

A History of Octopush

Written by Ken Kirby from articles by Alan Blake, E. John Towse and Cliff Underwood and with reference to BOA archive documents.

Sub aqua diving around the coast of Great Britain in wintertime is not the most fun thing to do for most divers. Many turn to their local swimming pool to practise and keep fit.

In 1954 Alan Blake, the Club Secretary of the Southsea British Sub Aqua Club decided to find a more fun way of spending time in a swimming pool and started to come up with ideas. Several schemes were mooted and discarded as impractical but one day in Jack and Ena Willis's kitchen drinking tea along with Frank and Hazel Lilleker, and his wife Sylvia, Alan laid out his plans for a winter sport that they could hopefully develop.

His plan was for teams of eight to propel a circular disc - possibly made of lead - with short sticks, to opposite ends of the swimming pool. As keen divers they wanted to maintain their links with the sea so they named the disc a Squid and the scoring area a Cuttle (later re-named the gulley). The short wooden stick became a pusher as that is what it was used for. The name of the game was simple - eight players gave them Octo and pushing the squid gave them Octo-push. (Although it was quickly realised 8 players on each side rather fills a swimming pool so teams were later reduced to 6 a side in the playing area).

It has been suggested that knocking a diving weight around the bottom of the swimming pool with snorkels was the origin of Octopush, but at no time did this happen.

As the man behind the idea Alan sat down and wrote some rules, while Jack Willis went off to make a squid, and Frank Lilleker set about making the pushers.

They took the new equipment to a BSAC training session at the old Portsmouth Guildhall Baths. John Ventham, Jack Willis, Frank Lilleker and Alan Blake formed teams of two against two to test the pushers, squid and rules of the game. This brought a lot of attention from others in the pool and they soon wanted to join in. A brief explanation of the rules, pushers in hand, breath held and the new sport of Octopush was born.

With the diving community being small and very tight knit at that time news of the new game quickly spread and other clubs started playing. Bournemouth and Brighton were known to come to Southsea for a game occasionally, with other clubs also giving it a go. Rules were not always followed so enthusiastic play looked more like a rugby scrum, but those who played loved it and its popularity increased.

At that time Peter Small, editor of the Neptune - the original magazine of BSAC, started to take an interest and included an article in the November 1954 issue.

In 1963 John Towse and John Powell formally introduced the game into the Southsea BSAC training programme and it was played on a regular basis on Tuesday evening training in the Royal Marine Baths at Eastney.

On 19th December 1968 John Bevan's enthusiasm and John Towse's organising skills came together to arrange the first National Octopush tournament in the Eastney pool. Six teams from various parts of the country competed for a trophy which unsurprisingly was won by Southsea, who had not conceded a single gull. The event was hugely successful but highlighted that there would need to be more rules to keep control of the game.

On 17th May 1969 John Bevan organised a national meeting attended by over twenty interested people from around the country where they agreed standardisation and specification for the rules of the sport of Octopush. The BSAC National Committee agreed to produce and publish an Octopush leaflet covering the specifications and the rules, which was distributed nationally, and entered in the BSAC year book. From this many more clubs throughout the country decided to try the new sport and wanted to challenge other teams. With many local matches and tournaments the sport was growing.

In 1972 John Towse launched the National Ladder where teams were able to play each other all year round, moving up or down the ladder depending on how well they were playing. Andrew Whorly took over running the ladder in August 1972 when it had expanded to over 30 teams.

By 1973 so many teams wanted to take part in the Nationals that the new organiser Cliff Underwood from London BSAC no 1 club decided to run qualifying tournaments. Two semi-finals were held at Northampton and Southsea with the finals being held at the Beckenham pool in South London. Cliff took over the running of the national ladder in 1974 as well.

After the 1973 tournament the sport grew from around 30 teams to over 100. This was becoming too much for one person alone so on 10th April 1976 at the Cheshunt Football clubhouse The **National Octopush Association** was founded. A committee was elected with Cliff Underwood as the first Director. Although the meeting took place in April they decided the National Octopush Association should be deemed to be in effect from 1st January 1976.

With the formalisation of the national Committee Reg Valentine, who was Director General of BSAC, recognised the association as the controlling body for the sport of Octopush.

At the next Annual General Meeting on 27th March 1977 at Cheshunt Sporting Club they decided to change the name to the **British Octopush Association**.

The Netherlands Onderwatersport Bond contacted the newly formed BOA to arrange a tournament between the top four British clubs and the top four Dutch clubs, which resulted in an annual Anglo/Dutch championship. However the Dutch had slightly different ways of playing so teams agreed to play to the host nation's rules. After 11

years French teams became strong enough to compete and the event became the European Cup.

The sport was also growing in other countries with teams from South Africa, Zimbabwe, Ireland, France and the Netherlands coming to play in the UK and an England side going to play in South Africa. However, this highlighted the need for one common set of rules as the home nation always had the advantage of playing to their own set.

At a Sports Committee meeting of CMAS (Confederation Mondiales des Activities Subaquatique - the international governing body for all underwater activities), Reg Valentine the Director General of BSAC was given permission to initiate a meeting of countries interested in the formation of a commission for underwater games.

Thus on 2nd and 3rd of April 1977 a meeting chaired by Alan Bax was held at Fort Bovisland in Devon attended by representatives from UK, West Germany, Netherlands, Scandinavia and Italy.

