Chapter Nine
The Goalie – “le gardien de but”
As excerpted from: “Craig Wilson’s Guide to Water Polo Goalkeeping, 1995”

From the very beginning, goal keepers were special. They had to be big, strong and fearless. They needed to be able to hold their breath underwater for long periods. But, they did not need to be a great swimmer. For the majority of the game, goalies could hang on the wall and watch their teammates slug it out with the opponents. On the rare occasions the ball came near, they had the pleasure of trying to drown the ball carrier.

In the early 1880's the Scots put up rugby goal posts about 10 feet wide at the end of the pool to minimize the scoring area. With this innovation came a rule that permitted the goalkeeper to defend the goal from the pool deck. Goalies prevented goals simply by jumping on the victims. They would wait for the opponent to arrive with the ball and then jump onto the players head when they got in scoring range. Apparently, after a few broken necks the rules brought goalies back into the water again.

By the late 1880's, the Scottish rules modified to reflect soccer. In fact, for a brief period of time, the game was actually called "water soccer." Under the new, more civilized rules, goals were scored by throwing the ball into a 3' X 10' feet netted cage. Although field players could only use one hand, goalies retained the special privilege of using both hands. This particular rule has remained essentially the same for the past 100 years, but the speed of the game has changed dramatically.

The goalie position as we know it today has remained basically the same for over 50 years. The first major breakthrough for the goalkeeper was the innovation of the eggbeater kick by the Hungarians in the 1940's. This kick allowed Water Polo Players to maintain a stable, head above water, body position. Still, the goalkeeper was passive, remaining locked in front of the goal.

Today, many goalies play as the seventh field player darting out from the goal to steal or breakup a cross pass before the shot can even be taken.

Additionally, in changing the rule that kept goalies from passing the ball past half-court, modern goalies now make 20 meter passes to get the fast break or counterattack started.

Unlike the other six players, the goalie position still does have its own set of rules, such as:
- Privilege to use two hands on the ball within the 4meter area.
- Privilege to use a clenched fist to block the ball.
- Privilege to stand, walk, and jump from the bottom of the pool within the 4meter area.
- Restricted to the defensive half of the pool.

The Modern goalie:
The three keys to success in the cage are: 1) great fundamentals, 2) positioning and 3) knowing the capabilities of the shooter and your opponents. Once the equation between goalie and shooter is equal, blocking is a chess game, psychological warfare of who can outsmart whom. This is one enjoyable aspect of water polo: matching wits with the opponents every time the ball comes down the pool towards the goal you’re defending.

Psychological traits of Goalies:
The goalie must show leadership.

By virtue of his(her) vantage point at either end of the pool, (s)he has a total view of the playing field. For this reason, (s)he must continually communicate to his/her teammates information about what is going on in the game. (S)he is the voice of the team, primarily for the defense, but also (s)he can relay critical information to the offense (e.g. time on the shot clock).
(S)he must have the ability to make quick decisions, speak up and feel comfortable guiding the field players with concise, timely and relevant information.

The goalie must have guts.

The most essential yet elusive quality requires the courage to WANT to be hit by the ball. When starting out, this is the toughest fear to conquer. We are all born with the human survival instinct. It is natural to want to dodge large projectiles hurled at your body. Seasoned goalies will admit that the survival instinct was probably one of their toughest hurdles to overcome, at least it was for me. One day it finally dawned on me that being hit by the ball, including the face, rarely hurt for more than a couple of seconds. In addition, I was always happy to be hit by the ball because that meant that I blocked it. Of course, there are the rare and embarrassing occasions when you are hit by the ball and it still goes in the goal. Shake it off and look forward to the next shot.

I don’t have any specific tricks or drills that can help you through this transition other than to say that all goalies go through it. The quicker a goalie can forget about being hit, the quicker (s)he move on to more serious training and playing.

Face shot

Getting Over It
The goalie must be a quarterback.

