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Encouraging the Youth Goalkeeper

The following is a list of ways in which you, the coach or parent, can encourage the goalkeeper in your life. The soccer goalkeeper is a special position played by special people. Proper encouragement can give youth goalkeepers the platform they need to enjoy the game, develop to the best of their ability, and excel in this challenging and rewarding position.

Encourage them to...

- ...have fun and enjoy playing the game. At the end of the day this is what it is all about.
- ...coach themselves. Keepers must think their way through the game and they shouldn't rely on adults to identify or solve problems for them. Coaches often can't give ample attention to their keeper because of the number of field players they're responsible for and parents should not be coaching to begin with. Keepers then have the choice of either thinking for themselves and taking ownership of their performance or merely going through the motions and waiting for the coach's insight when it's available.
- ...play unorganized soccer as much as possible. Players should take part in loosely organized soccer outside of adult driven practices and matches because a) there is much enjoyment to be gained through "pick up" soccer and b) invaluable development takes place in the player driven environment. Time alone with the ball is also very necessary and rewarding.
- ...spend ample time playing as a field player. More and more keepers are required to properly perform the role of the first attacker when they are in possession of the ball. They are soccer players first, and therefore must spend ample time on the field, especially as youngsters (U12 and younger).
- ...influence the game as much as possible. Stopping shots is the least they can do for their team. The time in between shots should be filled with "busy work" such as communicating and organizing, continually adjusting their position in relation to the ball, sweeping behind the defense, intercepting balls to prevent shots, etc.
- ...distribute the ball effectively. When distributing the ball (ie throwing, punting, rolling, passing, clearing, etc.) keepers should be encouraged to hold themselves to the same standard as field players in terms of technical execution and decision making. Simply put, without pressure they should receive the ball properly and get it to their team in the most appropriate way. When under pressure they should clear the ball effectively to a safe place. Again, keepers are soccer players first.



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- ...communicate. Goalkeepers have the best view on the field and they are obligated to share what they see with their teammates. Timely, loud, and concise communication is best. Also, encourage them to solve the problem rather than pose the problem. "John, mark 15!" is better than, "Who's got 15?"
- ...stay "alive and alert" –always! Too often keepers allow themselves (and coaches allow them) to disconnect from the game physically (stagnant, non-athletic posture), mentally (day dreaming, not following the play, not communicating, complacent), and tactically (standing and observing rather than constantly adjusting to the ball). All successful athletes rely on physical and mental preparedness and keepers must be prepared for the duration of the match, not just the obvious dangerous moments.
- ...expect to make and learn from mistakes. The game is played by humans and humans will make mistakes. The response to the mistake is key. Learning from mistakes can minimize the chance of repeating the same mistake. Also the nature of the mistake should be considered. An aggressive mistake (prematurely leaving the line to challenge a difficult ball) has more value than a passive mistake (hesitating on the line for a ball that should be won by the keeper). Reinforce aggressiveness and braveness regardless of the outcome.
- ...watch the game on tv and emulate heroes. Imagine an aspiring quarter back not knowing Payton Manning or an aspiring baseball player not knowing Alex Rodriguez. There are far too many aspiring goalkeepers who do not know Edwin Van der Sar, Jens Lehman, Iker Casillas, or Marcus Haneman and their development is limited as long as they do not know how the top performers play the game.

When considering the big picture of a goalkeeper's life long development, consider these two things.

- 1) The typical goalkeeper reaches their prime around the age of 30 (for the few who play that long). This is because the complex skills required to consistently excel at the position require years of experience to develop. Thus, the extreme proficiency and match savvy that we expect from relatively young keepers can be unfair and even absurd. Even a 17 year old is considered a "young" keeper in comparison to the 30 year old in their prime.
- 2) There is a severe double standard in the way attacking players and goalkeepers are treated. We expect both to perform their role and both need confidence to excel in their position, yet in one we reinforce success and in the other we reinforce failure. Consider the attacker who attempts to shoot a crossed ball with a rather ambitious volley, sending the ball 20 feet high and wide. Often, the response from the coach is one of applauding the effort or suggesting the outcome was merely "unlucky." The bench players and crowd undoubtedly cheer and ooh and ah as the ball is still sailing in the air. Despite the failed attempt, what does the attacker



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do with the next opportunity to shoot? Of course they strike again without hesitation or fear. Now consider the goalkeeper who comes aggressively for a cross which they do not reach. The ball sails over their head to a backside runner who buries the shot. We can all imagine the response of the crowd and bench who either sigh in disappointment or remain awkwardly silent while the coach as well is either silent or may feel inclined to openly criticize the keeper for the mistake. Now what is the response of the keeper the next time a ball is crossed? How have we encouraged the aggressiveness and braveness we need in our goalkeeper? So we can see how two different responses create two different environments which create two different kinds of players: one confident and one deflated. Goalkeepers rely on confidence to perform and we can rob them of this essential quality if we aren't sensitive about the environment we create.

Please encourage your keepers and help them to enjoy the game. Consider the complexity of the position and do your part to create the best environment in which their intent and effort is regarded higher than the outcome of their play. This is the path to successful development and eventual success for the goalkeeper and his or her team.



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