

# Field play important for young keepers

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**By Tim Mulqueen**

When goalkeepers reach their midteens and are serious about the position, they'll be competing for a starting spot on their club team.

Some may be trying out for state or regional teams -- or even the national team program.

Goalkeepers who have mastered most aspects of the position may find themselves losing out to keepers who have better foot skills. Keepers with superior foot skills expand their team's options and opportunities in numerous ways.

Goalkeepers can't pick the ball up with their hands when it's passed back to them by a teammate; therefore, foot skills make all the difference.

If keepers can confidently use their feet to deal with back passes, they give their defenders a valuable option when the defenders are under pressure. To do this, keepers must be able to settle the ball with either foot and pass the ball over various distances with precision. To illustrate how important foot skills have become, consider this: Goalkeepers touched the ball with their feet more times per game during the 2010 World Cup than during any previous World Cup, seven more times per game.

A keeper with limited foot skills will turn too many goal kicks and punts into 50-50 balls, meaning that the opponent has as much of a chance to get the ball as the keeper's teammate does. Goal kicks are often the first point of a team's attack, and having a field player rather than a keeper take a goal kick means giving up a numerical advantage in the field. Punting the ball isn't just a matter of blasting it upfield. The trajectory of the ball can give forwards an advantage. For example, a well-aimed low punt can find a wide player who has slipped away from her marker.

The goalkeepers who exhibit exceptional foot skills at the college level and beyond are most likely the ones who didn't specialize in the position too early. In fact, some of the greatest goalkeepers played in the field as well as in goal throughout their youth careers.

U.S. national team goalkeepers **Tony Meola** and **Tim Howard** were both center forwards in high school. That experience helped them in their ability to read the game and to use their feet. Meola's feet in goal were those of a field player. He was proficient

with both his right and left foot, and his skill with his feet played a key role in how his teams played the ball out of the back.

**Hope Solo**, who won the Olympic gold medal with the U.S. women's soccer team in 2008, scored 109 goals as a forward in high school. She was a Parade All-American selection twice as a field player. **Brad Guzan** was a consistent starter in MLS at a younger age than any previous keeper (before he moved to the English Premier League). He played in the field for his youth club, the Chicago Magic, and for Providence Catholic High School, where he earned all-state honors as a midfielder.

These examples illustrate why it's important for young players and their coaches to realize that having the desire and the key attributes to be a goalkeeper does not mean it's time to specialize. Young players should take every opportunity available to develop their skills in the goal and out on the field.

Field play does more than improve keepers' foot skills. It also improves their ability to read the game, understand and organize the defense, and anticipate an opponent's attack. By taking part in an attack, the keeper learns to comprehend how the attack unfolds. This knowledge enables keepers to intercept through balls -- the passes that penetrate the defensive line to give an opponent a clear path to the goal -- and to recognize danger spots when the opponent prepares for a cross.

Keepers must possess game intelligence. Game intelligence allows keepers to anticipate the play so that they can make the proper decisions, and it enables them to communicate to teammates where they need to move and where the keeper needs help. The best place for players to acquire game intelligence is out on the field. The need for goalkeepers to truly understand all aspects of the game is why we say a goalkeeper is just a soccer player who can use hands.

And, as unique as the position is, goalkeepers depend on their teammates just as field players depend on their keepers. Keepers who play other positions get a good appreciation for what a field player has to do. Have you ever heard a goalkeeper screaming at a player to get back and play defense after the player just made an 80-yard run? If you've ever made an 80-yard run, you know that it's not easy to get back right away and that being berated by your keeper does not help.

**'FEELING' THE GAME.** Making spectacular saves can indeed separate the great keepers from the good ones. But preventing a situation that requires the emergency save is the mark of the very best keepers; therefore, young keepers should constantly strive to improve in this area. There is only so much that a coach can do to help keepers "feel" the game. To a great extent, players must find it for themselves. That's why keepers should not specialize too early and should continue to get plenty of field time in their youth play.

Being a good field player can also create a more enjoyable soccer experience for young keepers. Beyond the variety and additional challenges, it can lead to more playing time.

Each team only needs one goalkeeper at a time. A good field player can get action when it's another keeper's turn between the posts.

Keepers who can play well in the field also get the extra respect of teammates.

*U.S. Soccer Federation coach and instructor [Tim Mulqueen](#) has been goalkeeper coach for U.S. national teams at the U-17 World Cup, U-20 World Cup and at the 2008 Olympic Games. He's been a goalkeeper coach in MLS, for the MetroStars, and the Kansas City Wizards when they lifted the 2000 league title.)*

\*\*\*\*\* excerpted from:

[The Complete Soccer Goalkeeper](#)" by **Tim Mulqueen** with **Mike Woitalla** courtesy of [Human Kinetics.](#))

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