

SELF-TAUGHT IS BEST TAUGHT

Over my football career I have played in many positions. From defence to forwards I have experienced playing in every position possible on the field. In my later years from U16 up to Senior I played at midfield until I was twenty-four at which time I took a four-year sabbatical from football. When I returned to football, I was asked back to cover the then current Senior goalkeeper my club the Armagh Harps. Only having played in goal at school level and Armagh Minor level in 2001, my experience was not of a high level and I had never really received any goalkeeping coaching over the years leaving my knowledge of the position rather limited.

The Harps sourced me a goalkeeping coach from within the club. A gentleman called Malachy McCoy who had played in goals himself as well as outfield. He had played in goal for Armagh and believe it or not Derry. We struck up a good understanding straight away and the two of us would regularly create and source various drills and exercises in order to improve my ability. Malachy allowed me to choose the direction I wanted to go in with regards to my goalkeeping and he would assist with the coaching we would do at training. Malachy has an exceptional coaching eye and has the ability to spot flaws in a goalkeeper's technique that I would regularly miss so this meant that anything I didn't see he had covered.

I also put a lot of time and effort into thinking about how exactly I wanted to play as a goalkeeper and tried to incorporate my game around what I knew were my strengths as well as trying to protect/compensate for my areas that needed more training. This is when I invented my Eleven Goalkeeping Principles. From here I became a self-taught goalkeeper, a student of the game and set out to try and master my goalkeeping craft.

My advice to all goalkeepers reading this would be to take responsibility of your own game and take charge of your training by becoming a student of your craft. Research game related drills and exercises that you think you can use to make yourself better. Be creative in your thinking and always look to other sports for inspiration as many sports are interrelated in their application.

The more knowledge you can gain about your position from a varied number of credible sources will mean that your understanding of how you ultimately want to play as a goalkeeper will improve. The key point to remember here is that when you read or experience different coaching viewpoints about certain goalkeeping training or techniques, there is no right and wrong answers. What one coach tells you to do is not more correct over any other. What you must do, as the goalkeeper, is try the things you have been taught and see what works best for you. Finding what feels most comfortable for you is what inevitably leads you to growing your own goalkeeping style.

You may find that advice from one coach works. You might find that advice from another works better or you might find that a combination of what both coaches told you feels more comfortable for you. You may even find that neither of what the two coaches told you will work for you and creating your own technique/style may be the best option.

So be open to advice from as many coaches/goalkeepers as possible and use their advice to develop your own style that you feel comfortable with.

It is said that experience is the best teacher and whenever it comes to goalkeeping nothing could be truer. When looking for inspiration for creating new drills or game related exercises the first place I look is games that I have played in. Usually the Tuesday night training session after a Sunday match will have drills that will have been created from any goals or goal chances that were created by the opposition during the weekend game. The other keepers, Malachy and I will set up the exercise to recreate what happened and we will all methodically discuss what happened and what could be done better to ensure the most favourable outcome. What this does is create a mental log of what to do if that situation arises again.

An example of this would be the County final of 2017 in which we defeated Maghery by four points. In the dying minutes of the game I pulled off a game winning save to deny Maghery a comeback. We discussed Maghery's tactics as a goalkeeping group and found that for the last five minutes of each half they would flood the box with their tall players and drop highball into them for flick-ons. This reaped dividends for them in both games they played against Crossmaglen as well as one or two others en route to the final. For the two weeks leading up to the final we recreated this scenario with our own tall players as well as creating flick-on drills with different coloured balls and doing the drill with our eyes closed to recreate the difficulty.

That two weeks of practice resulted in that magnificent save and although all spectators were in awe of the save, it is one that I had made at least five hundred times before that night and due to the repetition became more instinctive than spectacular. I remember thinking to myself that the ball was in but then my body reacted without thinking to keep it out.

For any goalkeeper to progress as much as they can, it is vital for them to better themselves without relying solely on their coach to make them improve. Becoming a student of the goalkeeping craft is what is required for anyone looking to reach the top levels of their ability. For goalkeeping knowledge and experience gives you the power to grow on and off the field. With this in mind, always remember **'Self-Taught Is Best Taught!'**