

# Identifying and Nurturing Young Goalkeepers

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The inspiration for this article came from a question I am often asked; "I coach a U-12 team and not one of them wants to play in goal, what should I do?" While there is no instant solution, the response is simple. Require everyone to have a chance in goal, and, devote one practice out of every 5 to goalkeeping, where every player is a goalkeeper on that day. The usual response sounds something like; "well I don't have a goalkeeper coach so who else can do it?" My answer; "you!" If we are willing to spend countless hours and untold amounts of money on learning how to teach dribbling, passing, receiving and shooting, then why not devote some of those precious resources to learning the basics of goalkeeping. Both the USSF and the NSCAA offer great courses designed to teach non-goalkeepers how to deal with this position.

All too often the child left in goal is the last kid picked, the one that can't seem to do much else or the only one that volunteered, each one proving problematic sooner or later. In the spirit of player development I would suggest that we must get a handle on the situation before it even comes to this point. As kids enter the game around six or eight years of age, they are just learning how to handle their own bodies and movements as they relate to anything athletic, let alone just soccer. At this point, let them be what ever they want to be, no pressure for anything except to have fun. Between the ages of eight and ten though, as we start to teach them specific skills related to soccer, we must add skills related to the goalkeeper. Most kids love to catch and throw the ball because it is far more natural than kicking and receiving so why not use that to our advantage? Forget positioning and complicated instructions at this point and simply ask the kid to keep the ball from getting past him or her. Are there some that will bat everyone away? How many attempt to catch most of them? Do they worry too much about one that got by or do they jump right back in and try for the next? Expecting everyone to have a turn at this stage does wonders in terms of eliminating pressures associated with the position. No one can point the finger at any one else as being responsible for letting one in, everyone takes their turn and most likely will let one in as well. Learning the game is as much about learning to respect each position as it is about anything else.

Between the ages of ten and twelve, kids will develop socially, emotionally and physically. If they have been playing a few years they will start to figure out what they do and don't like to do as it relates to the game. By now, games have probably become "competitive", stats and records are being kept and goalkeepers are a regular part of the game. It is between these years that most kids who may have looked forward to playing in goal are chased away from the position. Throughout my observation and studies of youth soccer, I have found that those teams and/or coaches, who have regularly incorporated goalkeeping into their practice schedule prior to the age of 10, are far more likely to develop players who enjoy being a goalkeeper. Those who have ignored the position or allowed only a select few play, struggle to find what they need. So, back at square one again, what is it exactly that we are looking for? I firmly believe that athleticism and some degree of mental strength are truly the building blocks of a successful goalkeeper as either is difficult to teach if it is not already in there somewhere. Give me those qualities upfront and I believe the rest can be taught. Again, ask these questions: Which kids are willing to leave the goal area to play with their feet? Which are brave enough to leave the line to challenge shooters? Do any of them naturally talk to their teammates about the game and how they can help? At this point, some kids may step forward and indicate that they are a goalkeeper and nothing else. When this is allowed to happen, these players can be spotted a mile away by the time they are fourteen. Why? Because they are far behind their peers in terms of their ability to play with their feet and overall understanding of the game. As such, it is critical that we expect all players, regardless of position, the same opportunities to learn the entire game. Allowing players to be full time goalkeepers before the age of twelve is tantamount to giving kids a bag of cookies just before dinner or letting them convince you that they don't need to eat their peas. As adults, we know better than this and would not allow it to happen. I would suggest taking the same approach in working with young players in any arena, the message being that we know what is best in terms of developing our children and sometimes the easy way is not the best way. In addition, avoid sending the goalkeepers away while the rest of the team is learning to feel

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comfortable with the ball at their feet. Between the ages of ten and twelve, young goalkeepers can get what they need by attending clinics, camps or by working with you for 20 minutes either before or after practice. Let them experience the position throughout the regular course of practice, during shooting exercises and small sided games.

Believe me when I tell you, when a ball gets past your 'keeper, he or she is well aware of it. The last thing that player needs is to be reminded that it just happened. Encourage players, coaches and parents alike to remain positive and to be aware of their body language. A water bottle kicked over sends the same message as yelling and screaming about it. Focus on the positive and what can be done next time rather than what he or she may have just done wrong this time.

Beyond the age of twelve, it is expected and somewhat acceptable that some kids will have their mind made up that they want nothing else but to play in goal. Hopefully this decision has been made through several years of trying every position on and realizing that the role of the goalkeeper fits best. Should this be the case, it is imperative that this player be better than adequate with his or her feet and feel comfortable playing behind the team as an additional player. If not, then this player is not ready to play only in goal. Regardless, team training must always include time playing with the rest of the team, with their feet. Again, it is often not appropriate to send the goalkeeper off to "warm-up" while everyone else does the same. Find a way to get them involved with the group.