

Goalkeeping...When is the right time?

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The position of goalkeeper is a very specialized and important position. The goalkeeper is the **KEEPER** of the **GOAL**. **The GOAL**...where the players are focused...where the coaches are focused...where the referees are focused ...where the spectators are focused...the soccer stage (so-to-speak). This is the place where success is measured by a save made or a goal scored...two of the most exciting moments in our game! *A Pressure Pot... That's putting it lightly!*

Let's take a look at what it takes to be a goalkeeper. The personality characteristics of a player who takes on the responsibilities of the goalkeeper include:

- Calmness
- Focus
- Courage
- Intelligence
- Patience
- Confidence
- Mentally strength
- Resilience

The physical characteristics of the player who takes on the responsibilities of the goalkeeper include:

- Quickness
- Agility
- Flexibility
- Strength
- Skill (catching, throwing, punting)

Let's take a look at the typical U5, U6, U7 and U8 player...do they exhibit these characteristics? Close your eyes and picture a player at one of these ages. We are talking about a nursery school kid, kindergarten kid, 1st or 2nd grader?

Let's take a look at what a U8 player looks like mentally, physically and socially.

Mentally:

- short attention span
- still love to use their imagination
- limited ability to attend to more than one task at a time
- beginning to solve simple problems (pass to a teammate)
- some understanding of time and space relations

Physically: *beginning* to develop physical coordination
pace regulation is improved
skeletal system is growing
cardiovascular system is less efficient than an adults'
catching skills are not developed
better at kicking and dribbling
love to run, jump, fall and roll

Socially: self-concept and body image are beginning to develop
sensitive...dislike personal failure in front of peers
negative comments from adults and peers carry great weight
limited experience with personal evaluation
inclined more toward cooperative activities
inclined to establish and cooperate with friends
desire social acceptance; want everyone to like them

Based on this educational information, U5, U6 and U7 children are certainly less developed in all of these categories than U8 children. Therefore, positioning a U5-U8 child in the goal during the game is **counter-productive!**

Why?

Typically, when we position a child, at any one of these ages (or for that matter, at U9 and U10), in the goal, they tend to stand there, uninvolved in the play, until that crucial moment, when the opponents and their own team are all traveling toward them. Then, they stand on their goal line, not quite sure what to do as the mass of players approaches. This *can be and is* very stressful for a young child. Everyone in the park is focused on the GOAL as this situation is unfolding, much more so than any other area of the field (the Soccer Stage). More coaching is directed at *the little one* minding the GOAL, because he/she must stop the other team from scoring!

U8 players are not ready physically or mentally to dive for a ball in the middle of the pack! I liken it to heading a ball. When are children ready to head a ball? When they physically can tighten (flex) their upper body, tighten their neck, arch their body and explosively drive their upper forehead through the ball!

“Provide goalkeeper training”, you say!

Goalkeeper training is at a **premium** at the older ages, where and when players are at a sufficient physical and mental development stage to handle the position and their responsibility to protect the goal. If we struggle to provide consistent, quality goalkeeper training at the older ages, what makes you think that a sufficient amount of time could be devoted to goalkeeper training at the U8 age level?

But, honestly, this is not the most important point. The important point is...we, as player developers, must get our young players comfortable with the ball at their feet so that later on in their career, when they are playing in the goalkeeper position, they can be a confident part of the attacking action (i.e. back passes from teammates, starting the attacking action, playing as a field player, etc.).

“It’s not the game without a goalkeeper” you say!

Who’s game? The adult’s game or the kid’s game. We, as coaches and teachers in the youth soccer world, are trying to develop confident, creative soccer players. We want them to be savvy in defending and attacking. Field players have to defend better when there is NO goalkeeper minding their goal. There is more opportunity to take chances to score goals without a goalkeeper minding the goal. All of the players on the field must be involved in the physical and technical aspects of the game (running, kicking, dribbling and defending) as field players.

“Should we work on the physical and technical skills of the goalkeeper at the U5-U8 age level?” you ask!

YES! Include FUN activities that introduce catching & throwing the ball to the coach and teammates. Include a training session on basic goalkeeping for every member of the team. Remember...kids at these ages love to roll and fall on the ground...they just aren’t ready for the pressure, stress physical & mental demands of the position in the game on Saturday!

When is the Right Time?

When the players are physically, intellectually (mentally) and emotionally ready to handle the position! **Physically**, U9/U10 players are coordinated and agile enough to handle the basic goalkeeping skills of catching, throwing, punting and diving. We say that the dawn of tactics (decision making part of the game) is at the U9/U10 age level. **Intellectually** (mentally) and **with training**, they can attend to more than one task at a time and process information appropriately to anticipate action (i.e. judging the trajectory and path of a shot on goal; timing their approach to an opponent on a break-away, etc.). **Emotionally**, even though they are in the Pressure Pot position (on the Soccer Stage), they can handle some of the criticism from coaches, teammates and spectators that is a natural outcome of the stress of the game (Winning!). This criticism can come in an indirect manner (negative body language) or in a direct manner (negative comments).

The Most Important Position

In my opinion, the position of Goalkeeper is the most important position on the field. The goalkeeper is the last defender and the first attacker in a crucial area of the soccer pitch (the Soccer Stage). The position deserves the **respect of its importance!** Goalkeepers must be nurtured...developed gradually and age appropriately in a quality training environment. The environment must prepare them for the physical, mental and emotional demands and pressures of the game.

Next Article in the Goalkeeper Series

Appropriate Training Environment for U9 & U10 Goalkeepers