

DON'T FEAR THE 'KEEPER!!

In the 1968 Olympics Games in Mexico City, the final of the men's high jump event took place on Sunday 20th October. As the athletes competed and vied for their ultimate Olympic goal by the end of the event only three competitors remained. Valertin Gavrilov of the Soviet Union, Ed Caruthers from the United States and his fellow countryman Richard "Dick" Fosbury. When Gavrilov failed to clear 2.20metres it left the two Americans to battle it out for the Gold medal. The bar was raised to 2.24 metres. Caruthers narrowly missed clearing the bar gently brushing it off its perch with his last attempt. Fosbury claimed the Gold medal by clearing the 2.24 metres on his final attempt. To finish the event, Fosbury made three unsuccessful attempts at the then World Record of 2.29 metres.

That day was special day for the men's high jump event and indeed for the sport as a whole. This was the night that the 'Fosbury Flop' was unveiled onto the world's stage. Dick Fosbury had developed his own technique of running up to the bar at speed, once close to the bar jumping upwards thrusting with his outside foot (right) while also twisting his body to ensure that he flew over the bar head first with his back to the bar.

The genius of Fosbury's new revolutionary technique was that it allowed the athlete to bend their back around the bar at the peak of their jump causing the athlete's body to clear the bar while their centre of mass travelled underneath the bar. Before Fosbury's technique most of the elite high jumpers would have used the Straddle Technique, the Western Roll, the Eastern Cut-Off and/or the Scissors Jump. All of these previously used techniques involved the athlete landing on their feet because previous landing surfaces were either sandpits or low piles of matting. Whenever deeper/thicker matting types were introduced it allowed the athletes to experiment with different landing techniques.

By the mid-1970s, Dick Fosbury's technique had completely revolutionised sport to the extent that practically all of the top high jumpers were only using his new style. Basically, the Fosbury Flop had rendered all other previously used techniques obsolete and is now the only technique used globally in competition.

At approximately 9.39pm in Croke Park Dublin, Motion Six was passed through congress by a 62% vote (60% threshold). The motion states "A defender who receives the ball from a kickout cannot pass the ball back to the goalkeeper."

Modern day Gaelic football goalkeepers have evolved so much over the past twenty years. Up until the 1990s, goalkeepers were basically netminders duty bound to guard their goalmouth and then launch kickout after kickout as far down the field as they possibly could. The skill sets of these goalkeepers lay dormant restricted by the creativity of the game strategists of the time. Then in the mid-1990s came the coaching boom. The GAA pumped vast amounts of funding into coaching both in development and creation of more professionalised structures with the purpose of improving our games.

As a result of this, our games developed and as our games developed, the players developed also. With the evolution of Gaelic Games came the evolution of the Gaelic footballer and this of course included the goalkeeper. We have been blessed this last fifteen years watching possibly the greatest Gaelic football goalkeeper ever in Stephen Cluxton. The man who has revolutionised the goalkeeping position in Gaelic football. This has led to the position becoming more and more appealing to the younger generations growing up resulting in the emergence of the next generation of goalkeepers like Rory Beggan (Monaghan), Shaun Patton (Donegal), Niall Morgan (Tyrone), Shane Ryan (Kerry), Blaine Hughes (Armagh), Graham Brody (Laois).

All of these goalkeepers have again helped to revolutionise the goalkeeping position and again they have a massive positive influence on the young Gaels who grow up wanting to become a top custodian just like their heroes. The expected skill set of all goalkeepers has now grown to include carrying the ball out of defence, free-taking, scoring from open play, sweeper keeper, marking attackers and becoming a quarter-back on Restarts. When the funding was allocated to coaching to improve our games and improve our players, did no-one think to understand that the game would ultimately change.

Whenever Dick Fosbury performed his revolutionary technique it of course looks unorthodox, it went against every technique that had been used before and I'm sure that for the crowd as a spectacle it took time to get used to like anything new will. The technique influenced both the then current elite performers which in turn influenced the next generation of high jumpers who continued with the evolution of their sport. The Olympic community did not see fit to draw up motions to restrict/curtail the spread or use of the Fosbury Flop but instead embraced it and allowed it to flourish.

Over the past five years the biggest and most frequent rule changes have been inclusive of the goalkeeping position, mostly centring around the area of Restarts in Gaelic football. In both soccer and our beloved Hurling, teams have been adopting short restart strategies with defenders in both codes either standing on the edge/sides of the 18yard area(soccer) or getting open inside their own 45m line (hurling) respectively. No motions or rule changes to curb this have been introduced and the evolution of the goalkeeper in these two sports has been embraced.

For me, and many other of the goalkeeping fraternity, the issue with this rule change has nothing to do with it being restrictive of the goalkeeper. The problem and what cause the biggest frustration and outrage is that the change is uncalled for and does nothing to improve the overall game as a whole. People claiming that the rule will force the goalkeeper to go long and create more contests are incorrect. I'm still actively playing for my club and I will still be playing short restarts and if I decide to play the ball long it certainly will not be into a 50/50 contest but to the advantage of my teammate so they can collect the ball unopposed.



I try to keep my column for coaching and always want to keep away from the internal politics of the GAA because with any opinion you will always offend someone and sooner or later, at some stage you will have offended everyone. My father told me that. So, my message today is for all of those young Gaels wanting or thinking of becoming a goalkeeper. The position should by no means be seen as the Grim Reaper of Gaelic football. It is a fantastic position to play and one that requires a high level of diverse skills. So please, please take some advice from the band Blue Oyster Cult and **“DON'T FEAR THE 'KEEPER!!”**