



University of Missouri

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Around the Columns

Scraping to scrap

MU's water polo club team has to scrape together the cash to play a scrappy sport.

Hazards of water polo, notorious for underwater shenanigans, include players getting their suits yanked off. Although this could be seen as a cheap ploy to boost attendance, team captain and club president Andy Withington says players wear two suits at all times. "It's a necessity."

water polo

Sophomore Dylan Lynn of Tulsa, Okla., lobs a shot against the Kansas City Blazes during a May tournament that Mizzou's water polo team hosted at the Mizzou Aquatic Center. Photo by Nicholas Benner.

Withington of St. Louis likens the game to a cross between soccer and rugby, with a basketball-style offense. Players attempt to pitch a volleyball-sized ball through a goal while treading water with an eggbeater-style kick. Occasionally a player temporarily disappears underwater with an "oof!" as if attacked by a shark. The actual predator: opponents bent on punching and drowning; some have even been known to purposefully grow long toenails to facilitate covert attacks. Withington, who acts as the team's de facto coach, says water polo has recently emphasized clean play; it is also "one of the few sports that has a brutality call."

Players have to be equally scrappy just to keep Mizzou's squad afloat. The team gets about \$1,000 per year, its share of an overall pot of about \$90,000 in student fees shared with 40 other club sports. This leaves the 30-some team members of the coed squad scrambling to cover lifeguard and league fees, equipment, hotel rooms for tournaments, swim caps with special ear guards, and multiple swimsuits.

In April the team hosted a tournament in an attempt to raise some cash, but low team turnout meant it only netted enough to pay half of its second-semester pool fees.

Still, Withington says dues hikes and late-night practices are worth it. "It's one of the most intense things I've ever done," he says. The game is a great release from the pressures of

school, says Withington, a sociology and psychology major who spent the summer studying for the LSAT. “There’s no better release than swimming around and getting tired,” he says. “It clears your head.”

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