

This article presents a few hints on keeper training for young players. This is not presented as a practice plan, because an entire practice on keeper training is not appropriate for young players and because all players should be exposed to these basics.

First let's define the age group as U-9 or U-10 and younger. A player this young should not be forced to play goalkeeper full time. All the players should get some keeper training. This training should include the rules for keepers including where they can use their hands and how they may get rid of the ball. Pay special attention to the latter since it varies widely at the lower levels. For example a local recreational league allows the keepers to run to the top of the area and get rid of the ball, whereas another league enforces the 4 step rule.

Specific training should be aimed at teaching proper catching technique. Forget diving and all the advanced stuff. For the upper limit of the age group (U-9) you can begin to teach positioning. Stress importance of protecting near post, cutting down angle, and moving across the goal mouth as the ball moves across the field. You can teach them to come off the line for free balls in the area where they can handle the ball beginning at the U-7 level.

Spend time also on what to do after the keeper gets the ball. Teach the kids not to panic. Lots of kids in this age (and older too) want to get rid of the ball as soon as possible. Teach them to catch the ball, take a deep breath, let the traffic clear, and then distribute the ball. U-8 and younger you probably want to kick, throw, or whatever the ball as far up field as possible. When you reach U-9, you can probably start adding other options, if the field players have sufficient skill to retain control of the ball after the keeper gets it to them. If the field players lack skill, then its still best to blast the ball up-field.

The team should buy a couple of junior keeper gloves (2 sizes so that all the kids can use them) that are form fitting and provide a dimpled surface. These gloves cost under \$10/pair at your local department store. Avoid the big gloves. As anyone who has coached young kids baseball can tell you, young kids can barely control their bare hands. So don't even think about any of the large modern gloves.

At U-8 or so, you may find a kid who is more serious about being a keeper and will come to practice with a pair of big gloves, just like the big kids use. I suggest you don't let him use them because of the kid's inability to control them. Talk to the parents and explain why you're not using the big gloves. Better yet have a meeting before the \$ is spent.

Assuming that practice time is limited, I would suggest a few sessions as follows:

1. For the whole team go over the rules for keepers.
2. For the whole team demonstrate proper catching. Divide the team into pairs and let them practice catching. Walk around and make necessary corrections.
3. Above is probably 5 to 10 minutes.
4. Set up shooting/keeper drills and rotate all kids into the goal. Keeper teaching points are catching technique and what to do after the ball is caught.
5. During scrimmages, place emphasis on what the keeper should do with ball after the save.

There are three key points for training young keepers:

1. Don't blame keepers for giving up a goal.
2. The coach **MUST** stay calm when the keeper has the ball. Too many coaches panic and start screaming "GET RID OF THE BALL." If the coach panics, there is no way to expect the kids to stay calm.
3. Remember that young kids have a short attention span and may be studying the bugs on the field while the ball is headed for the back of the net. Don't let this bother you.

Technique Training Exercises

During most warm-ups the coach can include some GK work with the field player's workout. Some suggestions are:

- All players are dribbling in an area. The designated GKs are jogging around and call for a ball from a dribbler. The dribbler makes a ground pass to the GK who runs through the pickup and returns the ball to the dribbler. The coach could make this a team-wide exercise--the GK that picks up the ball now is a dribbler and the passer becomes the GK. As the skill level increase, the dribbler can "shoot" a catchable ball at the GK.
- All players are passing and moving in pairs. The designated GK calls for the ball from a dribbler who passes to his partner, who "shoots" a catchable ball at the GK. The GK distributes back to one of the players and finds another pair to receive a shot; or the GK distributes to and pairs up with the original dribbler as the shooter becomes the new GK.

The above exercises could be where only the GK has the ball and distributes to a player for a one-touch return or a pass over to his partner for a shot on the GK.

GK play can be incorporated into passing warm-ups and exercises. For example, in pass and change lines, the GK can use this exercise to pick up ground passes. At times, the passer may "shoot" a ball off the ground for the GK to catch.

