

WHY NO GOALIES



Sam Snow, U.S. Youth Soccer had the following interaction with a coach in Florida not long ago:

Sam, can you send me some good articles or a comment on why we should play without goalies at U-8? I am trying to influence a club to change to this format.

The U-8 age group is still in an egocentric phase of psychological development, which tells us that we should allow these children to run and chase the ball, to be in the game – not waiting at the end of the field for the game to come to them. It is more important at this age that they chase the game. Children this age want to play with the toy (the ball) and they need to go to where the toy is to be fully engaged.

Consider also this passage from the Ajax youth development plan: *“It is typical for the 8 to 10 age group that each child plays for himself rather than combining with the others. In addition, children move towards the ball and not away from it, and are inclined to play the ball forward and not to the side or backwards.”*

Emotionally, a 7 year old cannot make the distinction between himself the goalkeeper and himself the child. So when a goal is scored, and all of the adults groan out loud, he blames himself for the goal being scored. It’s no wonder then that they begin to shy away from playing in goal.

Please remember that visual tracking acuity is not fully developed until around age 10. This visual ability impacts a person’s capacity to track a moving object over a long distance or when in the air. This is one of the physiological reasons we wait until the U-10 age group to introduce the position of goalkeeper.

In conclusion, here is a pertinent section from the US Youth Soccer Player Development Model:

Why no keeper until U-10?

Here is the Position Statement of the 55 State Association technical directors on the position of goalkeeper:

“We believe goalkeepers should not be a feature of play at the U-6 and U-8 age groups. All players in these age groups should be allowed to run around the field and chase the toy – the ball. For teams in the U-10 and older age groups, goalkeepers should become a regular feature of play. However, young players in the U-10, U-12 and U-14 age groups should not begin to specialize in any position at this time in their development.”

The analysis of most soccer experts is that small-sided games for young children are most beneficial for learning basic motor skills, basic rules and the fundamental concepts of the game. They also learn how to interact with their peers within a game involving a ball. What is not supported is the use of goalkeepers in this format. Children want to run, kick the ball and score goals. Every child should experience the triumph and success of scoring a goal. They don’t do well when told to stand in one place. If the action is at the other end of the field, a young goalkeeper will find some other activity to hold his or her attention.

Young children have great difficulty visually tracking moving objects, especially if they are in the air. Most children younger than 10 are very reactionary in their movement behavior and will duck or throw hands in front of the face if the ball comes toward the head. Anticipating where the ball might be played is a skill that has not yet developed and that does not really develop until age 9 or 10. Prior to age 9, visual tracking acuity is not fully developed. Players have difficulty accurately tracking long kicks or the ball above the ground. Beginning at approximately age 10, one’s visual tracking acuity achieves an adult pattern.

Striking the ball at a small target accurately is a challenge for all children. Goalkeepers restrict the opportunities to score goals to a select few players. Young children stuck in goal will not develop goalkeeping skills and are more likely to get hit with the ball than actually save it.

It is important to wait until children are better able—physically, mentally and emotionally—to handle the demands of being a goalkeeper. There are no goalkeepers in the 3v3 and 4v4 format through age 8; goalkeeping is then introduced in the 6v6 format beginning at age 9. This still allows plenty of time for children to grow up and be the best goalkeepers they can be. Thus most likely keeping them engaged in playing soccer for many years to come. Once players take on the goalkeeper role, they tend to grow in the position through three general stages. Those stages are shot blocker, shot stopper and finally goalkeeper.

The shot blocker stage is one where the goalkeeper simply reacts to shots after they have been taken. He or she tries to get into position to make saves and this is sometimes merely blocking a shot and not making a clean catch. The attacking role of the shot blocker is usually just a punt of the ball downfield.

At the shot stopper stage, a player has progressed to not only making saves after a shot is taken but also being able to anticipate shots. With this improved ability to read the game, the shot stopper gets into better positions to make saves and begins to stop shots from being taken in the first place. The shot stopper now comes out on through balls and collects them before a shot is taken. The shot stopper also cuts out crosses before opponents can get to the ball. The shot stopper comes out in one-on-one situations and takes the ball off the attacker's feet. The shot stopper can deal with the ball both before and after a shot is made. Distribution with some tactical thought on the attack is also developing for the shot stopper.

The goalkeeper stage is the complete package. The goalkeeper is highly athletic and physically fit. The goalkeeper is mentally tough, composed and confident. The goalkeeper has the full set of skills for the role to both win the ball (defending techniques) and to distribute the ball (attacking techniques). A full-fledged goalkeeper is indeed the last line of defense and the first line of attack. A goalkeeper not only makes saves but contributes to the attack with tactical and skillful distribution of the ball. The goalkeeper is physically and verbally connected to the rest of the team no matter where the ball is on the field. A first-rate goalkeeper is mentally involved in the entire match and is therefore physically ready when the time comes to perform.

Thank you, I believe we have success. This one is for the kids. I am here to tell you all the tact and education in the world, won't keep some from wanting to hang me high. I informed them of the rule. I suggested they should change. I thought a compromise could help lead them in the right direction, at least. I included our rules committee chair into the matter. I forwarded her response, because the board wanted to know if it was mandatory. While I was awaiting her response I sent Sam's response along. I also included my District Commissioner in the matter. I had her full support. Ultimately this was the board's decision. Tonight the registrar told me she's making two more teams and moving to this format. The one argument I heard was this was a progressive club and they wanted to be able to train goalies in prep for U-10 competition. They may hate me but, the kids win. All is good.

The logic that one needs to have the U-8 age group play goalkeeper in order to be prepared for the introduction of the position at U-10 is flawed. By the same unfounded logic, we should have 14-year-olds drive cars in preparation for when they are actually allowed to do so at age 16. If we allow this encroachment mentality to take hold, rather than showing adult patience and long-term development perspective, then the club would soon have keepers at U-6 in preparation for U-8 which they mean to actually be in preparation for when the position is introduced at U-10. Furthermore it tells me that the adults involved underestimate the children's ability to learn the new skills and concepts of play when they move into the U10 age group. Why does the club lack faith in its own players?

This is a classic slippery slope. The approach is also indicative of a mindset of children's soccer being a spectator sport for the adults; which it is not! Youth soccer is for the players, not the spectators. If the spectators want the thrill of a sporting spectacle then go watch a MLS, WPS or college match.