

Areas of Concern in Youth Goalkeeping
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This article was the first of many provided by the U.S. National Team Goalkeeper Network addressing some of the areas of concern in youth goalkeeping. The concept of the network was and still is to share and not dictate information regarding goalkeeping issues in soccer. We all have our own way of training keepers and as long as technique is first and foremost in our training for youth goalkeepers, we will all be on the same page and working towards a common goal.

One of the areas of concern that was raised by our National Staff and Regional Goalkeeper Coaches is that it is paramount as a basis for the future of our goalkeepers is: technique – and the need for functional technical training.

Functional Technical Training:

It is great that goalkeepers get individual attention. Some training is better than none at all. The problem is: how much of the training is done straight in front of goal and from an unrealistic service. How many times have you said or have heard

“She was great in training; she just can’t do it in games!”

As a goalkeeper coach, I am offended to hear that. It means that I am not doing my job. I understand that there are players that play better in training than in games, as games produce a different psychological response than training, but so much of the goalkeepers training is done in a non-functional environment that when it comes to game time the keeper has not seen some of the situations that occur with regularity.

As coaches we must try as much as possible to replicate game-type situations in our training. The keepers need to see shots and service from all angles. They must also see a variety of shots – bending, driven, bouncing etc. Whenever possible the ball should be hit from the ground and should be a moving ball so that the keeper can read the cues of the shooter. I agree that there is a time and a place for throwing a ball in youth training but we must strive to move away from this as a primary means of service.

While a keeper does see shots from varying angles and sometimes multiple shots, depending on rebounds or a save from our trusted goalpost, we must also try to get away from having the goalkeepers make 8-10 saves in a row. There is a place for multiple repetitions at a certain stage in the season, but as fatigue sets in, technique falters and that must be our primary concern. Let's face it; if a goalkeeper is making 8 saves in a row in a game we have some serious problems.

When we are training our keepers in a technical environment, we must strive for success, so realistic but challenging service is vital. We must also ensure that the goalkeeper's movements and body shape are dictated by the cues of the game, e.g. the pace of the ball played across the goal area or the proximity of the shooter.

Two vital areas that must be improved are the goalkeeper's ability to get into a good position and be composed, and the goalkeeper's body shape when preparing to receive a shot. Composure is an attribute that is often overlooked. Goalkeeping is all about effort to get into position, composure when you are about to face a shot and then effort to make the save. This model of effort – composure – effort is very rarely seen in our youth goalkeepers. The model we see is: effort – effort – effort.

When the goalkeeper gets into position we must make sure that they are able to remain loose and relaxed. When you are relaxed your reaction time is better than

when you are tense and bouncing around. If you watch some of the top goalkeepers they conserve their energy by moving efficiently and being as calm and composed as possible. We

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need to develop this in our young goalkeepers so that they are calm and can respond effectively to the cues of the game.

Body shape is critical as we know. In a recent regional event it was noticeable that, in general, the goalkeepers were standing too upright when preparing to save. This leads to all kinds of problems and technical breakdowns. Below are just a few problems with an upright stance:

- 1, reaction time is slower
- 2, diving from an upright position often results in a dive that is angled backwards because you are slower,
- 3, the natural response to a ball hit at you with pace is to flinch slightly.

With an upright body position, if you flinch and move your shoulders back further you will find that, assuming the legs are slightly bent, your hips rotate backwards forcing your knees forward and this causes you to be on your heels. Once on your heels the common response to the shot is backwards.

We would like to see our youth goalkeepers in a better ready position when the ball is within shooting distance. We recommend that the goalkeepers compact the space between their shoulders and their knees and have their head and elbows slightly forward. For years we have talked about the position of the hands. While important, the hands become non-factors if they are too close to the body. We have seen at the highest levels that, just by pushing the elbows slightly forward so they can operate in front of the rib cage, the reaction time for the hands is greatly increased.

This results in fewer rebounds and cleaner technique.

The ability to get into a good position is dependant on the goalkeeper's footwork. We have all heard that "The feet get the hands to the ball". One thing that should be stressed with our goalkeepers is: smaller is better. Taking small steps generates speed quicker and enables a goalkeeper to gain their balance with greater ease. That is not to say that a keeper should use mini-steps at all times – just when they start their movement and when reaching their position while gaining balance and composure.

Technique is our basis for goalkeeping. We must continue to produce technical goalkeepers. The motto for youth goalkeeping should be: be technical first, block second. At the professional level, where jobs are on the line, the motto is: block first, be technical second. We see a lot of unorthodox techniques used at the professional level and on the TV. As coaches we need to understand that the pros may use varying methods due to their experience and due to the pace at which the ball is moving. While we must applaud the successes at the professional level, we must reassure and recommit our youth goalkeepers to the importance of technique.

Coaches all have their own methods and modify techniques to meet their philosophy on goalkeeping. Let us continue to improve our nation's keepers by stressing technique in all areas and moving towards training our keepers in realistic and functional situations