Specific training for youth GKs should start with basic catching technique. Coaching points include:

- hands move together, both behind the ball; the thumbs should be close, the index fingers slightly turned towards each other.
- elbows are in front of the torso and close together
- hands are forward and fingers high on the ball
- the GK should constantly be bouncing on the balls of the feet and moving the body behind any balls to the side
- the hands move together for all catches; if the ball is below the chest, the hands should be extended and turned to where the little fingers and sides of the palm are touching; the elbows especially should be very close on this catch
- on a ground pickup, the GK should step one foot beside the ball, lower one knee close to but not touching the ground behind the ball and scoop the pickup, continuing in a forward run after the pickup (this is called running through the pickup)

Sample exercises include:

- 2-man pass and catch
- short ball serve, followed by a high ball; the GK should be made to move forward, then backwards
- 2-man pass and catch with moving side to side or forwards and backwards
- GK in the middle with 2 servers alternating
- GK forward pickup with server moving backwards laying ground passes off at different angles
- GK sit-ups with ball, coach kicks ball as GK brings it forward; this is to teach proper hand position and give the GK confidence in his grip

Footwork is the next area of GK training. Sideways shuffling between cones or quick steps forward and backwards between cones is the first part. The youth GK should be taught to move from post to post in an arc that extends about 2-3 yards out from the centre of the goal. This can be taught with two servers that are positioned several yards out, say at the top of the penalty area and wide of each post. As they pass the ball back and forth, the GK moves on his arc.

Forward movement can be taught with a gate several yards in front of the GKs arc. Balls are played from some distance so that the GK can pickup the serves before they reach the gate. If you have a couple of GKs, a fun exercise is to have a "goal-line" that is as wide as a goal. Place two gates a couple of yards shorter than the goal width about 3-4 yards in front and back of the goal-line. The GKs take "shots", beginning with ground balls, from the servers in front of each gate. After each "shot," the GKs trade sides and catch the next serve before it passes through the gate. Another footwork exercise is to have a server on the side deliver a low ball to the near post; immediately after the GK makes the save, they move back to the far post for a high serve.

While diving is not appropriate for the younger age groups, we'll take a quick look at it anyway. Teaching basic diving technique starts with the GK sitting on the ground. The GK should hold the ball and fall to one side and plant the ball. One hand should be behind the ball, the other hand on top of the ball. The elbow and forearm should not be touching the ground.

The next step is to fall from a squatting position. If the GK continues to land on the elbow and forearm, then have the player put his hands together in a praying position and fall. Then have the player fall holding and planting a ball. The ball, the hip and the shoulder should be the only areas that touch the ground. The ball should be planted first, followed by the hip and shoulder almost together.

From a standing position, the player should squat and fall. This teaches the knee bend required. From here, the player should take an angled step with the near foot, lowering the near hip and then falling, planting the ball. At each of the above stages, move from the GK holding the ball to the GK catching a served ball.

Once the dive mechanics are understood, the GK must be shown the final position to protect the body. The ball and forearms should be in front of the face. The top knee should be driven forward to almost touching the top elbow, this will protect the torso. The bottom leg should be extended and raised slightly.

When comfortable enough, have the GK make consecutive dives to one side on served balls across the goal mouth and then zigzag dives forward from the goal mouth to the top of the penalty area.

Finally, the GK should be taught distribution. Though last in this list, distribution can be taught early on. When playing catch, have the GK do 3/4 overhead tosses. The GK must cup the ball in one hand (which is difficult for some of the younger players to do). The ball should be delivered just lower than straight above the head and the body and head should be as tall as possible.

Another distribution technique is the volley kick (or punt). The initial stages can again begin with playing catch. Have the GKs serve the balls with short volley kicks. The closer to the ground they can kick the ball the better. This moves to the full volley kick where the GK should drop (not toss in the air) the ball with the hand opposite the kicking foot.

A young GK may not be mature enough to understand the angles involved with playing the GK position. However, the coach can start to reinforce the idea with a 100-150 foot rope tied to each goal post. As the apex of the rope moves, the GK will be given a visual layout of the path of a shot to either post.

A drawn arc out from each post to a couple of yards from the goal center will show the GK, the path he should travel when the ball moves from one post to the other. The point is to get the GK off the line a little bit when the ball is in the center and to cover the near post when the ball is on the side.

Coming out to pick up a ball or close down the angle is a skill that requires lots of experience. Playing balls into the area with an attacker running on but well within the GK's capability of getting to them will help establish the GK mentality of coming out. Playing balls to an attacker where the GK cannot get there first will hopefully train the GK that there are ball he must stay back on. The coach must work with his GK to establish his range. This training should include kicking the ball away if the GK has to play it out of the penalty area.

The rule of thumb for coming out is, if you are sure you can get to the ball first, then go for it, else, hang back and look for the next touch by the attacker to be your ball.