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## Afghanistan water polo in Olympics? Los Al coach is working on it

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Bahram Hojreh teaches water polo techniques to children ages 8-12-years-old at the USA Water Polo National Training Center in Los Alamitos. He spent a month in Afghanistan training the country's first water polo team.

ROSE PALMISANO, ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER

By [ASHER KLEIN](#) / ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER

Water polo players say their sport is the toughest there is. They love a challenge, as if forever treading water wasn't hard enough.

But longtime player and coach Bahram Hojreh can see why the odds might look especially long on his latest challenge – bringing his sport to a country known as the Graveyard of Empires.

### About Bahram Hojreh

Bahram Hojreh has been playing or coaching water polo nearly all his life. Born

"In Afghanistan, where they never had water before? In Afghanistan, a war-torn country? Land locked? ... Are you crazy?" Hojreh said two weeks after returning from

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in Iran in 1976, his family emigrated to the U.S. a year later and landed in California. He was an All-American at University High School and played at UC Irvine under Ted Newland, the winningest water polo coach in NCAA history.

Today Hojreh works at his family's computer technology company in Irvine by day while running the International Water Polo Club at night five days a week, plus weekend trips.

Read more about his trip and see the photos at

[25dayjourney4afghanh2opoloaug2013](http://25dayjourney4afghanh2opoloaug2013.blogspot.com)

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**Afghanistan Water Polo:** Created in 2008 to develop the Afghan national water polo team. There were 11 players on the national team's 2011-12 roster, including one woman. More info:

[afghanistanwaterpolo.com](http://afghanistanwaterpolo.com)

**International Water Polo Club:** A club based in Los Alamitos that serves age groups 6-Under to adult masters. It's run by Hojreh, who also serves as its head coach. More info: [interwpc.aquanite.com](http://interwpc.aquanite.com)

#### Other milestones in Afghan sports:

The team at Afghanistan Water Polo isn't alone in promoting sports in the country, and water polo's not the only sport popular in California that has a shot of catching on in Kabul.

**Sept. 11, 2013:** It's never qualified for the World Cup, but Afghanistan's national soccer team won its first international competition, the South Asian Football Federation Cup, beating India 2-0 in Kathmandu, Nepal.

**Aug. 20, 2008:** Rohullah Nikpai wins bronze in men's 58 kg taekwondo at the Beijing Olympics, his country's first Olympic medal. Nikpai repeated the feat at last year's Olympics in London, where five other Afghanis competed.

**Oct 15, 2001:** Afghanistan's national cricket team begins playing against much better teams representing clubs in Pakistan, despite U.S. airstrikes back home, according to BBC reports. The Taliban had recently allowed men to play cricket, though bans and strict regulation on all other sports persisted. Afghanistan drew two of five matches, losing the rest.

**1965:** A Peace Corps volunteer named Tom Gouttiere turns a high school basketball team in Kabul into Afghanistan's national team, according to a July story in Sports Illustrated. Future U.S. Sen. Bill Bradley visited in 1970, soon after his first championship with the Knicks, shooting around with Gouttiere's team and

Afghanistan.

"But it's a challenge. If it's too easy, what are you, really?"

Hojreh, who usually coaches in and around Los Alamitos, spent most of August drilling the Afghan national water polo team in one of maybe 12 pools in the country. He helped set up the team five years ago as part of Afghanistan Water Polo, a nonprofit created in the U.S. and sanctioned by the Afghanistan National Olympic Committee, and this was its first long-term training camp with a professional American coach.

It comes at a crucial juncture in the country's history. It's unclear who will steer the country after U.S. troops withdraw next year: the repressive Taliban regime or the business interests that promote more Western values.

Many see sports as a way to empower citizens of developing countries to make their own decisions.

"Sports can break down barriers and get people to work together," said Tracy Evans, an Olympian and head of sports-development nonprofit Kids Play International. "Sports is a catalyst to help promote peace, to help promote gender equality."

Afghanistan Water Polo hopes to inspire the country to believe in itself by bringing the water polo team to the 2016 Olympics in Rio de Janeiro. Hojreh says it'll be very difficult to qualify this time, but making the 2020 Games in Tokyo isn't a pipe dream, as long as the coaches and their financial backers stay committed.

"You give me a team and if they're getting the respect that they deserve – finance, the right facilities, the right athletes, the right travel – we'll take 'em to the top," he said. "It doesn't matter what country."

#### TRAINING DAYS

The state of water polo in Afghanistan when Hojreh and another member of Afghanistan Water Polo arrived was, in a word, messy.

What pools they had weren't regulation size, heated or filtered well. During Ramadan, they lost a week of practice, and when practices got started, the players weren't used to the structure of them. It left Hojreh feeling like saying, "Hey, I'm serious here."

