

LEVEL SEVEN: GOALKEEPERS AGE 32+

This week's article focuses on our final stage within my Levelled Progression Model. Up to this edition we have discussed the 'Formative' levels (1-4), the 'Functional' levels (5 & 6) and now we will discuss the 'Future' level, so called because it will highlight the stage of a goalkeeper's career that deals with their retirement from playing and what they should consider post-playing. The seventh level of my Levelled Progression Model is called:

LEVEL 7: GOALKEEPERS AGED 32+

This is an area in Gaelic football, as a whole, that is seriously neglected and needs a rejuvenated approach. That is not to say that there are clubs and counties that do already provide excellent post-playing mentorship for players but for the majority of teams I feel this is lacking compared to other sports. During the Alex Ferguson era at Manchester United, he would advise players to have contingency plans in place in case the worst should happen i.e. – career ending injuries.

He would advise players to get their coaching badges while still playing so they could move straight into coaching after they stopped playing. If a player had no interest in coaching, then he would advise them to put their efforts into something that would provide an income for them whether it be business ventures or partnerships. He would always ensure that every player had something to take on after their playing days had ended.

Without having something time consuming in their lives after retiring from playing, the goalkeeper will find that they have an enormous amount of time to fill in regard to the pitch, gym and match day sessions that they used to attend on a weekly basis. With so much time on their hands the goalkeeper will find it hard to function and may even lose their sense of purpose with no goals or targets set for them to achieve. If/when this happens it is called 'football depression' whereby so much time has now been freed up, friendships with teammates become more distant or more work to upkeep so much so that the 'keeper may experience feelings of loneliness, rejection, worthlessness and/or neglect. This is why it is important to have something positive to focus their energy into when they quit playing.

At this stage of their career the goalkeeper will have entered into their peak years, usually beginning 28-32, as the goalkeeper learns how to use their experience to optimal effect. It is the vast years of experience that creates a goalkeeper's peak because now they have experienced every possible situation, they could face enough times to have developed effective responses for each. The experience the goalkeeper develops also makes up for inevitable losses in physical abilities although by training smarter more than training harder, the goalkeeper could delay this regression of ability.

With this in mind it will also be vitally important for the goalkeeper to ensure that they recover properly after every session and match including gym sessions as well as putting a concerted effort in maintaining or increasing their suppleness. By concentrating on their recovery properly it will help them avoid those unwanted niggles and injuries. If injuries do happen it will be important for the goalkeeper adhere to all rehab protocols to the letter if they want to return fully functional both in ability and mechanically.

As the goalkeeper gets older their playing time may reduce so it will be important for the goalkeeper to appreciate the games, they get to perform in. At this stage the goalkeeper needs to enjoy the game as much as possible as they move ever closer to their final game. They may even find themselves playing more for the second team in their final year[s] and again enjoy every minute as much as possible as the fact is it will be missed once gone.

Now as a more senior member of the squad, the goalkeeper can take on more of a mentoring role especially for the younger goalkeepers joining the team. It is a chance for the 'keeper to pass on their years of experience to the younger members of the team as well as being a strong voice within the dressing room helping the management to keep the team on their collective goals. By utilising the leadership qualities that are learned from playing in the position, the goalkeeper can lead by example for other team members to follow.

Once any player begins to cross the 'thirty' barrier, they will begin having thoughts of the closing stages of their career. Slight as they may be, it is only normal for a goalkeeper to think about their future and this, for me, is where club/county teams need to become more involved. Again, there are a few teams that already have good systems in place to deal with players coming to the end of their careers in terms of assisting them with their post-playing direction.

But more and more teams need to look at this area and implement some form of system to help their players who are in this stage of their career. Whether it be encouraging them to attain their coaching badges and giving them coaching roles within the club or training them in the administration side of running a club/county team[s], there is nothing to stop the players being trained during their playing careers so that they can move straight into a coaching/administration role immediately after retiring from playing.

If the goalkeeper does have any feelings of becoming a coach, it would be better to gain coaching experience during their playing days and they could begin by coaching the underage goalkeepers at their own club to start them off. As well as this, the goalkeeper will need to further their understanding of the game by utilising coaching literature as well as attending as many coaching courses/conferences as they can. This will provide them with a massive positive outlet for their post-playing days.

It will be vital for the goalkeeper to have their own plan for whenever they decide to stop playing. The plan will need to account for all the extra time the 'keeper will have and look to fill that time with positive influences. They may want to pursue some personal goals that they may have had on hold during their footballing career, things like home improvements, family/relationship goals or even some travel plans that had not been finished. The 'keeper may also have had some business goals placed on hold until retirement like a business expansion or growth if self-employed, targeting a promotion if employed or even returning to education to train or retrain in a certain field.

After retiring from football, it will present a fantastic opportunity for the goalkeeper to continue any current hobbies they may have as well as allowing them to chance to learn those new hobbies they may have always wanted to learn but had been deprioritised due to football. Sport for the goalkeeper will become more recreational in nature and they may even take up new sports or go back to previous sports they had played either in school or in the community.

Ultimately, it will be the goalkeeper's decision when they would like to retire from the game, and it is certainly not an easy decision to make. For this reason, it is very important that the retiring goalkeeper gives thought to preparing for their coming retirement and more specifically design a retraining plan or life plan for what they intend to do after hanging up their gloves. Post-playing will always leave a great void in the goalkeeper's schedule and it is very important for them to have planned accordingly for this to ensure they have a positive physical, psychological and spiritual conclusion to their playing career.