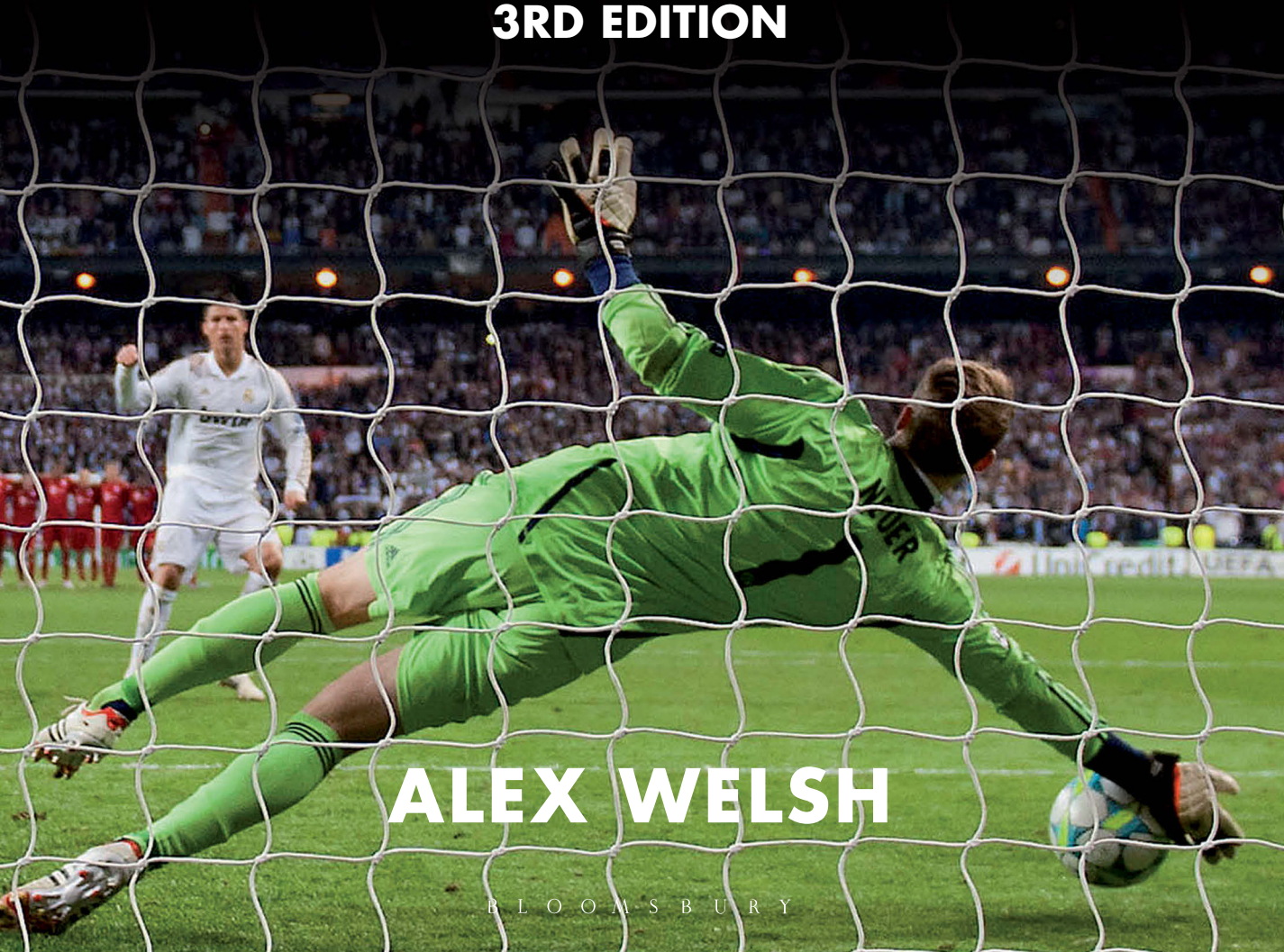
THE SOCCER GOALKEEPING HANDBOOK

3RD EDITION



ALEX WELSH

BLOOMSBURY

THE SOCCER **GOALKEEPING** HANDBOOK

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THE ESSENTIAL GUIDE FOR PLAYERS AND COACHES

ALEX WELSH

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PREFACE TO THE THIRD EDITION

I am very pleased to have the opportunity through this third edition to update the ideas and practices in this book. As the demands of the game are constantly changing it is vital that coaches ensure their work with players is relevant and keeps pace with current match requirements. After all, if coaching does not lead to improved match performance it is pointless.

