



At the last World Cup we have all been able to enjoy the German goalkeeper Manuel Neuer who without a doubt showed that the position of the goalkeeper and his role on the team has changed dramatically over the last 10-20 years. This is of course due to the rule change in 1994 which made it no longer possible for goalkeepers to pick up a pass back from one of their team mates. This rule change, however was made 20 years ago, and is not the only reason why the role of the goalkeeper has changed so much over the last several years. More teams nowadays focus on a well-developed build up from the back, teams push many players forward to keep the opponents under pressure and the defensive line often plays very high up the pitch. To stay connected with the rest of the team the goalkeeper is now required to step up away from its backline and serve as the last defender or the sweeper keeper. More than 70% of the work goalkeepers do nowadays is done with their feet and not with their hands! Due to all of these changes the role of the goalkeeper has changed and the goalkeeper is now not only a keeper, but a field player that is able to his or her hands.

Although worldwide many goalkeepers have become “goal players” many young goalkeepers in the US are not instructed or trained to include themselves when their team has the ball. This might be because many of the best soccer players the US produced over the years were great goalkeepers (Tony Meola, Brad Friedel, Kasey Keller and Tim Howard) who controlled the 6th yard box. They were, or still are, very athletic goalkeepers who control (or controlled) the 18 and have great shot blocking capabilities. Their qualities as the 11th field player are very limited and when Tim Howard receives a pass back from one of his teammates he plays the ball long more often than not.

The other reason that many coaches neglect to instruct their goalkeepers to be involved is simply because a mistake can cost you a goal. With the focus on the outcome and not on the development of players keeping your goalkeeper away from the ball seems the best solution. Your goalkeeper, however, is so much more than just your last line of defense. Given the situation (goal kick, intercepted ball or pass back from team mate) they are also your first line of offense! Getting your goalkeepers involved during the game isn't easy, but a very important part of their development when playing this vital position.

The WSA has a clear goal in mind when it comes down to developing a playing style. We want it to be a possession oriented style which includes a positive build up from the back. The goal player has a very important role in this process, but players have to be made aware of this. The goal player needs to be capable and confident enough to ask for the back pass and step up away from the goal when his or her team moves up the fields. Their team mates also need to know and understand that they should use the goal player during the buildup.

With the emphasis on player development we as coaches know that the long term goals outweigh the results in the short term. When trying to build up from the back there is a big chance that players will make a mistake every now and then that will cost you a goal. However, if you are clear to your team and the parents in what you want to achieve everybody will understand that this is only a small price to pay and the benefits will be far greater. We want our goal player to support the build up from the back, goal kicks are played short all the time and keepers should be instructed not to punt the ball up the field, but look for options nearby. Keep encouraging your players to pass the ball back and include the goal player even when it goes wrong every so often.

Another benefit from playing with the sweeper keeper besides being able to use them as the 11th (or 8th) field player is that young soccer players are more engaged and involved when they are allowed to step



away from their backline. Too many times coaches fault their goalkeepers for not being engaged enough when they make a mistake. If your team is constantly playing in the opponents half and you are instructed to stay back, on your end line, and watch everything happen from very far out it is very hard to stay connected with the rest of your team. Young players will lose focus easily and feel no part of the game if they are not engaged.

Training your goal player to be a part of the buildup and to stay connected with your team when the ball moves up the pitch is very important. Given the position of the goal player he or she has the best view of the entire playing field. Like all other players on the pitch who gain possession of the ball, goal players also need to be given the opportunity to perceive and analyze game situations. The term goal player is different from the well know term goalkeeper, but shows that this player is not only supposed to defend the goal. He or she is also a big part of the team as a field player. Again, more than 70% of what a goal player does nowadays is done with their feet! When your team is in defense your player in the goal needs to stay connected with his or her backline.

Depending on where the ball is on the field the player in the goal needs to communicate with the backline and move with the play. The further away the ball is from your goal and the more pressure your team puts on the ball the further your goal player steps up the field. The goalplayer always needs to stay connected with his or her team. The player in the goal is not only there to defend the goal, but also to back up the defense. At times your goal player will need to run down passes and long flighted balls that get passed the defenders. By clearing or controlling these balls the goal player can eliminate a dangerous situation and your team can start a promising attack.

