

## CLOSE THE GAP

The National Football Leagues commenced with a bang last Saturday evening with some scintillating games and intriguing results. There were wins for Carlow, Limerick and Cork as well as a comprehensive win for my native County Armagh which now sets them up well for a promotional push for the top division, although the work for that has only begun. There were also draws for Derry against Leitrim, Donegal against Mayo, as well as the tie of the weekend, old adversaries and a repeat of last year's All-Ireland Final, Kerry against Dublin.

In this latest instalment of the age-old rivalry, a titanic battle ensued for superiority. And as always in this heavyweight pairing the intensity and ferocity of the action was a sight to behold. Skill, athleticism, finesse, work ethic and ruthlessness were all on show right until the shrill sound of the final whistle.

There were many highlights and indeed many incidents that contributed to the final score of the game. Brian Fenton showed a masterclass in midfield play taking full advantage of Kerry's weakened midfield selection scoring four great points, David Clifford was involved with nearly every attacking move that Kerry had as well as chipping in with some defensive duties all the while scoring a goal and three points. Both Dean Rock and Sean O'Shea showcased their free-taking abilities scoring 1-6 and 0-5 from the dead ball respectively.

But, for me, none of the above ingredients had more of an impact on the final score of the game than the save made by Kerry goalkeeper Shane Ryan in the 38<sup>th</sup> minute. With the absence of Stephen Cluxton there was a feeling of reduced spotlight being placed onto the goalkeeper position as whenever he plays the position is discussed and focussed on more, especially in the pre-game analysis. This time it simply wasn't the case.

Dublin led Kerry 1-10 to 1-09 at half-time. We have become accustomed to this Dublin team re-entering the fray after the interval with real impetus and ramping up their intensity levels. It has now become an integral trait to this Dublin team to score goals in the third quarter of games immediately after half-time. In the 38<sup>th</sup> minute, with the game locked at 1-10 apiece, Dublin claimed an advanced mark on the cusp Kerry 45m line. The ball got played diagonally across field and after a well worked piece of attacking play Dublin were in on goal.

The Sixth Principle of my Eleven Goalkeeping Principles that I teach is called "Close the Gap," and it deals with whenever a goalkeeper is in a one-on-one situation with an attacker. The Principle states:

“Close down attackers through on goal as early as possible. If you can, anticipate the final pass to the attacker who will be through on goal and time your advance accordingly. When rushing the attacker always ensure you move ‘In the Line and Down the Line’ of the shot to ensure you ‘Take the Space’ of the attacker getting as close to them as you can before a shot is taken.

Rushing the attacker like this hurries their decision making, changing its nature from logical to impulsive, giving you the advantage. Once you engage the attacker do not back off or retreat into your goals until they have passed the ball on or have been dispossessed.”

As soon as Kerry goalkeeper, Shane Ryan, reads the last Dublin pass he advances to meet the attacker before he even collects the ball. He moves Into the Line of the shot and moves Down the Line of the shot to close the attacker.

By the time the Dublin player receives the ball, turns and looks for goal, Ryan has already ‘Closed the Gap’ between him and the attacker down to 2-3 yards. This decreases the decision-making time of the attacker and thus forces him to turn back onto his other foot. Ryan holds his ground and anticipates the shot to come allowing the forward to shoot. The attacker shoots and Ryan, having done the hard work already, makes a good save and Kerry come away with the ball.

With the game tied at 1-10 apiece and Dublin’s tendency to focus on this game quarter for a scoring spree, this save in no uncertain terms stemmed that tide and from here Kerry built up a lead that they would hold onto up until the closing stages of the game. Again, for me this save was the pivotal incident of the game. Yes there was plenty of action and drama still to unfold by the end of the game, but, if Dublin had of converted this score for the three points, I feel it would have buoyed them into pushing on and claiming the two points in a comfortable fashion.

It was a fantastic example of my Sixth Goalkeeping Principle and one that I shared on social media during the game itself. For any situation when an attacker is through on goal in a one-on-one situation it is critical for the goalkeeper to get themselves as close to the attacker as possible before the shot is taken by keeping themselves In the Line of the shot and move Down the Line of the shot to gain close proximity to the shooter.

Once you are close to the shooter the aim is to force them into a hurried or panicked shot giving you the greater advantage to make the save. By staying on your goal-line or not reducing the ‘gap’ between you and the shooter enough will only give the advantage to the shooter meaning the shooter still has enough options to allow them to hold the balance of power in this situation. If you want to ensure you gain the advantage in your one-on-one situations always, always, **CLOSE THE GAP!**