In producing this book I would like to thank my good friends Pauline Cope (Charlton Athletic Ladies FC), Paul Heald (Wimbledon FC), Stuart Taylor (Arsenal FC), Emma Byrne (Arsenal Ladies FC) and Lee Butcher (Welling United FC) for their excellent contribution. The photo shoot was great fun and the standard of goalkeeping demonstrated in the impromptu training session at the end was breathtaking. I have coached all of them at various stages of their careers and they are all tremendous goalkeepers. I am grateful also to James Dalton (England futsal team) for his guidance on futsal goalkeeping techniques. I am also indebted to the many specialist coaches I have befriended over the years, in particular Perry Suckling for his ideas, generosity and integrity. My biggest vote of thanks goes to Bob Wilson who has exerted the greatest influence on my coaching career. As one of the world's leading authorities on the art of goalkeeping, Bob has been a tremendous source of knowledge and inspiration and taught me to always accentuate the positive. Thanks also to all the goalkeepers I have coached over the years. Each of them has presented a new challenge and helped me to improve my coaching effectiveness.

Finally, I am extremely grateful to my wife Maria for not only typing the original manuscript and curbing my verbosity but also for her continued support of my coaching work.

FOREWORD

The Soccer Goalkeeping Handbook is one of the best ever books written about the art of goalkeeping. It is certainly the most comprehensive. Whether you hold a burning ambition to play 'between the sticks', have a desire to coach and improve aspiring talent, or are simply curious about this most complex position, this is a manual that will broaden your knowledge, surprise you and best of all – inspire you. Having worked with Alex Welsh over many years, I am flattered to constantly hear myself talking within these pages. We have always shared ideas, thoughts and beliefs. Without sounding conceited, we believe 'our way' should be the benchmark adopted by national governing bodies.

The Soccer Goalkeeping Handbook is based on the best coaching principles and that is why I am so proud to be associated with it. Read this handbook, read it again, absorb it all and then, as a keeper, go out and improve your game or, as a coach, blend the best of these ideals with the best of you. All you need to know about modern-day goalkeeping is contained within these pages. Simply adapt them to your own style, strengths and personality.

Bob Wilson
Arsenal FC and Scotland
Arsenal FC Head Goalkeeping Coach
Sports Broadcaster

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

This book is written with the needs of the player, coach and parent in mind. For the player it might be affirmation or clarification on a particular point; for the coach it might be ideas on developing a technical or tactical theme; and for the parent it might be simple guidance. Essentially the book is concerned with improving a goalkeeper's match performance and helping the reader to become a more effective keeper.

The book is divided into three main parts. Part I identifies the key elements of goalkeeping success, which in turn provide a focus for the various practices later in the book. It also explores what makes a successful coach and offers advice on planning individual sessions and programmes as well as developing the keeper's physical, mental, technical and social strengths. The chapter on preparing to play and train highlights the importance of being mentally and physically ready for optimum performance. The final chapter in this section describes the fundamentals of goalkeeping emphasising that a mastery of the basics is essential for later success.

Part II provides a range of progressive practices covering the five goalkeeping roles of shot stopping, fielding crosses, dealing with through balls, distribution and organising the defence. Each role is broken down into individual themes which reflect situations that the keeper might encounter during a game. Each theme has a number of realistic and relevant practices attached to it; and with every practice there is an explanation of the assessment, decision and technique involved accompanied by key coaching points. Based on the goalkeeper's needs, the coach can then select those practices that are most appropriate. Where applicable, a description of common faults that the coach might encounter when covering a particular theme is provided.

Part III provides tips on goalkeeping in futsal and 5-a-side formats. It also covers physical conditioning for the goalkeeper by providing exercises aimed at improving strength, speed, mobility and agility. Finally the book concludes with the 10 Golden Rules of Goalkeeping.

INTRODUCTION

Contrary to the popular theory, goalkeepers are not mad, they are just a breed apart.

