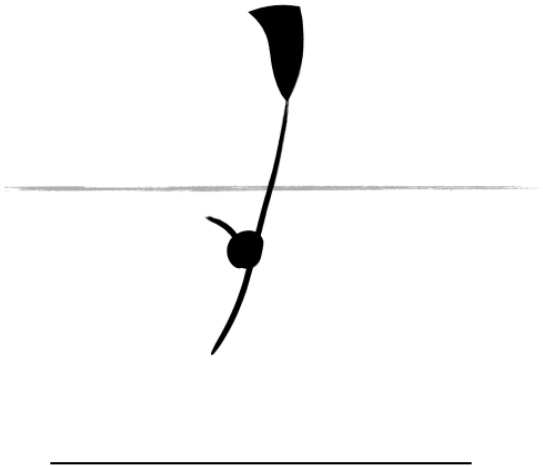


2. Fix your eyes on a point on the bottom, almost directly below you.

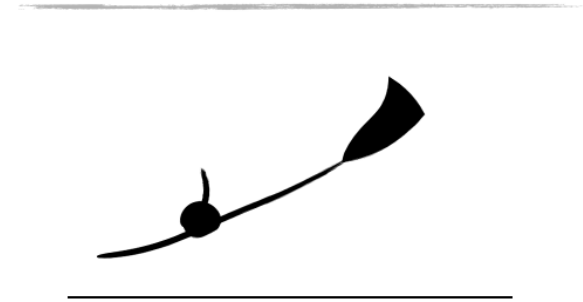
- Using your arms to lead the way, bend at the hips so the top half of your body points vertically downwards, at (nearly) right-angles to your legs.



- Immediately raise your legs into the air so they're pointing towards the sky.



The weight of your legs will push you downwards. Then you can 'level out' on the pool bottom.



A good duck dive doesn't take much effort. You should be able to glide straight to the bottom without having to 'swim' downwards. The weight of your legs is doing all the work.

As your skills develop you'll master 'reverse diving', where you sink rapidly to the bottom feet-first – but that only comes with heaps of practice. Watch how the top players do it.

## CLEARING YOUR SNORKEL

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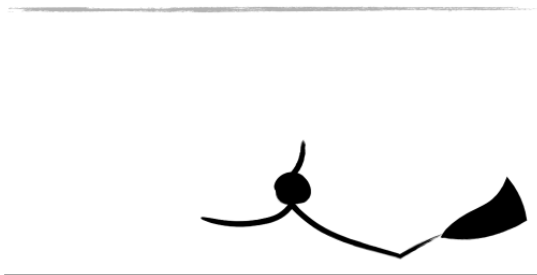
Unless you've already had heaps of practice, chances are your memories of snorkelling are of that annoying splash of leftover water that gurgles when you try to breathe. You can never seem to get it all out, no matter how hard you blow when you hit the surface. The only option is to lift your head out of the water and drain the mouthpiece, right?

Not so. Experienced divers know a few tricks on this front. It wouldn't be much fun if you had to play underwater hockey while gurgling water, and it's easy to avoid.

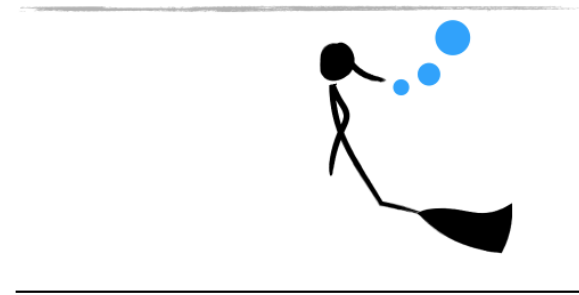
First, remove from your head the notion of clearing a snorkel like a whale does: hitting the surface and blowing out through your mouth as hard as you can. It simply doesn't work. You'll never get all the water out that way.

Try this.

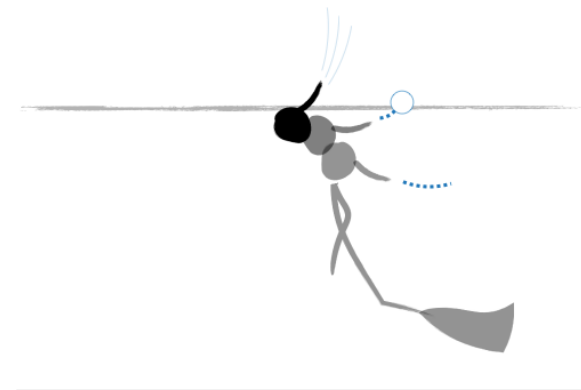
1. With your lungs full of air, descend to the bottom of the pool. Your snorkel will plug-plug full of water.



2. Now slowly head for the surface. Look upwards at the surface.
3. A short time before you breach the surface, *begin blowing out through your mouth.*



4. Continue blowing out as you break the surface, rolling your head forwards back into the swimming position.

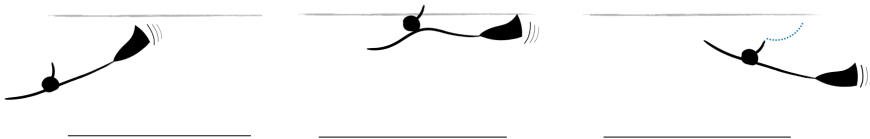


A continuous stream of air has the amazing effect of taking virtually all the water with it, leaving your snorkel tube completely dry by the time you've cleared the surface. We call this the 'displacement method'.

When you've mastered this method, try it again but this time look downwards, at the bottom, as you ascend. You'll find that the displacement method alone is enough to clear your snorkel tube – looking upwards makes it easier but it isn't totally necessary.