After a save or a steal the goalie must quickly survey his(her) team as they counter-attack down the pool, evaluate the predicament then make a pin-point pass to the correct player. Failing to identify the right “outlet” player can cost your team a fast-break goal. Goalies should be able to make passes up to 25 meters down the pool with the ball landing in an area no larger than 1 square meter.

The goalie must maintain a positive attitude.

(S)he is the last line of defense and the last hope. The position lends itself to being placed in a pressure cooker. A positive attitude is infectious. If you stay positive your teammates will believe in you and will share in your outlook. You probably have heard that some people look at a glass half-empty while others look at a glass half-full. Goalies must never see a half-empty glass.

There is no place for getting “down in the dumps” during a game. When the “chips are down” it is imperative that you maintain your composure. In the goal, like being on a stage, there is no place to hide. If a moment arrives when the pressure becomes too much, don’t let your teammates and especially your opponent know that you are temporarily scared or worried.

When you have a goal scored against you always make a mental note to yourself detailing the specific circumstances that resulted in the goal and most importantly maintain your composure. If the goal was scored because of an outstanding play then you can tip your hat to your opponent.

If you missed a shot that you should have blocked search your thoughts for a reason why you may have missed the ball. If no clear reason is readily apparent then chalk it up as a bad play on your part. We have all missed shots in games that we were able to block with our eyes closed in during practice. During a quarter break or after the game, ask yourself, your teammates and coach what could have done if anything, to prevent the same goal from happening again.

A goalie must be a student of the game.

The goalie position differs greatly from the field positions in Water Polo. In order to reach your potential as goalie you must understand every aspect of the game in order to play in synchronization with the field players. A defense (goalie & field players) will consistently play at a high level when they understand the fundamentals of individual and team defense, execute the team’s defensive strategy together, know the strengths and weaknesses of their teammates and keep open lines of communication during the game. When a goalie and his defense are “in synch” the opposing team will look as if they are playing with lethargy and without a clear offensive strategy.

Being a student of the game is easy: therefore make it a part of your training regimen. You can never learn enough about Water Polo. Study your opponents by watching their games, listen to your coach(s), break out the Water Polo video collection and study your written as well as mental notes. By becoming a student of the game you will develop more common sense and analytical skills which will give you the ability to figure out the best percentages for defensive alignments, shooting angles, etc.

The goalie must be patient and acquire experience.

Experience is an entity that cannot be trained and is the lifeblood that makes a good goalie great. It helps a goalie to better anticipate the shot, make the outlet pass to the right player, lead the
team through communication and leadership, and stay cool under pressure. The bottom line is that experienced goalies make less mistakes, hence they give up less goals.

If you were to ask a group of coaches what is their top consideration when selecting a goalie to play in a big game, my guess is that you would see that experience would top the list. This is why you find most starting goalies in the international arena above the age of 30. Even though the younger second and third string goalies may display more physical talent, my hunch is that the coaches keep the younger goalies on the bench giving them the experience of watching the older veteran play.

**Physical makeup:**

The goalie should have good **mobility & quickness**. Leg strength and overall flexibility are necessary attributes that allow a goalie to cover the inside dimensions of the cage. Ideally, you want a player who is proficient in the egg-beater kick.

**Flexibility** helps a goalie to stretch for a ball while the body is contorted having just moved from one portion of the cage to another. This may be the difference between a deflection and a goal. Goalies must be able to move sideways, forwards, backwards, and straight up. Goalies must work on this flexibility and range of motion through daily stretching.

**Reaction speed** is a prerequisite for goalies. Much like a sprinter in swimming, you must have a quick first movement to get to the ball before it goes past you. Reflexes must be sharpened through practice.

The goalie should be able to **swim**. For short distances, goalies need swimming speed to be able to out-swim field players and make steals. Don’t assume that because you are a goalie, you will not have to swim. Try to learn how to swim the front crawl as well as you can, because it will become one of your best threats to steal the ball. I swam competitively as a youth through my Junior year in high school and was one of the faster players (50 yards) on the Olympic team.

