

A different Approach to Goalkeeper Training

[For Intermediate and Advanced Level]

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For years we have heard the expression, “the goalkeeper must think of themselves as a soccer player first”. Perhaps it is time to add “the goalkeeper coach must also think of themselves as a soccer coach first”. Coaches who separate the goalkeepers from the rest of the team, in order to work exclusively on “goalkeeper drills,” may want to consider a different approach towards training. Whenever the keepers have the expertise of a coach available they should take full advantage of it by practicing with the “field” players. They should be working on situations that emphasize good decision making.

The number one priority for any goalkeeper is to help their team win games. Winning games is what separates good goalkeepers from the ones who just *look good*. Becoming a game winning keeper is accomplished by consistently making good decisions. Such good decisions involve coming out for crosses, coming out to cut off through balls, being set for and in good position to save shots that impact the outcome of a game.

This type of development can be accomplished by coaches who train the keeper to be able to think. While developing the hands and the feet of a goalkeeper are essential for success, perhaps the most important body part to develop in the goalkeeper is the brain.

Successfully making basic plays is directly related to not giving up ‘soft’ goals, these goals that are the result of poor decisions or lack of leadership from the goalkeeper. This is by far the most important type of training for a goalkeeper to be involved with.

Despite the importance of developing sharp, alert keepers many coaches spend the majority of training time with “goalkeeper drills” that focus exclusively on diving, reaction and footwork. If the majority of the bad goals given up by keepers are a result of late decisions or poor choices why is it that we don’t spend most of our training putting keepers in an environment that helps them make better decisions.

I believe that many goalkeepers feel that they must constantly work on reaction drills for them to feel sharp. I also believe they also enjoy these drills because it does not require much thought or decision.

Without a doubt goalkeepers need reaction work. They need to be sharp in order to feel confident. However, once a keeper reaches a certain level of technique, quickness, and agility there is a different type of sharpness that is required. The keeper needs to be the sharpest *thinking* player on the field. Their decision making on plays must be accomplished in a split second. The choices a keeper faces are almost always unique and they require immediate action. This is why such plays must be practiced over and over again in a realistic environment. [Please keep in mind that this is recommended training for intermediate and advanced level keepers who have solid fundamental skill].

Coaches must set up sessions where the “field” players join with them to practice game situations such as dealing with crosses and through balls. They also must constantly put keepers in small sided games that require decisions to be made. Simply jumping over cones and reacting to shots from the coach is not enough.

Some of the essential situations that need to be addressed on a constant basis are:

I. Crosses

Handling crosses requires split second decision making skills. The goalkeeper coach should have a session set up twice a week where the keepers take at least 40 crosses in a realistic environment

In all phases of this exercise the keeper must concentrate on their starting position, communication and decision making skills [ie. Whether to stay or go out for the cross].
Exercises and Drills

- A. The keepers should start by having several players with accurate serves on the flank crossing balls in the box. At first there should be no players in the box competing for the ball with the keeper. The crosses should be above the crossbar and should force the keeper to move their feet to test their range and mobility.
- B. Next, the crosses should come in with one or two players to contend for the ball with the keeper. The serves should vary in height, speed, bend, etc.
- C. There should be two attackers and one defender in the box with crosses coming in at various heights and speeds.
- D. Work up to a 5 attackers vs. 3 defenders situation in the box.
- E. Work on corner kick situations where the box is filled up with attackers and defenders. With so many goals being scored off corner kicks it is amazing how rarely they are practiced under game like situations.

II. Through balls and Breakaways

Whenever the keeper can come off of their line to cut out a through ball they prevent a possible shot on goal. *Preventing* shots on goal is just as important as saving them. One of the biggest weaknesses seen in keepers is the ability to make good choices regarding coming off of their line for through balls.

Coaching Points

1. The keeper must have a good starting point [most keepers start back too deep out of fear of being chipped] in order to cut out a through ball.
2. They must read the opponents intentions and *anticipate* when the ball will be slipped through.
3. They must know which balls they can get and which ones they can't.

Drills and Exercises

Lead up Exercise. In a square grid about 15 by 15 yards Player A dribbles around while the goalkeeper tries to take the ball off of their feet while using their hands. This exercise will help the keeper develop the ability to cover up loose balls and to get their hands to the ball first [SEE DIAGRAM 1].

