



Photo: Chad Ozz

Chicago Riptide is taking part in the upcoming Gay Games VII.

# Chicago Riptide is making waves

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There is no simple way to describe water polo.

It's one part swimming, one part soccer and one part basketball. Look hard enough and you'll find some aspects of hockey, too.

Played in a pool that's 25-30 meters long by 13-20 meters wide, water polo is an exacting but fast-paced sport that leaves its players in great shape.

Chicago Riptide, a mostly gay and lesbian water polo team, is in its fourth year. Team members are gearing up for Gay Games VII, hoping that the exposure will encourage newcomers to try their sport.

Team co-founder Chad Ozz says participating in the Gay Games represents a huge step for Chicago Riptide. "For us, (the Games) don't represent winning gold medals. They're more a steppingstone in our growth as a team."

From July 17-21, Riptide will face off in five games against other teams, including the (West Hollywood) WH20, the Atlanta Rainbow Trout and the Team New York Aquatics.

The Games will be the culmination of a long journey for the team, which Ozz and co-founder Juan Ramirez formed partially because Chicagoans really had no venue in

which to compete in water polo in the 2002 Gay Games in Sydney.

"Juan and I really do not find lap swimming all that enjoyable, but we both have a passion for being in the water," Ozz says. "We also wanted more of a competitive team experience, and there were not many options at the time."

They began practices in 2003, but it took quite a while to draw new people. "We had no newcomers for a year," Ozz says.

But their first fundraiser at Sidetrack drew some attention. Ozz says, "There's nothing like a stage full of guys in Speedos to generate interest in water polo."

Chicago Riptide currently numbers about 30 members, with a fairly even mix of men and women.

The team will be one of the smaller ones at the Games, but Ozz is confident Chicago Riptide will be able to bring up its ranking, which is currently 8th out of 15 water polo teams in the International Gay and Lesbian Swimming Association (IGLA).

The team is also taking part in an event certain to be a Gay Games highlight—the "Pink Flamingo," IGLA's elaborate production choreographed by the aquatics teams. Riptide member Jeremy Voigt is at a loss as to how to describe what to expect.

"It's hard to put into words," he

laughs. "It's not quite a drag show, but, well, it usually turns into one."

The Gay Games culminates Riptide's 2006 competitive season. The team competes from January through summer, usually participating in the annual IGLA meet as well as several events around Chicago.

Not everyone on the team competes, however. "For a lot of people, it's not about the tournaments," Voigt says. Many members remain on the team because they enjoy the workout from the practices as well as the social opportunities the team offers.

"We spend as much time together outside the water as we do in," Ozz adds. "The team has become like an extended family to me."

Practices usually begin with drills allowing team members to exercise the myriad skills that water polo requires. These include being able to catch and throw the ball with only one hand, swimming while keeping your head above water and mastering the "egg beater" kick—the main technique of treading water in water polo, which is accomplished by rotating the legs in opposite directions to stay afloat.

Depending on the number of people at the practice, the workout usually ends with a scrimmage or

full-court drill.

Chicago Riptide welcomes all who want to learn to play. No previous experience is required, but it does help if you can swim fairly well.

"It definitely sets you apart if you are a good swimmer," Voigt says.

Prospective members also need to be serious about learning water polo, which moves very quickly and has a lot of rules. Newcomers should expect to be disoriented at first.

"A lot of times you're playing and you get fouled, and you have no idea why," Voigt says. "You just get used to it once you stick with it for a while."

Chicago Riptide will hold a new members' practice at 8:30 p.m. on Thursday, Aug. 3 at Gill Park, 825 W. Sheridan. Everyone interested in learning water polo is welcome. Regular practices are held at Gill Park every Tuesday and Thursday at 8:30 p.m. For more information, visit [www.chicagoriptide.com](http://www.chicagoriptide.com). For updated Gay Games schedules, visit [www.gaygames-chicago.org](http://www.gaygames-chicago.org)