The goalie must be **physically fit**. Strength will increase stamina, speed and longevity. The goalies desired body type should be lean so as to enhance flexibility and range of motion. You don’t have to be tall. I have seen shorter goalies who play excellent Water Polo.

It is important to remember that a goalie is only as good as the defense in front of him or her. Great defensive performances will make a weaker goalie look strong while poor defensive performances will make a superior goalie appear weak. If you have had the opportunity to watch a game from directly behind the goal, then you have seen the individual skills of the goalie and the coordination of the defense. Although a goalie's individual performance can be evaluated in a vacuum, it is more appropriate to view the goalie's performance as it related to the team defense.

A great performance by a team makes the goalie look strong while a weak team performance makes the goalie appear weak. If you have watched a game from directly behind the goal, you have seen the critical importance of the team concept in overall coordination of the defense. A goalie can only be a strong as the team defense in from of him/her. Although, individual performance does play an important role, the team concept will add greatly to a goalie's performance. Most of the time goalies receive the compliments for a good performance, when in fact the entire team should have also received the same praise.

By virtue of the number of different jobs a goalie must do, many of the famous names in the sport of Water Polo have this to say about goalies:

"(He/She) Changes the outcome of a game single-handedly."(Steve Heaston, 1988 Olympic Coach, 1993 Coaches Clinic)

"Is the most important player on the team." (Pete Cutino, National Coach, 1976)

"Can help field players take more liberties defensively."(Art Lambert, Olympic Coach, 1972)
"Starts the offensive charge. (Monte Nitzkowski, Olympic Coach, 1989)
"Strong goalkeepers win games."(Robert Horn, former U.C.L.A. coach, 1988 Y.E.S. clinic)

Fundamentals:
A. Eggbeater kick (see chapter 2 & 3 also)

The eggbeater kick is most critical. Many manuals have been written on the fundamentals of the eggbeater kick so we will not attempt to explain in detail how it is done. As seen by the diagrams, the breaststroke kick is alternated so that each leg operates independently and continuously. While one leg is recovering the other is flexing, and so on. The kick is done with the body in a vertical, or sitting position.

My philosophy is that you can never spend enough time training with the eggbeater. If your knees or hips begin to hurt, STOP immediately and let your body rest. It is telling you that there is a problem. If you don’t have any pain, just soreness, then spend more time working on your leg strength and quickness.

As a lead up, I have found that beginning goalies should learn eggbeater while holding a kick board. This frees the hands and allows you to fully concentrate on the legs. In the beginning of each season, I would take a kick board, hold it in the water as if it were a plow and eggbeater laps. My coach in Italy made me do this in the beginning of the season for the first week before we started with strenuous eggbeater and I never had a problem with extreme soreness and injury as I had in the previous years. The rule of thumb is to work your way up to extreme training.

In addition to the eggbeater, goalies should be proficient and practice at the flutter kick. This crawl kick will be useful for the short sprints necessary and for general flexibility of the legs.

**THE EGGBEATER KICK**

![Eggbeater Kick Diagrams]

Sculling is another technique that can help your eggbeater. You should be able to move your hands back and forth lightly on the surface of the water to assist in propelling you across the width
of the cage. I practiced sculling while in the sitting position. My coaches called this the “Chair Drill”. Sculling helps with lateral movement and gives the goalie a good feel for the water.

**B. Body position** – ready position.

There is a definite difference between the resting eggbeater kick and the alert, ready position. Goalies must begin to rise higher in the water in order to prepare for a shot and see all that transpires in the field or water in front. (S)he needs to have a minimum height of the chest above the surface of the water for this alert position. The hip position should be slightly behind the torso, that is, not vertical.

**Ready position, side view, outside shots**

![Ready position, side view, outside shots](Joan Gould)

www.waterpoloplanet.com

**Ready position, front view, outside shots**

![Ready position, front view, outside shots](Chris Kittredge)

www.tudorgraphics.com
In conjunction with this body position, the goalie must also be concerned with the next fundamental – hand positions.

