Issue 6 - Cut the Imaginary Rope

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Editor: I'm delighted to have Gwynne Williams as our guest goalkeeping contributor. Gwynne is a National Goalkeeping Staff Coach with both the USSF and the NSCAA and is Goalkeeper Coach at Lynn University, Florida.

This is my advice to developing 15-year-old goalkeepers. Cut the imaginary rope that ties you to the goal line.

Successful young goalkeepers, typically ages 11 through 14, build their success on shot stopping. While all goalkeepers delight in making saves, too often goalkeepers try to look spectacular, and over exaggerate the difficulty involved.

The advice that follows is good for all goalkeepers especially the developing 15 year old goalkeeper. At about the age of 15 young players begin to gravitate to preferential permanent positions. If your choice is to play in goal and you want to play at a high level then you will need to be more than a shot stopper.

Given that prevention is better than cure the following bullet points are essential for the developing goalkeeper and must be added to your repertoire if you are to be a complete goalkeeper and cut the imaginary rope that ties you to the goal line.

- Â The Goalkeeper must be an organizer

Having the luxury of viewing the game through 180 degrees most of the time, the goalkeeper must take charge and be the defensive organizer. By displaying good organization the goalkeeper will have less work to accomplish and concede fewer goals. The key to organizing your defense lies in organizing early. The time to organize is when your team is attacking. It will often be too late once your team has lost possession. When attacking, your team will either score a goal or give away possession, and I'm willing to bet they will lose possession more than they score, so get organized for what is to come next.

Good goalkeepers restrict themselves to organizing from the halfway line backwards. Too often I see goalkeepers trying to orchestrate every attacking move their team makes, even in the oppositions penalty area. Stick to your area of responsibility and organize early.

- Â The Goalkeeper must be a communicator

Good organization is achieved through good communication. Verbal instructions need to be commanding, clear, concise and controlled. Do not over elaborate and never scream. Screaming displays lack of control and fear. Good communication should leave both teams knowing who is in charge. Keep your commands simple: "Keeper's!" "Away!" In this way you will develop consistency, which will lead to better understanding with your teammates. A good goalkeeper will talk either his team into giving him/her less work or may even talk the other team out of creating dangerous situations.

- Â The Goalkeeper must stay attached to the defense

Always be attached to your defense. This will keep you in the game mentally and physically. By being attached you will be able to cut out danger often before it happens. Being attached you may be able to play a through ball with your feet beyond the penalty area, cutting out the danger early. If you become detached you cannot offer sufficient support to your defense. The distance between you and the defensive line will vary depending on factors such as size, speed and confidence. Be wary of pushing up too far as this could create more problems than it solves. The supporting position you establish must allow you to retreat to the goal when necessary. Stay attached when kicking the ball out, whether it be from a goal kick or a punt. All to often, goalkeepers detach themselves immediately and walk back towards the goal line after they have kicked the ball. This is the moment to stay attached. You will no doubt have pushed up your defense before you kicked the ball, so reattach yourself ASAP.

- Goalkeepers react they do not anticipateÂ Â

Contrary to what many coaching books state, good goalkeepers react to actions they do not anticipate. Too often young goalkeepers play mind games with themselves and begin to will certain things to happen -- especially just before a shot is taken at them. Hence they guess (anticipate). Sometimes they guess right and reinforce a bad habit. However, they will also let in the soft goals by anticipating wrongly. How often do you see a goalkeeper faced with a penalty situation, throw themselves to the bottom corner only for the ball to go straight down the middle. If they had reacted instead of anticipating they would have put themselves in a position to save the ball. If the shot is hit perfectly it may be impossible to stop. Good goalkeepers put themselves in a position to save the less than perfect shots consistently. They react to an action. They do not anticipate.

- Â Goalkeeper as the first attacker

As well as being in control defensively, the complete goalkeeper will be in charge offensively within his/her territory. The ability to play with your feet is now essential for goalkeepers and good goalkeepers demand the ball be passed back to them from defenders that are facing them and under pressure. They now have become creative players within the team and can change the point of attack, often becoming the springboard for an attack from deep.

Not only should the goalkeeper take their own goal kicks, they must take charge of dead ball situations in the defensive third of the field. Push up the team and initiate the attack.

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