

## **Introduction**

The U12 goalkeeper is ready to take a major step in his or her development. Up to this point, many players have probably taken turns playing in goal, but at this age the player that wants to concentrate on the position of goalkeeper usually makes him or herself known. It is, however, important that all players still do a lot of dribbling and passing exercises as all goalkeepers need to be good with their feet too.

The requirements and training of this position are specific and must be dealt with in a patient and understanding manner. It is helpful for every young goalkeeper to get basic instruction from an older keeper who has gone through proper training. Exposing a player to diving and defending breakaways (1 v 1) without proper preparation usually ends in injury and discouragement, and should be avoided. All keepers enjoy playing out on the field, and should thus be encouraged to participate in all areas of practice to improve their vision, technical foot skills and overall development.

Proper instruction for goalkeepers in this age group can improve them tremendously.

They have generally reached the age where they will not move out of the way of a hard shot, and should therefore concentrate on receiving all types of balls and on distribution. It is at this age group that they should also be exposed to proper diving techniques.

Once the player has the basic goalkeeping tools, he or she can be worked into all the team's training. The goalkeeper should always be a part of the team and certain parts of training should emphasize the goalkeeper's involvement more than others.

## **The Ready Position:**

Start by teaching players the "ready position", the stance that all young goalkeepers should adopt anytime they prepare to stop a shot, whether during practice or in a game. The ready position involves being balanced on the balls (or front) of the feet, bending comfortably at the knees while keeping as tall as possible, and having the hands relaxed through the fingertips.

To add to this the player should be shifting weight from foot to foot at speed in order to increase his reaction time and jumping ability.

## **Hand Positioning:**

It is imperative that young goalkeepers are taught the correct hand positioning for both low and high balls. In both cases, the hands should form a supple web that surrounds the back side (closest to the goal) of the football. (Remember to always play with an appropriate sized ball for the age group that you are coaching). Coaches should also remember that at this age, players often have difficulty judging the height and speed of a moving ball.

For low balls the hand position resembles an '**M**', with fingers pointed down and palms facing forward. The little fingers of both hands are almost touching.

For high balls the hand position resembles a '**W**', with fingertips pointed up and palms facing forward. The thumbs of both hands are almost touching.

## **Coaching Points:**

It is stressed that whenever possible, the young goalkeeper should try to get two hands behind the ball (no show diving!) as quickly as possible. This means that we have to encourage the young goalkeeper to have quick feet, attack the ball and move forward to meet the flight of the ball.

When meeting the football, the goalkeeper should also use their body to form two barriers, a cushion and a wall. Try to get the goalkeepers to cushion the ball towards their bodies with their hands. The goalkeeper can absorb the force of the shot by relaxing slightly at the moment of contact. We do not want to form a brick wall that the ball will just bounce off back towards the attacking player! The wall will be created behind the cushion by the goalkeeper's legs or body.

A goalkeeper should always be on the balls of his/her feet to be ready to react to different and developing situations.

#### **Practice:**

At practice utilise 1:1 technical work at this age group. Emphasize that the hands are supposed to **cushion** the ball into the chest area. A good practice exercise for this is to work in pairs with one throwing the ball, the other catching with one hand pretending that the ball is a water-filled balloon! Alternate the catching hand and vary the service. Make the catching player move his or her feet. This can be developed into two hands using the correct hand positioning getting the players to not let the ball make a sound as they catch it. Coaches should try this too; it is more difficult than it seems!

#### **Collecting Balls**

Before going into the methods of collecting/saving/catching different types of balls, stress the importance of being ready to move in the direction of the shot. A good goalkeeper makes difficult saves look routine by anticipating his or her movements well in advance. If a young goalkeeper can concentrate for 5 minutes on the opposition attack, he or she will learn much about where the most danger will come from. Things to look for include: which foot the forward favours, which way they are likely to turn with their back to goal and which side of the field they prefer to attack down. In most games of this age group the coach can help by identifying simple patterns to his or her players. Players at this age often have difficulty judging the height and speed of a moving ball, therefore, wherever the ball is coming from tell the goalkeeper to be on their toes and ready to move their feet to get their body behind the line of the ball.

