

GET YOUR FEET RIGHT

Whenever I am coaching, one of the most common questions I am asked is 'what is the most important aspect of being a goalkeeper?' My answer is always the same. There is no, one aspect that is more significant than any other as mastery of the position needs a competent level of ability in all goalkeeping skills. The one area that would be ever-present within all other aspects of goalkeeping would be the *FEET*. For me, good footwork is a vital part of being a goalkeeper and to play at the highest level possible having excellent footwork becomes essential.

Many manual and alternative therapies hail the feet as the gateway to the body especially as they are the foundations upon which the body stands. This means that whatever happens to the feet will undoubtedly have a knock-on effect to everything above them. With this in mind, it is very easy to see that everything a goalkeeper does begins with the feet. Whether it is diving, catching, kicking, recovering, closing attackers, positioning or even decision making; all are initiated by or heavily involve the feet.

One of the very first things I look for when observing goalkeepers for the first time is how good their footwork is. As it is heavily involved in so much a 'keeper does, it gives a general picture of what level a goalkeeper is currently at as well as being a good indicator of how much work may be required to help the goalkeeper improve.

The most basic of areas that the feet are involved in is the stance of the goalkeeper. Once the opposition is on the attack, no matter the field position, most goalkeepers will engage their '*SET*' position. It is this position that is the fundamental stance for all my other goalkeeping principles to feed off.

The main components of the set position have the goalkeeper on the 'balls' of their feet with knees slightly bent, their bodyweight is also slightly forward bending at the waist and their hands are out towards the ball wherever they feel most comfortable. It is essential that the goalkeeper is on the balls of their feet to not catch themselves flat-footed during play.

Being on the balls of the feet permits the goalkeeper to be nimbler and allows them to move far more easily around their goalmouth. For a goalkeeper, being able to position themselves with ease or reposition themselves quickly when caught out of position is critical. Increasing this area can include the use of plyometrics, S.A.Q. (Speed Agility Quickness) training, speed ladders, speed hurdles and/or specific positioning exercises to work on footwork.

From the set position goalkeepers can also propel themselves into any save they may need to make during games. Already '*on their toes*,' it is important for a 'keeper to take one last step towards any shot in order to reduce the angle, which further increases their chances of making the save. So it is clear to see all dives/saves begin *feet first* with this step towards the ball and if this is not already in your diving technique it is important that you begin to train this into your diving technique as soon as you can.

Catching or dealing with high balls played into the goalmouth are another area where 'keepers need to be well trained. Again, beginning from the set position the 'keeper must judge the flight of the ball, resisting the urge to rush out once the ball is played, carefully positioning themselves into the best position for them to attack the ball. This means waiting for the ball to make its downward descent and when attacking the ball, the 'keeper, strides into the catch using two to three steps with the last being upward to propel them to the ball trying to catch it at the highest point possible.

One of the most frequently used skills during games by a goalkeeper is kicking (striking the ball with the feet). Obvious or not the feet play an important role when kicking the football and if you read last week's article '*Kick Your Habit!*' it is not just the strike that is important. How you approach the ball, the foot plant, where the feet are placed right through to how the striking foot completes the kicking technique are hugely important for successful kicking.

The pace and intensity of the modern game has vastly increased over the decades of the GAA. Nowadays a 'keeper needs to make hundreds of split-second decisions, actions and non-actions reacting, sometimes anticipating, to developing play in real time. Therefore, a goalkeeper needs to be able to '*think on their feet*' to keep up with or ahead of the play. This means the 'keeper's brain and their feet must be in-sync with one another. When a goalkeeper's feet cannot stay with the speed of their decision making, they appear slow, clumsy and cumbersome whereas a 'keeper who has superb footwork appears graceful, agile and nimble. Thus, speeding up your footwork increases the speed at which your decision-making can function.

All goalkeepers are fallible and at one time or another they all make mistakes. Some mistakes are small and insignificant, but others can be catastrophically costly, so when mistakes do happen it is important to '*clear your feet*' and move on either by physically or metaphorically clearing the dirt off your feet. Take what learning you can, but most times when mistakes are made it is because some aspect of the feet was not right.

The repertoire of the modern-day goalkeeper continues to grow exponentially, with more and more new skills, abilities and tactics involving the 'keeper being explored year-on-year. Having said that, the fact still remains that at the heart of all these developments is competent footwork and without it no other aspects of your goalkeeping will function correctly. So, make sure to '***Get Your Feet Right!***'