

Staying Connected to the Game – The Goalkeeper’s Job Responsibilities

The goalkeeper plays a decisive role in the outcome of each and every game. Saves are made and goals are scored at pivotal moments in the game and the keeper’s performance during these key moments can win and lose games.

Although the key moments are typically what people remember of a keeper’s performance, it’s actually the time spent *in between* the dangerous plays that ultimately prepares the keeper for success or failure. Goalkeepers who make good use of this “down time” can dramatically improve their performance as well as their team’s. However, all too often players and coaches think on a small scale by judging keepers only by their shot stopping. In these narrow terms the goalkeeper is limited and his influence on the game diminished.

To think on a larger scale is to consider how the goalkeeper can use every minute of the game to positively influence his team and remain prepared for the soccer problems he could face. Because this down time is so important, players and coaches must redefine the goalkeeper’s job responsibilities in order for the goalkeeper to stay completely connected to the game. This can be challenging for the coach because the nature of the game is to follow the ball. Players, coaches, and spectators are used to watching the ball wherever it goes and when the ball is away from the keeper he can become complacent and disconnected from the game. To combat this complacency, keepers must develop strong habits and they must believe that their effort to constantly connect to the game will pay off for their team in the end. A sense of responsibility and self directed action is needed from the goalkeeper.

A journalist once asked Kasey Keller how he felt about the easy game he played after his team won 3-0 in the German Bundesliga. Kasey responded with a laugh and, half way jokingly, said his job is “always hell,” regardless of the score line. He went on to say that he is constantly in high alert and must maintain a high level of urgency for 90 minutes, regardless of his team being 3-0 up or 0-3 down. Although the term “hell” was meant to be a bit of an overstatement, he nonetheless conveyed the value he places in his responsibility over the course of an entire game, not just the obvious dangerous moments. This level of physical urgency and mental concentration can often leave a goalkeeper exhausted, even when they were only called on to make a couple of saves in the whole game. This is the high standard of performance that all goalkeepers can aspire to and develop within themselves.

The following ideas can help you stay better connected to the game:

Positioning Away From the Ball

The goalkeeper must constantly mind her positioning when the ball is away from her, regardless of which team has possession. When done properly, she should adjust her positioning every time the ball is passed or dribbled to a new location. This means moving vertically and horizontally in relation to the ball. A simple way to do this is to stay on the “ball line” at all times, even when the ball is in the other half of the field (see figure 1).

Often keepers are only required to stand at the top of the 18 and many keepers and coaches are ok with this. This low standard is the very least a keeper can do. Without adjusting to the play, this turns the keeper into more of a spectator than a participant as the ball moves around the field. Inevitably a counter attack will unfold and before the keeper knows it they can find themselves out of position. Furthermore, they often are “switched off” because of standing still for several minutes and neither their brain or body are prepared for action. As a spectator the keeper is much less prepared to play the game.

The higher standard requires the keeper to be constantly involved, moving and adjusting, so as to become an active *participant* instead of a mere spectator. This is the most the keeper can do. By the higher standard the goalkeeper is very much prepared and can benefit in these ways:

- She will be closer to her defenders and can therefore communicate more effectively.
- She stays “switched on” or “connected” mentally through active participation.
- Physically she is moving more often and therefore the muscles stay stimulated and primed.
- She is always in an optimal position to offer support to her teammates should they need to play to her.
- Should her team lose possession of the ball she is already on the ball line and ready to defend her goal against the counter attack. (keepers stood at the top of the “D” when the ball is out wide leave themselves vulnerable because, if their team loses the ball, they must scurry to get onto their ball line before a shot occurs. See figure 1.)
- Should the opposition play in behind her defenders she can offer defensive support by acting as the “keeper/sweeper.”
- By constantly adjusting to stay on the ball line the habit becomes second nature and will begin to happen without thought. This becomes particularly useful when the ball is near their 18 because, instead of worrying about her positioning prior to a shot or pass, she can concentrate on the ball and organizing her teammates.