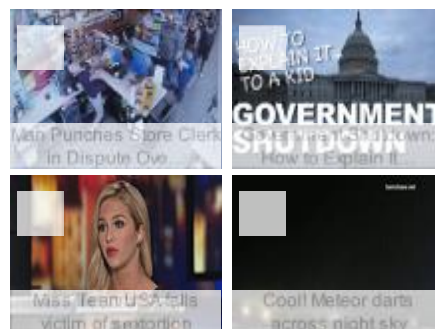
"They were doing some kind of off and on training prior to when we got there for three or four months, but it was lax," he said. "I get there; it was like a shock to them."

Other coaches who know the Irvine native say what Hojreh's done with his International Water Polo Club makes him qualified to take the reins of the unlikely national team.

"Probably one of his strongest points is that he really cares about his players," said Marc Hunt, men's water polo coach at NCAA seventh-ranked UC Irvine. "He's really passionate about what he's teaching."



Editor Picks



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reportedly teaching them a short half-hook shot. The current incarnation of the national team beat Chapman University 54-48 in a game in Orange in November.

#### **Trip to U.S. blocked**

The Afghan national water polo team has a pretty clear pathway to the Olympics, according to coach Bahram Hojreh, and it leads directly outside the country.

If the team is going to beat a likely qualifier like Kazakhstan to a spot in Rio de Janeiro or Tokyo, they need to get used to international competition, and quickly.

"You have to go to other countries and compete," he said. "Go to Iran, go to the neighboring countries that already have water polo."

Some of the best competition would come from training in America, and he hopes the team can establish its bona fides with U.S. authorities by filling their passports with stamps from other countries.

Visa problems prevented Afghanistan Water Polo from bringing the team here in December 2011.

"I contacted all my friends that have pools, that have teams and clubs for training. We got them in tournaments," Hojreh said. "Even the other clubs, they were all excited. Hey, we all want to be a part of this thing."

Host families, food and transportation, even clothing donations were planned for the three-month trip to Southern California. But a week or two before they came, every Afghans' visa was denied but one – for the sole female player in the contingent, Hojreh said. Without the others she didn't come either.

That was the last big project for Afghanistan Water Polo until Hojreh and Director of International Operations Scott Caruso flew to the country in August.

And while he was in Afghanistan, he still tried to teach the players some English, even though, as the son of two Iranians, Hojreh could talk with the Afghans in their language a little bit.

"I'm not here to make my Farsi better," he said. "No matter what country you go into in the world, you're going to have to speak English to get respect."

Hunt added that Hojreh showed strong administrative sense in growing the International Water Polo Club into a powerhouse – the club frequently contends for Junior Olympics titles – so he knows how to build a program.

"I think it's a perfect fit for him, coaching in Afghanistan," Hunt said.

With an inexperienced team, Hojreh's focus on fundamentals is another key.

Scared at first to even fly to Afghanistan, Hojreh was soon enjoying Kabul as he got his team fitter and more tactically aware while teaching them a bit of English slang.

At a media day at the Blue Flame Pool in Kabul, 10 local news outlets bunched around Hojreh to find out what he was doing there.

"I'm here to train the guys so we can win," Hojreh said.

"Aren't you here for hope and peace?" he remembers the media scrum asking.

"My job is to make them good enough to compete. I'm not going to go into international competition and be embarrassed all the time," he said.

The team didn't make any miraculous breakthroughs, but after three weeks of training Hojreh said they were coming along strong.

One of the older players, Mohammad Tamim, had played on the Afghan national basketball team, according to Hojreh. Already disciplined, he learned water polo pretty quickly.

"Our last couple of days there I realized he could be a perfect coach/trainer when I'm gone," Hojreh said. "He understands responsibility and commitment and discipline."

When he left the country, Hojreh had to make room in his luggage for all the gifts the players gave him. Between the drills, the slang and the trips they took through Kabul, players and coach connected.

#### **BUILDING FUTURE**

If Afghanistan Water Polo is going to succeed, Hojreh thinks it will require more than just a competent team.

Hojreh coached other coaches, so he doesn't need to Skype into their sessions too much over the next few years. He aims to grow a web of youth, junior and club

programs, so the national team has more players to pick from and a bigger audience.

"The more popular we make the team now, the more businesses want to sponsor it," he said. "It'll allow the team to travel and compete and get respect on the world stage."

Of course, that will take time. Tom Gouttierre started the Afghan national basketball team in 1965, and was surprised to hear there's a water polo team there at all.

But Gouttierre remembered the people as "raw-bones athletes" with an affinity for "steadfast competition."

Hojreh hoped local businessmen feel the same way. They're already investing in pools and

water parks, and Hojreh saw an appetite for more growth in the malls and factories springing up despite the still-frequent bombings.

"They want pride; they want to improve their country," he said.


Hojreh measures his success as a coach by his players' development as good people, and ultimately that's where he sees his best chance to make an impact – where the sports and the business tie together.

"What are the kids doing? Nothing. They get to be deprived of everything," he said. "If you create sports programs or play programs ... you give them opportunities."

Hojreh, like Gouttierre before him, deeply enjoyed spending time with Afghans.

"I know of no other people that have in the front of their minds the kind of national and personal commitment to providing hospitality," Gouttierre said.

If they can tread water for long enough, Hojreh thinks he can return the favor soon, in Rio or Tokyo.

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