

Goalkeeping Psychology: Having a plan to Concentrate and Recovering From Big Mistakes

Goalkeepers have a tough job: theirs is a game of inches, feet and yards and a decision as to “how to do the job” must be made in an instant. Having a method to keep the “creep” of distracting self-talk and negative verbal images from teammates, coaches and fans out of the goalkeeper’s head is an important skill. There is a “place” where the goalkeeper can go to get into a mental and emotional groove. Getting there and staying there involves concentration.

As a goalkeeper, the specifics of the position play a part in “how to concentrate.” A field player can influence their concentration by “getting into the flow of the game,” where a goalkeeper does not tax their physical fitness to an extent where physical activity can aid in getting into a good mental rhythm. A good skill is to learn how to focus when the game gets stressful or anxious. These steps take practice and time to develop:

- Breath—in and out and say, “relax”
- Listen—what sounds, voices can the goalkeeper hear?
- Purge—cut out the “bad” or unnecessary information from the listening stage
- Cue—what should the goalkeeper be hearing or seeing; have a word that can be associated what needs to happen—a word that describes what needs to be done.
- Reinforce—reaffirm what the goalkeeper should hear.
- Enjoy—relish the opportunity to play in the flow, or in the zone.

The goalkeeper should be taken through these steps in stages: off the field, during practice and then in the game. Getting focused is something that has “ebb and flow” to its process. How the goalkeeper concentrates early in the game may wobble as time passes from the warm-up, into the first half and finishes at full-time. Mental Focusing will rise and fall with the momentum of the game. The repetition of focusing and refocusing over the course of a half is where the goalkeeper learns the “craft” of concentration.

Learning how to concentrate is the same as a technical skill: it is all in the application. Being focused makes the job easier; it doesn’t make the job mistake free. Perfection in the game rarely occurs; permanence however is something the goalkeeper carries from practice to practice and game to game. The bottom line for the youth goalkeeper is this: mistakes will occur (the ball will go under, over and sometimes through the hands) no matter how much a goalkeeper is prepared and focused for the moment. Having a “mistakes policy” is what will help the goalkeeper recover the quickest. This is a plan that is worked out ahead of time between the goalkeeper, the coach and even the team. When an occasion arises where the goalkeeper makes a big mistake, there should be a plan that involves:

- How to take care of the ball—if a goal results in a mistake, an outfield player gets the ball, if a corner or free kick result, an outfield player slows the play long enough to keep a quick restart from occurring.
- A player whom the goalkeeper trusts / respects to survey the situation and say something positive to the goalkeeper or even allow the goalkeeper to “relieve pressure” by being the target of the problem.
- The goalkeeper should have a trigger mechanism to help him move on (“no problem, there’s still time.”)

- Players not involved in “the plan” should know what their role is (maybe a quick positive shout to the goalkeeper or simply running or jogging to get ready for the next “play”).
- After the situation is over, a verbal sign can help the coach on the sideline know that the goalkeeper is back on track (this saves from saying too much right away in a verbal exchange).

The team coach or goalkeeping coach should assess what to say at half time or right after the game. This decision should often be made on a case-by-case basis and the goalkeeper should expect a short discussion about a mistake at some point after the incident is over. The big point is that this should be a discussion, not an argument or lecture from the coach to the player.

The best response a goalkeeper can make after a mistake is to get back on track and be prepared to “do the job.” Sometimes, goalkeepers can redeem themselves in a game where a miscue has caused a goal, while in others there may not be an opportunity to do so. The reality of soccer is that there will be highs and lows within the game itself. The goalkeeper that is ready to work through the events of the game will be the one who is valued by teammates and coaches alike.