#### **Ground Level:**

In the handling of ground balls (rolling), the main concern is to get the body between the ball and the goal. Goalkeepers should learn to 'shuffle' (side step) to the rolling ball and attempt to create two barriers (the cushion and wall) between the ball and the goal. The cushion is the goalkeeper's hands in the 'M' position, and the wall will be the goalkeeper's legs. Again once behind the line of the ball, the goalkeeper can attack it by moving forwards to meet it. Once the keeper is certain of the line of the ball he should position one foot to the side of the ball, kneel down on the opposite knee (forming the wall) and make a ramp leading to his chest with his hands and arms.

Get the body behind the ball no matter how slowly the ball is travelling. As the ball travels up the ramp, the hands and forearms should curl around the bottom of the ball and hold it into the safety of the chest. It should not be 'scooped' as young keepers have a tendency to be too keen and the ball can end up slipping

out and into the net! The goalkeeper can alternatively attempt to bend from the waist and maintain fairly straight legs to collect a ground ball. This is sometimes preferred because of a bigger body surface forming 'the wall' and also for speed of distribution from a standing position.

With no pressure a goalkeeper should be encouraged to come away from his goal line and field the ball with his feet. His or her first touch, however, should be at an angle away from the goal and/or direction of pressure (where ball has just come from). It should be reinforced that the young keeper should also play to their strongest foot.

#### **Waist Level:**

Again, instruct the goalkeeper to get directly behind the ball and field it with the fingers relaxed towards the ground. As the ball makes contact, the goalkeeper can absorb the force of the shot by giving or withdrawing slightly. By curling around the ball from the waist, a majority of this force is absorbed.

#### **Chest Level:**

Teach the goalkeeper to get behind the shot and allow the ball to make contact with the fingertips of both hands. Do not attempt to clasp the ball from both sides. Form a net with the hands around the ball in the 'W' position, with thumbs together and finger tips upward. Pull the ball into the chest for safety.

#### **Overhead Level:**

Handling high shots requires sure hands because in this case, the hands are the only wall between the ball and the goal. The hands must be outstretched and fairly relaxed to absorb the shot's force. Again, the hands must make contact on the backside of the ball and not the sides.

To help ensure that this happens, ask the keeper to keep his thumbs touching whenever he goes for the ball. Many young goalkeepers will move their arms from their sides in large arcs to meet in the middle above their head, although by the time they have done this the ball has often gone through already! Get the keepers to get in the habit of always moving their arms in straight lines towards the line of flight of the ball. Pull the ball to the safety of the chest as soon as possible.

#### **Jumping:**

When the shots are overhead, a goalkeeper should still attempt to make two barriers between the ball and the goal. The goalkeeper can do this by jumping up vertically, although we must encourage our young goalkeepers to attack the ball (move forward to collect it rather than wait for it to come to them). During practice, the coach should ask his players to jump as high as they can, firstly from a still position with hands by their sides, then allowing them to use their arms to thrust upwards, and then finally taking a few steps forward, taking off on one foot, and using one knee and both of their arms to thrust upwards. Which of the three methods saw them leap highest? If the goalkeeper can anticipate quickly and get behind the line of the ball, then he can afford himself most time to get vertical. It is vital that our young goalkeepers practice jumping and holding on to high balls.

#### **Summary:**

To summarize, no matter what type of shot, the goalkeeper should do the following:

1. Side-step quickly behind the line of the ball
2. Attack the ball whenever possible

3. Create two barriers between the ball and the goal, or have as much of body behind ball as possible
4. Absorb the ball's force by cushioning
5. Bring the ball to the safety of the chest
6. Concentrate until the ball is in the hands
7. All goalkeepers need a good warm-up of all the above and some basic diving (explained below)

***These basic concepts must be taught before placing a child in the position of goalkeeper.***

### **Narrowing Angles**

Generally speaking, if the opposition is attacking down the middle of the field, the goalkeeper will want to stay in the middle of his goal. If however, they are attacking the goal from the side he will want to move slightly in that direction to cover his 'near post' (the goal post nearest the shooter) because the ball when shot can travel to that side of the goal more quickly than to the other side. Most professional goalkeepers will tell you that they would much prefer to get beaten with a shot to the far post than the near post.