Without doubt, the goalkeeper is the most important position in the soccer team and is the only position stipulated in the laws of the game. Nearly every senior club now has a qualified specialist goalkeeping coach. The performance of the goalkeeper can make or break a team, and it is no coincidence that the most successful clubs have the best keepers. The 'mad' label reflects the individual nature of the job and the lengths to which the keeper will go to protect his goal. Most of the goalkeepers I have met place a clean sheet before personal safety and, therefore, those who do not share the obsession are driven to question their sanity.

This common purpose has led to the development of a genuine camaraderie between goalkeepers. It is often said that they are the keenest of rivals but the best of friends, and this is why people often refer to the 'goalkeeper's union' when keepers stick up for each other. After a match goalkeepers often get together to chat about aspects of their craft in a way that outfield players do not.

PART I
THE FOUNDATIONS OF GOALKEEPING

WHAT MAKES A TOP GOALKEEPER?

1

Soccer is a team game until the goalkeeper makes a mistake and then it becomes an individual sport.

While a striker will be measured by the positive things he does, a goalkeeper will be judged on the mistakes he makes, and this is why the position of goalkeeper is the most pressurised on the field and often the loneliest. All players will make errors, but the keeper's usually result in a goal conceded. Once he manages to keep his mistakes to a minimum and prove his reliability, his work will be measured by the important saves he makes. Good goalkeepers put their mistakes behind them and learn from the experience. One mistake does not make a bad goalkeeper, or one save a good goalkeeper.

Identifying what makes a top goalkeeper in the modern game is more than assessing their ability to save shots and take crosses. Approximately 60–70 per cent of the keeper's work will be taken up by what I call gamecraft – distribution, receiving back passes and dealing with through balls. The goalkeeping art can be likened to a present where the wrapping paper (what the observer first sees) is how well he deals with these gamecraft elements. If the keeper is deficient in these areas there may be no further interest in finding out what is inside the wrapping paper, namely the ability to save shots and deal with crosses.

Goalkeepers who have reached the top have benefited from three key factors encapsulated in the following:

Natural ability/talent
+
Attitude
+
Opportunity
=
Reaching the top

Are top goalkeepers born or made? This question has vexed coaches for many years and there is no simple answer. Given the correct conditions, cream will rise to the top, but talent can be inhibited by low motivation levels, poor coaching and a lack of exposure to challenging match experiences.

THE QUALITIES OF THE GOALKEEPER

Natural ability/talent

It can be difficult to define natural ability, but when I see a goalkeeper for the first time, I assess how comfortable he looks in the position and how difficult it is for the opposition to score. A naturally talented goalkeeper has a combination of outstanding technical, physical and mental attributes. What stands out for me is how well he handles the ball (as this is the equivalent to an outfield player's touch) and how well he moves as this will determine the extent to which he manages to be in the right place at the right time. While the capacity to move with great pace and control is critical – as speed in all its forms (off and across the ground, of reactions and of thought) characterises the great goalkeeper – technical mastery across the five goalkeeping roles is essential for those performing at elite level since any weakness can be ruthlessly exposed by the opposition. Thankfully from the coaching perspective natural ability can be developed and, given the appropriate learning environment, flourish.

Competitiveness

Good players do not become great without committing themselves wholeheartedly to improving their craft and ultimately their match performance. This inner drive is easy to detect in goalkeepers – how much does he want to prevent the ball going into the net? The extent to which the player

does not want to be beaten will determine how hard he will work to polish his strengths and minimise his weaknesses. This, of course, will involve some degree of self-analysis, and it is imperative that the keeper is totally honest with himself. Another feature of a successful goalkeeper is their ability to cope with the pressure of making mistakes. All keepers make errors but the best have the mental toughness not to let these undermine their confidence or concentration levels and not to allow one mistake to lead to another.

Soccer intelligence

Since the goalkeeper is expected to play virtually as an additional outfield player, either to patrol the area behind the defence or to initiate attacks, it is essential that he is able to read the game. He should be able to support this understanding with sound decision making. The ability to consistently make good decisions usually distinguishes the confident, positive player from the nervous, unreliable one.