Using a set of cones about 8 yards wide Player A starts out about 10 yards [SEE DIAGRAM 2] away from the goalkeeper. Player A has a total of 6 touches to dribble

around the goalkeeper and through the cones. Player A must dribble through the cones. Player A cannot shoot the ball. They must try to dribble around the keeper. This exercise helps the keeper stay on their feet as long as possible when dealing with a breakaway situation.

Using a set of cones to form a channel about 15-20 yards long and 20 yards wide Player A must dribble through the cones past the keeper. Player has 5 seconds to complete this exercise [SEE DIAGRAM 3]

A. The coach [with one “field” player on either side about 20-25 yards from goal] should slip balls through to one of the players. [SEE DIAGRAM 4] The keeper must make an instant decision on whether to come for the ball or stay in goal. Encourage the keeper to be aggressive with their decisions. Keepers will generally break up more plays by being aggressive as opposed to being passive. Even if the ball played through is a 60/40 ball in favor of the attacker, the keeper should come out aggressive and try to cover the ball. If the keeper gets close, instead of standing up they should attack the play and stretch to get the ball. This puts pressure on the opponent and gets the keeper to extend their body sideways which creates a long barrier that the forward usually shoots into.

Occasionally, the keeper will make a poor decision in training and not get to a ball that they are coming out to get. This is alright. The coach must expose them to making mistakes. It is the only way the keeper will learn their range.

MOST OF THE PASSES HIT BY THE COACH IN THIS PHASE OF THE PRACTICE SHOULD BE 50/50 BALLS

The next phase for this type of training is for the coach to do this exercise about 30-35 yards away from the goal [SEE DIAGRAM 5]. After this phase is finished move the exercise back to 45 yards away from goal. In these final two situations you will now expose the keeper to through ball exercises that might require them to come outside of the penalty area to play the ball with their feet or head. To keep the keeper honest and with a realistic starting point, the coach should occasionally try to chip the ball over the keeper.

B. Next, the practice should include having defenders involved. The coach starts about 25 yards from goal with a forward near him and a defender two steps behind the forward. The coach pushes a pass to the forward with the defender trying to catch him. This exercise exposes the keeper to potential breakaway situations when they have to decide whether to stay in goal [because the defender might catch the forward] or come out to cut out the through ball. Also encourage the keeper to step up and get closer to the play regardless of whether they are going to come out for the ball. Being closer to the plays puts the keeper in a better position to make the save or puts them in a good spot to pounce on a bad touch made by the opponent. The keeper must always be aware of whether they should stay in goal or to come out to breakup the play.

Two factors that influence this decision are:

1. Is their defender going to catch the attacker?
2. Is the ball in a very wide position so that it would be wise not to leave the goal mouth?

[SEE DIAGRAM 6]

C. Finally the coach should hit through balls where the defender is a step ahead of the forward. The defender must either clear the ball or shield it for the keeper. This is an important play to master. I can't begin to tell you how many times I have seen this play turn into a disaster [SEE DIAGRAM 7].

*Just as in section A, both sections B and C should also include plays that start from 35 to 45 yards away.

Teach the goalkeeper to read the cues [such as the opponents body language, is their head up, etc.] that would indicate an opponent is looking to slip a ball through.

*In addition, any exercise that involves 2 vs. 1, 2 vs. 2, 3 vs. 2, and 3 vs. 3 to goal is excellent training for keepers to learn to play off of their line.

Breakaways

Breakaway situations give the goalkeeper the opportunity to impact a game. Making a save on a breakaway can dramatically turn around the momentum in a game. Breakaways should be practiced in the same session with through balls in realistic situations such as Section II Part B. Breakaways can easily be practiced by having the coach hit 60/40 balls in favor of the attacking player.

BREAKAWAY EXERCISES [SEE DIAGRAM 8]

Two goals facing each other about 35-40 yards apart. Team O has 5 players line up to the right of the goalpost. Team X has 2 players about 5 yards behind the first player from Team O. The same set up is used down the other end with Team X having 5 players lined up with Team O having 2 players 5 yards behind chasing.