A coach can easily demonstrate where the young keeper should position him or herself by tying a piece of rope to each goalpost and having the shooter hold them to form a triangle. The goalkeeper should try and position himself on the line that bisects the triangle.

A coach can very easily demonstrate what 'narrowing the angle' means by getting each player in turn to place their ball on the penalty spot and stand behind it. Ask the player how much of the goal he can see unprotected. Then ask the player what his chances are of scoring.

Then move forward to the edge of the 6-yard box and ask the player the same questions.

The same concept is utilized whether the attacking team is coming at the goalkeeper from the middle or the sides. Obviously we do not want the keeper to come out too far as the ball could be deliberately chipped over his or her head, although at this age group this is rare. As a general rule if the forward has the ball at his feet, then the goalkeeper can advance at least yards. The coach should reinforce that the keeper should always be in the ready position.

### **Diving**

Young players will both head, slide tackle and dive for the ball, whether we want them to or not, therefore, it is imperative that they be taught the correct techniques from the outset.

The first dives should be taught in practice from a seated or kneeling position. The coach or partner kneeling 3-4 yards away will roll a ball (slowly) to an ***agreed*** side about one yard from the keeper's upright body. The keeper's arm is to produce a 'long barrier' between the ball and the imaginary goal behind him. Again we want to encourage our keepers' to attack (move forward towards) the ball, so they will dive to their side but slightly towards the ball. The player will do this by placing his hand (on the side of the body that he is going to dive) on the ground, fingers spread, with the little finger almost touching the ground. This hand is to move in a straight line at this distance from the ground at all times, keeping the arm as straight as possible.

The opposite hand should move across the body, again trying to have the thumbs nearly touching, but this hand will end up half behind and half on top of the ball in order to control it.

In essence the bottom arm attacks the ball, the body rotates and the bottom elbow is tucked in.

The goalkeeper will end up lying on his or her side arm outstretched to make as long a barrier as possible. Again, the 'barrier' must be flexible enough to absorb the force of the ball and not rebound it to the attacker. The ball must again be brought into the body in a controlled fashion as soon as it is under control. The knee of the top leg should be brought up also for protection.

It is very important that the coach alternates the player doing the exercise regularly (every 1-2 minutes). It is extremely tiring utilizing sets of muscles that are not used very often. The coach should try it sometime! The practice should continue with balls rolling to each side (the partner telling the keeper which side he is rolling to). When the keeper is competent (and agreeable) the service can speed up and finally not let the keeper know which side it is going to, in order to increase his reflex speed.

As the goalkeeper matures throughout the season, the coach can determine whether it is prudent to advance the goalkeeping practice to starting from a kneeling position (making a slightly longer barrier), then crouching, and graduate to a standing 'ready' position with feet shoulder width apart. Then the partner can serve the ball from a longer distance using his feet, getting the keeper to move his feet (side-stepping) to make the save as easy as possible.

Remember that if the keeper can make two barriers then he should. Again, we want to encourage the goalkeeper to attack the ball. When in a standing position, the first step must be forward at a 45 degree angle towards the side of the ball. The goalkeeper's feet must be pointed up the field.

Landing is an extremely important issue when diving for a ball. Young goalkeepers have a tendency to dive stomach-first giving a superman impression. This is wrong as it goes against our key factors of having our eyes on, and our body behind, the ball. It can also be very painful.

For a 'collapse' save (for a ball fairly near to the body) it is essential for the goalkeeper to land on his/her side, breaking their fall first with the side of the leg, hip and then shoulder. For a ball further from the keeper's body, the dive will more closely resemble a dive into a swimming pool with the keeper's forearm and then shoulder landing first. Again, in both cases the goalkeeper should then pull the ball in to the body in a controlled fashion, keeping it safely out of the reach of attackers.