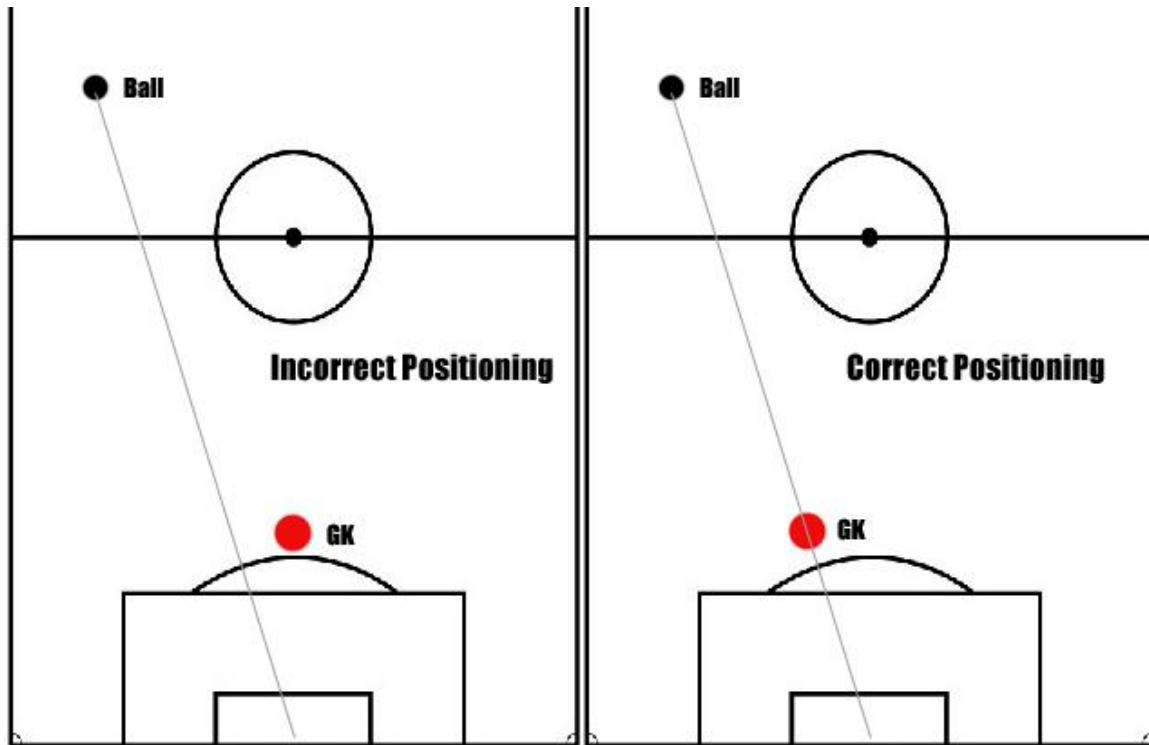


Figure 1

Urgency and Body Composition

The position of goalkeeper is dynamic and requires a high level of athleticism, mobility, and explosiveness. Too often keepers do not prepare their bodies for action and are left to fend at the mercy of the attacker, rather than being primed to assert their presence and dominate the field. The keeper is disconnected from the game when his body is not prepared (standing still for too long, weight on the heels, knees locked, arms folded, etc) while conversely, he is very connected to the game when he develops good habits for keeping his body primed and prepared (moving often and quickly, weight on the balls of the feet, knees slightly bent, shoulders forward, etc). Also, by preparing the body, the mind tends to remain in a healthy, alert state which allows for quick decision making and rapid responses from the body's systems.

All athletes have an optimal starting position which helps them perform their position in their sport. Baseball and softball infielders prepare themselves by leaning forward and low, typically with their mitt low to the ground. Football linemen begin in a three quarter stance to prepare for the physical confrontation with the opposing players. Can you imagine seeing a baseball player standing straight legged on his heels with his arms folded while a pitch is taking place? Can you imagine a tennis player casually resting with her hands on her hips on the wrong side of the court while her counterpart is

readying to serve? What if a boxer approached his foe without preparing his hands to block the oncoming punches?

Although those examples sound ridiculous, soccer goalkeepers fail by allowing themselves to become physically disconnected from the game, as well as positionally and mentally. Although the ball may seem far from danger at times, soccer is a fast game and it can arrive on the keeper's doorstep in an instant. The following ideas can help keepers remain vigilant in staying physically connected and remaining on high alert:

- While adjusting to the ball when it is away from you, be sure to stay on the balls of the feet and move swiftly with sharp shuffles and steps. (Some keepers prefer to keep their feet staggered, one in front of the other, to help them to take a positive first step forward.)
- When the ball comes within 40 yards of your goal your urgency should rise and this should show in your body posture and composition. The weight should be transferred forward on the balls of the feet and the shoulders over the toes. Tension must exist in the knees by bending or slightly bouncing to create energy and avoid becoming stagnant.
- In colder weather it may take more movement at safe times (corner kicks, substitutions) to keep the body temperature up and muscles ready.

Too often keepers do not show enough physical urgency until the time of a shot or cross and sometimes this is too late. By being alert and physically urgent when the ball is in dangerous areas you can be sure you are as prepared as possible to deal with any situation. The lower standard merely requires you to be in position. The high standard requires you to be energized, urgent, and prepared to be athletic.

Communication

The goalkeeper has a great responsibility to communicate and organize because his position allows him to see more of the field than any other player. By communicating *proactively* the keeper can diffuse the opposition's attack and build his own team's attack. By staying connected positionally the goalkeeper is always in the prime position to communicate to the players involved with the ball. By communicating to them, and then adjusting and sliding with them, he inevitably stays in better positions, which allows for good communication, and thus a positive cycle is created.

Vision and Awareness of the Field

Connection to the game also means being aware of your surroundings. Goalkeepers typically have a very good view of the entire field. However, this vantage point is only

useful if keepers make a point to look around and gather information. Too often goalkeepers play “blindly” because they only look around as a dangerous play occurs and not as the danger is building up. Or even worse, they are so fixated on the ball they never lift their head to look around. Along with creating the positive cycle of correct positioning, correct posture, and positive communication, looking around to gather information is imperative. By doing so, the keeper can give better information to her teammates and can be more decisive in anticipating and responding to attacks.

Learning and Observation

A good way to learn and gain a greater appreciation for connection is to attend a high level match in person. In the collegiate and professional game this level of connection is a necessity and it really is missed on television because the cameras only follow the ball. Watching in person, especially from an elevated position in the stands, reveals that two well connected keepers will move in unison as they adjust to the ball. When the ball is cleared from the left end the keeper on that end will move up while the keeper to the right will drop back. When the ball is switched from the near side to the far side both keepers will move to stay on their respective ball lines. Seeing this executed in person can have a lasting impression.

Conclusion

Above all, the goalkeeper who assumes maximum responsibility during the game will consistently have the greatest influence possible. The keeper who ignores these responsibilities will have less of an influence and will only be doing part of their job. As mentioned before, these demands are rarely placed on goalkeepers from coaches and therefore it is the responsibility of the goalkeeper to show self direction and commitment to ultimately achieve their maximum performance and raise their level of play. For keepers who are not accustomed to this, the standard has been redefined and raised. It is now their challenge to reach this standard and maximize their impact during every moment of every game.