When your team is in possession of the ball the player in the net needs to be involved as a field player both inside and outside the 18. Again, your goal player is your last line of defense, but more importantly also your first line of offense. He or she can start the initial attack from the goal with short passes, longer passes or even throwing the ball to a supporting player. Why punt the ball away if you have players open that can receive the ball without a defender near them? He or she should also be available to receive passes from his or her teammates. Given the point of view of a keeper, he or she can easily switch the point of attack. This includes having your goal player take the goal kicks as part of their development in that specific position. Why have another player take the goal kick if you already have somebody in that position that needs to learn how to build from the back through a goal kick?

At a young age players will be given the opportunity to play many different positions to help their overall development as a player. The players are not trained based on specific positions, but given the opportunity to learn and understand the game given the principles of play. Players will gain an understanding of the game in small sided games and eventually start to recognize game situations on a bigger field. Since playing in the goal is a bit different than any other position out on the field it is important that young players are given the opportunity to develop game awareness as a goal player. One doesn't become the sweeper keeper without any training. There are many ways to include your keepers in your practice sessions without having to focus solely on the goal player, but to give players the exposure they need to develop the necessary skills to develop as goal players.

It is important to remember that besides including your goal player in your practice session that they are given the opportunity to develop the skills needed to handle the other 30% of balls, may it be a diving save or a 1v1 with a forward from the opposing team. If there is one position on the field in which specialized training is necessary it is the goalkeeper/ goal player position. Some of these skills take time



to master, requires the keeper to put in a lot of work and it can be very repetitive at times. At U9, U10 and U11 all teams should have several players that can split time in the goal. Although many young players might have the talent to fully focus on the position in the goal no player should specialize that early. To have several players attend specialized training can definitely help your team and players should be encouraged to attend the goalkeeper training.

To make sure that all young goal players are given the opportunity to succeed it is important that we coaches and parents continue to support them. Often, in the eyes of our spectators, the games are won by our fantastic forwards who were able to score a goal or 2, but too often both coaches and parents are very critical of the keepers when “they cost us the game”. To keep players motivated to play in goal they need to know we not only appreciate the work they put in to improve, but also show that we are supportive when they make a mistake. Sadly enough 1 mistake by a keeper can cost us a goal, but many will forget that during that same game the team missed 4 or 5 great opportunities to score a goal. We win as a team and we lose as a team! Make your goal player feel important, support them when they make a mistake and it doesn't hurt to compliment them when they make that 1 amazing save that just won us the game.

By means of this article we hope to make everybody aware of not only of the importance of the position of the goalkeeper (or goalplayer), but also that it is very important to include your goal player in practice when developing a possession orientated style of play. Support your keepers and include them as they are a very important part of your team, not only as your last line of defense, but also as your first line of attack. Goalkeepers or goalplayers are so much more than just players hoping to block a shot from the opposing team. They are a player part of the team just like the other 7 or 10 players out there!

Ruben Vloedgraven

Director of Coaching – Westfield Soccer Association

doc@westfieldnjsoccer.com





WSA Take Aways

- 1) Understand that young players will make mistakes in every position they play in, including your goal players. When players make a mistake in the goal this could be more costly. Always remember that we focus on the long term, player development, and not on the short term goals (the need to win every game).
- 2) Your goal player is your first line of offense and your last line of defense.
- 3) Utilize your goal player during the buildup. He/she can see the entire field of play.
- 4) To successfully use the goal player as a "field player" you need to include your goal player in your practice sessions (either offense or defense), and not just for shooting exercises! When you run a session with the focus on the build up from the back you need to include your goal player as the first line of offense.
- 5) Don't let young players specialize in a position too early, especially goal players. Give players the opportunity to explore the field at U9, U10 and U11.
- 6) Not 1 player will be successful without the support of his/her coaches, parents and players. Young goal players need to be given the opportunity to develop. Making mistakes while playing is a big part of how you develop to become a better player. If we are too hard on young goal players (coaches, parents and team mates) there is a chance that many will lose interest in the position of the goal player.