There appeared to be five different games which could be divided into those played with a stick and those played with a ball. West Germany and Scandinavia separated to form the Underwater Rugby sub-committee while the UK, Netherlands, Italy and South Africa worked on an agreement about the stick games. Those co-signing the petition were Cees Van Raaj of the Netherlands, Des Danbridge of South Africa, Giantinio Sacomani of Italy and Cliff Underwood of Great Britain. When it came to a vote the British name of **Octopush** was outvoted three to one in favour of the name **Underwater Hockey**, so the CMAS Underwater Hockey Sub-Committee of the Underwater Games Commission was inaugurated.

Cliff Underwood was appointed the first CMAS Rules Director charged with looking at various sets of rules from around the world and collating them to form the basis for the new international rules. This may sound simple, but there were 5 or six separate versions, the USA only had local rules which included allowing the goalkeeper to stop the puck with their hands and throw it back into play. UK and Dutch rules were quite close as they had been playing against each other for several years, and the French insisted they had invented the game so their rules should apply. South Africa and New Zealand played similar rules to the UK but with Field Hockey sticks while Italy didn't send in their rules as (they later stated) they were the same as the UK so Cliff already had them.

Many meetings were held with heated words exchanged and agreements made. Eventually one single set of rules struggled out which, although greatly modified, are still used today.

The first World Championships were arranged in London in 1979 to celebrate 25 years of Octopush, but unfortunately international politics got in the way and the event had to be cancelled. Alastair Wilson of ACUC Canada came to the rescue by offering to hold the games in Vancouver in 1980, but not all of the original teams could go, so

the first World Championship was only contested by five men's teams. The event was a success with the Netherlands taking the trophy.

A major hiccup occurred in 1997 when CMAS and BSAC fell out and BSAC was expelled from CMAS. This left the UK without a route into the world governing body so they had to find a solution quickly. The British Octopush Association, the British Fin swimming Association and the British Spearfishing Association formed a new alliance called the British Underwater Sports Association (BUSA) who then applied and were accepted onto the CMAS Sports Commission, and the Underwater Hockey Commission. Ron Jacobs was the first Chairman of BUSA with Keith Dunkinson taking over a few years later in 2002. BUSA was purely formed as an umbrella body to give national squads access to CMAS, all other functions such as rules and competitions etc were organised by the separate controlling bodies.

This was the point where the British Octopush Association and BSAC started to drift apart. Whereas Octopush clubs had been sub sections of BSAC clubs they now started to leave and form new clubs which were entirely independent from BSAC.

World games were being held regularly with the event coming home to Ponds Forge swimming pool in Sheffield in 2006. This was the largest and best world championships so far which marked a turning point in the organisation of the world championships.

Politics within CMAS caused some upset to the underwater hockey world who just wanted to play their game, so after the 2006 world games a group of countries formed their own 'World Aquachallenge Association' (WAA). This never really took off as many countries relied on links with CMAS for their funding and just could not afford to break away.

The British Octopush Association continued to evolve. In 2006 when Charlie Simms was Chairman he was instrumental in changing the BOA from an association where the clubs were the members to an individual member organisation. The BOA therefore became the governing body for underwater hockey in the UK which meant taking more initiative for training, accreditation and safeguarding which had previously been the responsibility of each club.

An application in 2008 to Sport England for official recognition as the national governing body was refused because BSAC is still considered to be the recognised national governing body for all underwater sports, even though BSAC had agreed to allow the BOA to make the application.

In 2011 Clare Peddie - Chair, and Mary Tetley - Chief Executive of BSAC started to look at the BOA/BSAC relationship and instigated discussions with Ken Kirby - Chair of the BOA. This led to an affiliation agreement signed on 25th July 2013 bringing Octopush back into the BSAC fold and giving the sport official recognition with national sporting bodies through BSAC as the Recognised National Governing Body. BSAC also helps the BOA with safeguarding, Clubmark and representation, all very important in the modern world of sport.

When the Frenchman Thomas De Trebon became President of the CMAS Underwater Hockey Commission he set about bringing the countries back together with huge success. European games were held in Slovenia in 2009 and World games in Portugal in 2011.

The European Games and World Games are now held every other year with a very successful turnout of 68 teams from 17 different countries in Eger - Hungary for the 2013 World Championships.

Great Britain sent 7 squads to Eger bringing back Silver for the Ladies Elite, Bronze for Ladies Masters, Bronze for Mens Masters, Bronze for Ladies under 23, fourth place for mens Elite, fifth for mens under 23 and sixth for mens under 19.

Underwater Hockey is not yet an Olympic sport but there is potential. Spectators do not get a good view unless underwater cameras are used to show the games on a large screen, so there is very little sponsorship and no large outside following. There are about 70 clubs in the UK, and Underwater Hockey is played in over 30 countries, the sport is growing rapidly and the future is bright.

Past Chair of the British Octopush Association:

1976 to 1979 Cliff Underwood

1979 to 1981 Dennis Price

1981 to 1983 Phil Fearnhead

1983 to 1985 Phillip Burton

1985 to 1987 Ian Pearson

26th April 1987 to 6th September 1987 the position was vacant

1987 to 1990 Tony Drakard

1990 to 1993 John McNeil

1993 to 1994 Kevin Chetwynd

(The post was vacant between March and June 1994 when John McNeil took over again but later handed over to Bernie Tarling).

1994 to 1999 Bernie Tarling

1999 to 2002 Keith Dunkinson

2002 to 2004 Tim Arnold

2004 to 2009 Charlie Simms

2009 to Date Ken Kirby