C. **Hand positions.**

The hands are an important stabilizing and mobility force through the sculling motion. But: A goalie’s hands should NEVER be too far below the surface of the water when a shooter has the ball.

Another way to interpret the amount of hand motion a goalie should use is given by three-time-Hungarian Olympian Andre Molnar: "I use my hands when the ball is being passed from one player to another. When a player has the ball and is ready to shoot I ease up on the arms and hands; the legs take over."

The ready position listed above will change according to the closeness of the ball to the cage. As a general guideline, I have found that your hands should be in front of your body, elbows bent comfortably and the following distances kept in mind. When the ball is:

- Outside of 6 meters the hands are just below the surface of the water.
- Between 4-6 meters the hands should be ON the surface of the water and not below it.
- Closer than 4 meters the hands need to be all the way out of the water.
Ready position ball close to cage, cutting off near side of cage

D. Positioning

Angles:

A. The most advantageous angle

- Goal - Area
- ½ Yard Line
- 1 Yard Line
- 2 Yard Line
- 4 Yard Line

Chris Kittredge
www.tudorgraphics.com
Movements and shot anticipation:

**Head to the Ball**

E. During and After the Save.

1) Gain complete control of the ball while at the same time listening to the bench for information that a free player may be open. Relying on the coach and bench can be dangerous so at the same time you should work with your teammates to know where and when to deliver the ball and know tendencies of their counterattack.

The question of how or whether to use one or two hands when moving to the ball is dependent on how fast the shot is approaching and where it is directed. If possible, use two hands to block the ball when there is:

- A softer shot close to the body.
- A longer, weaker shot to the outer portions of the cage.

In these instances, the palms should be facing each other to form a ladle-shape, fingers together, thumbs close together. The wrists need to be firm so that the ball doesn't "squirt" through the hands.

NOTE: In all other instances, one hand or any portion of the body should be used to reach and block the ball. One-hand lunges from the goalie can reach farther and faster than two-hand lunges.
Controlling the ball in front of the cage – notice hand position

Two hands to block and control the ball in front of the cage, high shot, goalies right

Two hands to control the ball in front of the cage, goalie's left & right
Maximum two-hand control of low shot
2) Hold the ball high so you players will know that you have the ball while at the same time looking down the pool for possible passing opportunities. Always look down the deep right side of the pool first, the center of the pool second, the deep left side third, short right fourth and short left last. This order ensures that the ball will get the correct player fastest. You don’t want to throw the ball to the short left when you may have a player open deep right. This order will become second nature. Visualize yourself looking down the pool to these locations and making perfect passes to each one.

3) If you have time, swim the ball out to the 3 or 4 meter line and then hold the ball high looking for an open player. This will make the pass shorter and more accurate. Be sure to keep your head up high because you may have to make an immediate "quick strike" throw.

Over head block – two hands

D. Five Meters.

Psychologically, this shot should be looked at as a very positive chance for the goalie. In all instances the field player is EXPECTED to make the shot therefore, a block is an embarrassment to the shooter and his/her team. Chris Dorst (1980 & 1984 Olympian) was the master at penalty shot blocking. I believe that during his tenure at Stanford, he held an unbelievable 30% penalty throw blocking percentage. His strategy was to verbally and physically interrupt the field players concentration from the moment the penalty was called by the referee until the moment of the shot.

The two styles of penalty shot blocking are:

- Moving towards one side of the cage as the best guess or
- Moving out towards the shooter with arms spread so as to eliminate the lower or upper portion of the goal.

More than 3/4 of all penalty shots go to the low corners. Therefore, you will want to try to cover as much of the surface of the water as possible after the whistle.

Once you have determined the area of the goal that you want to defend then timing is the next factor to consider. You can improve your chances by exaggerating the layout position with arms extended out wide, sculling, and anticipating the referee’s whistle.