As this stage is reached and the coach feels that the goalkeeper work can be incorporated into a team shooting exercise, then the coach should first concentrate on emphasizing the above coaching points to the keeper, while the assistant controls the rest of the team shooting. It is often helpful for the coach to stand behind the net to see things from the goalkeeper's perspective. Remember that all players need to be warmed up properly, especially the goalkeeper, and thus it is advisable to have the players shooting from a longer distance first. Try to encourage the keeper to concentrate in practice as to which foot certain players will use and where they like to shoot. This can help concentration and anticipation in games.

The progression described above can be utilized for a basic warm-up prior to a practice or game.

### **Ball Distribution**

Once the ball is successfully collected and controlled, the goalkeeper must make a quick decision on the method of distribution, whether to roll, throw, pass or kick the ball back into play. **Remember that the keeper is trying to distribute the ball to a teammate in space and in such a way that it is fairly easy to bring down under control.** Most players at this age will be most accurate if they roll, pass or throw the ball. Again, goalkeepers should be encouraged to distribute the ball to the sides of the goal and to try to switch the play to the opposite side from where the pressure (ball) has just come.

#### **Roll:**

Rolling the ball to a team-mate who is fairly close and does not have an opposing player near him involves a motion very similar to bowling. The goalkeeper's feet are usually moving in that direction and the strongest arm provides the rolling force, while the other hand simply helps guide the ball in the appropriate direction.

#### **Throw:**

There is an abundance of different throwing techniques a goalkeeper can use. It is best to expose the young players to all of them and then they will decide which ones they favour. Most frequently seen are the underarm throw, the sidearm slingshot, the baseball pitch and the over arm throw.

The over-arm throws are slightly more difficult for a team-mate to control, so it is vital that the keeper allows for this in looking to see where the nearest member of the opposition is.

This action is similar to a tennis serve, holding the ball in one hand (the strongest serving arm), but the feet are positioned firmly on the ground one foot in front of the other.

#### **Pass:**

Quite regularly in the game these days, one will see a long ball played over the defence that rolls straight to the keeper and the opposition forwards give up the chase. If a keeper has been regularly involved in matches (as most kids have at the younger age groups) then he will have time to control the ball and pass to a teammate in space. This may even be done outside of the penalty area. It is recognized that it is often difficult for a younger player to look up and take a 'snapshot' of where players are before concentrating on the ball, however, a simple call of 'time' by a defender will allow him to relax sufficiently in order to control the ball, look up and pass. If the goalkeeper is attempting to control the ball with his feet, he should try to do this when the ball is not heading directly to his goal! The coach can help the players practice this.

#### **Kick:**

There are times when the players in front of the goalkeeper will all have a member of the opposition fairly close by. The coach can teach his players to move into space, but sometimes a goalkeeper will have to kick the ball. To most easily get a young keeper to do this, get him to hold the ball in both hands, then walk forward after a few steps drop the ball and attempt to kick just after the ball bounces. This technique will set up the desired motion. The keeper must keep the toes of the kicking foot pointed down and remember to follow through the ball as far as possible. This skill requires a lot of practice before it

can be done successfully on a regular basis. The coach should emphasize accuracy before power to start with.

### **Communication & Support**

Undoubtedly the goalkeeper has the best view of the field of play, particularly in his own half. The keeper therefore must be encouraged to communicate with his defenders and midfield players. We have already seen how a defender can make a call of 'time' to his keeper, and in this way the relationship is dynamic and players should be communicating with each other constantly.

This communication should always be **positive**. Constructive analysis must only come from the coach.

As with all game situations, a player who wants to control the ball should call for it, and this is no different for young goalkeepers. They should be encouraged to call 'keeper's ball' for any ball that they feel they can control (both in practice and matches). This is a real safety issue as a player that does not call for a ball he is going towards risks getting run into by another player.

Having every player in practice call for every ball that they want to control, as well as every ball they want to receive from a teammate, gets them learning good habits from an early age. The goalkeeper should learn this too, and also to give instructions for the defence to go wide, come in, or to a specific player to hold position or drop back to cover. This develops trust and will eventually be used to take advantage of the opposing team's weaknesses and break down an attack.