Clearing a snorkel in this way is virtually foolproof and quite effortless. It means that a) you can take a much-needed breath the moment you hit the surface, and b) you don't need to take your eyes off the game play.

With practice you'll be able to do this at lightning speed, even while you're sprinting across the court. You can grab a quick breath and be back in the action in no time at all.



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## CLEARING YOUR MASK

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Even the best-fitting mask will occasionally let in a bit of water. In underwater hockey it's a frequent occurrence owing to the twisting and turning and occasional jostle with another player.

It's no big deal. With a little practice, you can clear the water from your mask *even while you're underwater!*

As with the snorkel-clearing trick, we use air to displace the water that's gotten into the mask, this time via your nose.

Try this.

1. First take a BIG breath and descend to the bottom. Let a little water into your mask. The easiest way is to crack the seal at the top, around your forehead. Let the mask seal back on your face.
2. Looking straight ahead (horizontally), begin gently blowing out through your nose (you really don't need much air for this – just a puff).
3. With your hand, crack the seal at the bottom of the mask by gripping the side of the frame and tilting it very slightly. The air you blow will quickly displace the water.
4. Don't stop blowing. Let the mask go so it sits back on your face, and only then ...
5. Stop blowing out through your nose.

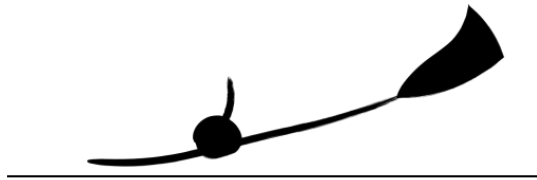
The trick is to begin blowing before you crack the seal, and only stop when the mask is back on your face. It only takes a fraction of a lungful of air!

## ADDRESSING THE PUCK (POSTURE)

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The secret to playing good hockey is keeping a good posture while you're on the bottom.

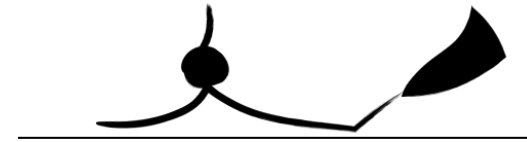
Most beginners, on duck-diving to the bottom of the pool, tend to end up in this position ...



The front part of the body is on the bottom (playing arm outstretched), with the rear half sitting clear of the bottom.

The trouble with this position is that it severely restricts how you can move your arms and shoulders, meaning your degree of control over the puck is low.

An experienced player has a different approach.



Back arched, thighs on the bottom, shoulders and head well off the bottom. You can actually use your fins, with a gentle wave of your feet, to keep you comfortably in this position while you're manoeuvring the puck or waiting to receive a pass.

With this posture you're free to move your playing arm all around, including under your body. It gives you much more power to push and flick the puck. And with your head up, you'll have far greater visibility over the game.

Imagine you're lying on the floor with a laptop. Would you do it this way?



Not terribly comfortable, right? It's no way to play hockey, either.

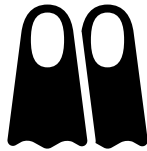
## WHAT'S NEXT?

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Underwater hockey can take you places. It's played all around the world, with world championships taking place every two years.

There are also annual Australian titles, in women's, men's and junior divisions, plus a host of informal competitions with other states and countries.

But the best thing about underwater hockey is the sense of community. At whatever level you play you'll make heaps of friends and have a whole lot of fun, in and out of the water.

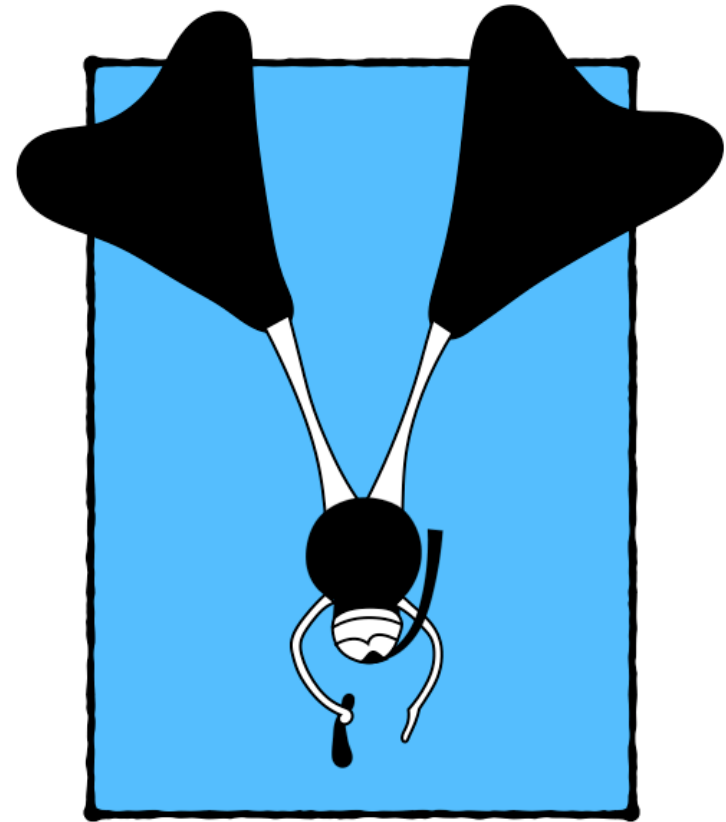


Hopefully this guide has sparked your interest in underwater hockey. We'd love to see you at the pool – it's a great game for the whole family. Get in touch or just come along and introduce yourself.

No gear? Doesn't matter – we have plenty of adult and kids loan gear that you can use to take a test dive.

Check out our website for up-to-date information.

[underwaterhockey.com.au](http://underwaterhockey.com.au)



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