This anticipation of the whistle is similar to what the sprinter does at the start of the period. It involves slight movements towards the penalty throw shooter. The worst that can happen, short of being removed, is for the referee to assess you a major foul - one of three possible during the game. Be aware, that some shooters will take a longer windup than others before finally releasing the ball. Look at where the players arm position is and how they are holding the ball. This will give you some indication as to how quickly the ball will be released.
It is of equal importance to have scouted the penalty shooters from the opposing team. Few players will deviate from their favorite corner each penalty shot. Before the game begins, you should know which style of blocking you will use and the timing required for each player. Most good shooters have different targets, but the same release point, so you can work to time the block.

Try to get the shooters thinking about their shot because thinking makes them anxious, which is a basic cause of most "bad" shots.

The 5-meter throw is a way for you to shine and, perhaps more importantly, give your team a lift by preventing what is expected to be a sure goal, while at the same time deflating the other team. Practice your routine daily.

Penalty throw block, wall goal

F. Lobs.

Anticipating when this variety of shot will be taken is the first key to blocking the lob shot. The lob shot itself moves at a much slower rate of speed and therefore gives you more time to get to it than the power shot. The field player who is a good lob shooter will often observe one or both of the following two faulty features in a goalie before attempting a lob:

• You are out of the cage too far (forward/backward).
• You are off-balance because you have reacted to the shooter's fakes.

Maintaining a good centering position (forward/backward) and staying on balance will deter most shooters from attempting the lob shot. There is one other situation where the likelihood of a lob is very high - when the shooter is at an angle where the power shot does not stand a good chance of scoring. Corner lob shots have a larger area margin for entry into the cage than do straight-on lob shots.

The technique for blocking the lob shot is different than all other shots because the goalie is moving back into the goal to intersect the arc of the lob. This movement is the opposite of the power shot where the goalie moves forward to “cut off the angle.”

When the lob shot leaves the shooter’s hand, you must pivot your torso to point one shoulder at the ball and the other toward the extreme opposite post of the cage. Your eyes need to always be on the ball as you turn 1/4 to move towards a spot 1-1/2 meter away and close to the opposite post. Then, you can either scull rapidly or take a quick stroke or two toward that spot. You should try to make these movements directly across the goal mouth. Above all else, WAIT FOR THE BALL TO COME TO YOU!
After reaching this spot and while the ball is in flight, you must extend the arm and fingers that are closest to the ball straight up. For example, if the lob comes from your right, you should extend your right arm up; if the lob comes from the left, you should extend your left arm up. The opposite (non-extended) arm should continue to skull to provide you continued body support.

If at all possible, the lob is one shot that you should try to, in the following order:

• Catch the ball and gain control of it.
• Tip it out to a place in the water away from any immediate field players. This is a shot that, if rebounded, is an easy “garbage” rebound for a player to put in the goal.
• Tip the ball out of bounds (over the cross-bar) if there are opposing players who are in near pursuit of the ball.

Lob Shot Block – last sequence

Lob block on shot from the 4/5 side of the pool – notice left hand used to block(catch) ball

Lob block on shot from 1/2 side of the pool – notice right hand used to block(catch) ball
Final thoughts:

LESSON #1: Always expect the unexpected.
LESSON #2: Do not alter your playing style because of an embarrassing incident. Every
game, regardless of your experience level, will always provide a lesson learned. It is your
responsibility to find the lesson and learn from it (them). The second that you think that you know
it all is the instant you will cease to improve as a player.
The goalie has much to learn and develop. Some improvements will come naturally while
some will take time to develop with the assistance of coaching and practice. A goalie doesn't have to
be tops in all areas. It is important that the individual selected develop his (her) own style suited to
his(her) strengths. Regardless of one's skill level when they start, their strengths will get stronger
and their weaknesses will diminish.

Goalie proverb:
"Do all of the preparation, suggestions and work mentioned in this chapter in order to avoid a
goalies most embarrassing moment!! - - reaching back in the cage to retrieve the water polo ball."
Keep in mind also that although a goal scored on you may be embarrassing, if you try to learn from
every goal and every game, you will develop into a better goalie over time.

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