Presence

The truly great goalkeepers appear to have an aura about them and an ability to fill up the goal. While they may be feeling very nervous inwardly, they appear to play with such authority and confidence that they inspire and influence those around them. The top performer remains composed even under extreme pressure and his decision making and technique are unaffected by external factors. It is important that young goalkeepers learn to develop this on-field personality, a determination to be in control of, rather than be controlled by, the situation.

Making the most of match opportunities

Appropriate match experience is essential if the goalkeeper is to develop in the right way. Ideally the player should not be performing at a standard where he is too comfortable. If his potential is to be fulfilled, the demands placed on him should be challenging. This may involve playing promising youngsters above and, on the odd occasion, below their age group. The coach must remember that actual match practice is the richest learning environment. Eventually every player will find his own level but for the up and coming young goalkeeper presented with his breakthrough match he must be ready to make the most of the opportunity and move up the pecking order.

SCOUTING YOUNG GOALKEEPERS

While identifying the best player in a match is relatively straightforward, assessing potential is not so easy and requires an experienced eye. Much, of course, will depend on the scout's expectations, which will be influenced by long-term player development principles and specifically by:

- The level for which the scout is recruiting. In other words, how does the player in question compare with the goalkeepers already in the team or squad?
- Their age.
- Their experience.
- The level at which they currently play.

The best scouts do their homework and know what they are looking for before going on a scouting trip. They should watch the player over a number of matches as the degree to which the keeper is called into action will be out of his control and be determined by the quality of his own team and the opposition. A scout should arrive early and watch the goalkeeper warm up as that will provide an insight into his physical, technical, mental and social attributes. Generally speaking the whole is greater than the sum of the parts and following the observation, the scout should be able to compile a list of 'wow factors' that set the keeper apart from the rest. These factors may be found in the following 'four corner' checklist.

Physical

Physique is important when scouting a more mature goalkeeper, but when looking at eight-year-olds for instance it is less of a factor. However, good spring and speed off and across the ground are essential raw ingredients.

Technical

Handling, positioning, shot stopping, distribution and reading the game are all key components underpinning successful performance.

Mental

Bravery and a willingness to go where he might get hurt should be in the keeper's DNA but mental courage and the ability to recover from mistakes are just as crucial. Competitiveness and concentration are also vital ingredients in the top goalkeeper's make-up.

Social

Does the keeper have a presence and impose himself on situations rather than allow himself to be controlled by others? Does he look at home in the goal? Does he present a formidable barrier when the opposition attacks?

Within professional clubs there should be close dialogue between the recruitment and coaching staff so that the scouts are looking for the same characteristics that the coaches are hoping to develop. It does help the process if the scouts have a clear idea of what the relevant benchmarks are at the various age groups. The following represents a range of expectations at a typical English Premier League Academy:

FUNDAMENTAL PHASE 9–10 year olds

1 Natural movement skills.

2 Hand eye coordination.

3 Athleticism.

4 Basic mastery of handling and diving techniques.

5 Natural enthusiasm and love for the game.

6 Willingness to learn and the ability to absorb new information.

DEVELOPMENT PHASE 11–12 year olds

1 Good movement off and across the ground.

2 Mastery of basic shot-stopping techniques.

3 Understanding of positioning.

4 A range of effective throwing techniques.

5 Ability to cope with the back pass.

6 Starting to make good decisions.

7 A strong competitive streak.

13–14 year olds

1 Speed around the goal.

2 Agility.

3 Well-developed shot-stopping techniques.

4 Understanding of counter-attacking.

5 A willingness to deal with high crosses.

6 Appropriate use of communication skills.

7 Mental strength becomes more noticeable.

15–16 year olds

1 Presence.

2 Speed, agility, power.

3 Obvious key strengths.

4 Full tactical awareness.

5 Ability to deal with a range of crosses.

6 Good reader of through balls.

7 Good organiser.

8 Full understanding of the requirements of the position.

9 High levels of concentration.

PROFESSIONAL PHASE 17–21 year olds

1 High levels of balance, coordination, power and speed.

2 Very well-developed techniques for shot stopping and dealing with crosses.

3 Full understanding of the goalkeeper's contribution to team play.

4 Well-developed gamecraft.

5 Decisive.

6 High levels of consistency.

7 Strong personality.

8 Excellent levels of concentration.

9 Highly competitive.

10 Mentally tough.

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