

# PSYCHE OF THE GOALKEEPER

*Most people live on the earth; I choose to live in it\*. This phrase expresses the psyche of the successful goalkeeper. The goalkeeper is not a superficial position – the athlete must be totally absorbed; mind, body and spirit. When coaching the goalkeeper the approach to training should include not only playing the position (with the full complement of technical and tactical development) but, more importantly, about being the position – the focus, the thick skin, the confidence...the Zen.*

A keeper's ability to focus is essential. While the keeper is not always physically in the game, mentally they must always be there. The goalkeeper must have the ability to maintain concentration and focus even when the game is over one hundred yards away, because one thing is certain, the game will turn and come back, and suddenly there is a rush of energy sweeping their way. A large number of people will be converging on the keeper, some with the intent to score, others looking to regain possession of the ball. Behind all of this is the keeper. Keepers must now upgrade their focus, track the movement of a mass of players, read what is happening, organize, communicate and lead their group, all the while maintaining a focus on the movement of the ball. The ball is being manipulated around the field, but in the back of the keeper's mind it is understood that the ball is coming his/her way, and that he/she will have to zone in on it, in order to regain its possession. The coach's job, then, is to hammer home directly and often the ability to handle all of this stimuli.

When you are coaching "focus", demand the players' attention when you are talking to them. Always put their backs to the sun, keep them in a tight group within your forward field of vision, and ask them to look at you in the eyes. The eyes are the gateway to individual's spirit and when you can exchange looks into each other, the connection is made and growth and learning can result. Reinforce the mentality for keepers to exist in the moment, and when the moment is gone, let it go and re-focus. When training keepers I usually have them focus on two or three actions in a row. I always direct them to go on to the next situation, so that they begin to train their minds to not dwell on what just occurred (good or bad). If you apply this in training, then the keepers will develop the ability to dwell in the moment and go on to the next one without belaboring the situation.

As you coach this "multi-task focus" explain that the keeper's job is a paradox in itself and one that demands a thick skin. On one hand the ball is the keeper's enemy and on the other hand it is his/her ally. A goalkeeper must train with another on the same team with the thought of helping them to be the best they can be, and at the same time compete for the sole possession of the starting job. The position is one of a high-image; keepers dress differently; they get to use their hands; they are highly scrutinized; when they make a mistake, everyone notices it; when they do something great, everyone notices it; but the humdrum of their normal activities can go almost unnoticed. They have to know how to give of themselves and how not to give up. Soccer players who choose to become keepers do so because they love to compete against themselves, as much as they love to compete against others. They need to learn and understand that the position is about the game and the people around them and not themselves – just like any position of leadership. Self-satisfaction comes from giving: working hard to improve their technique; working hard to learn the game; working hard to read various situations; working hard to lead and to organize; working hard to focus; working hard to be confident; working hard to be aware; working hard to turn around and pick the ball out of the net without their psyche breaking down.

It takes the development of "thick skin" for a goalkeeper to handle this type of pressure. Begin developing this "thick skin" immediately. Discuss your approach to coaching with the keepers and be sure that they understand that your criticism is positive and constructive – it is business, not personal. When you correct a player or a person, whether in front of a group or individually, always let them know that you are being constructive, that you want them to learn because you will do everything that you can to help them be the best that they can be. Be honest and open. Be a teacher, not a manipulator. Coaches must go beyond themselves in order to help goalkeepers to

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get beyond themselves. Give the players the tools to overcome your own coaching mistakes and this will help them when they are out there feeling alone, under pressure and everything seems to be breaking down in front of them.

As a coach you often walk a thin line between a kick in the butt or a pat on the back. Too much of either one at the wrong time could result in a loss of player confidence. Often, young keepers are exposed to the position because of their lack of field skills. We all know of the different rates of physical development of kids and too many times a lesser skilled child will be directed to play in the goal, because it might be the area of lesser activity due to the strength of other players on the field. This can be related to the weakest player in a youth baseball game, where the kid is placed in right field because that is the area of least activity. The player becomes bored because balls are rarely hit there and you begin to see them throwing their mitt up in the air and catching it or picking the dandelions. All of a sudden the bases are loaded and here comes a batter who hits that high fly ball to the unprepared fielder - grand slam, the team loses, and the fielder takes the blame. My question becomes: Can you expect a young mind to respond to a situation if that person has not been exposed to it in training? Do you kick their butt or pat them on the back? Prepare the players properly and completely and this will give them confidence.

If a player wants to play the goalie position, hold on to them. If a player decides not to play the position anymore, let it be on their own accord, not because they were driven from it. Everyone is going to reach their own potential as a keeper and as a person in general. A coach should help a keeper to reach his/her potential and to grow in a positive manner and this will result in a carry-over into life experiences. It is very important to build a player's confidence, because confidence is the foundation of leadership – a cornerstone of the position.

*When playing Soccer, you quickly realize that the goalkeeper has the most involved position in the game. Therefore a keeper is to be the best of the best. Make sure that your keepers feel that way and they will be able to handle a seeming failure or a mistake, as well as properly handling the feeling of success. Developing the psyche of the position and mastering it goes well beyond the game. A strong mental and spiritual foundation and a finely tuned body, coupled with the ability to focus on command, the ability to develop a thick skin and the ability to display confidence and leadership will give your keepers the tools to be able to handle the demands of the position. When this is achieved then the result is learning at the highest level.*

(\*Paraphrase of: John Muir) (References: Coaching Psychology, ODP GK Curriculum, Blodgett-GK Coaching)