The coach pushes a pass to team O player with team X player chasing. Team O player tries to complete the play by scoring on a breakaway. As soon as this play is finished Team X tries to score on a breakaway at the other end. The coach should make the passes 60/40 or 70/30 in favor of the attacking player. When the play is finished the attacking player should go in the chasing line at the other end and the defending player should go to the attacking line. Occasionally, the coach should push a 50/50 all forward or a ball slightly favoring the keeper to see if the keeper is alert enough to come off of their line.

III. Shots

The most important aspects of making a save are:

1. *Having your feet set.* This is a skill that is very underrated and takes a lot of practice to perfect. The ideal situation for the keeper to get maximum explosion off of the ground to save a shot is for the keeper to get a little 1-2 inch hop just *before* the shot is taken. If the keeper is still moving forward as the shot is being taken they will not get a good dive. They should be balanced and should not be leaning to one side. The keeper should also get used to having a slightly higher starting point so they don't feel as if they have to cover a lot of ground going forward in order to reduce the shooter's angle. Videotaping a shooting exercise or game condition will be a great benefit for the keeper in developing this skill.

2. *Having the angle covered.* Good positional play is essential to becoming a winning goalkeeper. Good goalkeepers face fewer shots *on goal*. This is probably due to the fact that if the keeper is in good position he gives the opponent little or nothing to shoot at. In this situation the opponent often puts the ball high or wide of the goal frame.
The coach should stand behind the goal in training and constantly reinforce proper angle play. The experience of a 'field player' coach is invaluable in this regard.
3. *Knowing when the opponent is going to shoot.* It is important that the keeper is set and not moving forward when the shot is taken. Experienced attacking players are tricky and deceptive. Many keepers get beat not because they are not quick enough but because they don't know when the shot is coming. First time shots, shots bent with the inside of the feet [instead of power drives] and toe pokes are perfect examples of shots that catch the keeper not being ready.

Any shooting exercise or game condition is a great training environment for helping keepers work on developing these skills. While it is important to work on footwork and reactions, all of the footwork and reaction drills in the world won't mean anything if the keepers cannot demonstrate the three skills listed above.

Exercises and Drills

Player A is to the side of the "D" and Player B is on the other side of the "D." The goalkeeper is at the near post [SEE DIAGRAM 9]. Player A plays the ball to Player B who controls and quickly hits a shot [or shoots the ball first time]. This drill helps the keeper on making decisions as to when to get set while they are moving sideways.

Player A passes a through ball to Player B [SEE DIAGRAM 10] who runs on to it and shoots first time. This exercise helps the keeper make decisions on getting set while they are moving forward.

Player A and Player B play 1 vs. 1 to goal. This exercise will help create situations where the keeper does not know when the opponent will shoot. Many keepers fail to save shots because they don't know when the opponent is going to shoot the ball.

Set up two goals facing each other about 25-30 yards apart with a dividing line in the middle. Three X players and one O player are on one side while three O players and one X player are on the other side. The teams play 3 vs. 1 on one side and look to shoot as often as possible. When a shot is missed or goes to the keeper the game continues on the other side. Players may not cross the halfway line.

The three players may also play a ball in to their teammate on the opposite side. Give 1 point for each goal scored and 2 points for every goal that is scored from a first time shot or a shot that rebounds from the goalkeeper [SEE DIAGRAM 11].

VI. Leadership and Communication

Being a leader and communicating to your teammates might be the most important skill a goalkeeper can possess. The coach can dramatically improve this skill by setting up as many small sided games as possible and coaching the keeper from behind the goal on positioning and communication.

Other considerations:

***Play as many games in training as possible**

***Never neglect the goalkeepers foot/kicking skills**

***Videotape the sessions.**

***Coach the keeper in practice and games from behind the goal.**

***Keep in mind that “field” coaches can also coach goalkeepers and do it well.** The keepers can learn just as much about soccer from non-goalkeeping specialists who can give them insights into the mind of a forward.

***Use the “field” players in all of your sessions.** They bring realism into the training session. It will also help the coach watch the keepers set position, starting point, etc.

***Have “field” players talk and give feedback to the keepers after a session.** They will provide tremendous insight for the keepers as to what they see in their performance and point out some of the mistakes that they are making. Always tell the keepers to “learn to think like the enemy.”

***Get keepers in as many good games as possible.** When the opponent is smart and the speed of play is fast the goalkeeper will gain much more experience. The problem with good keepers is that they usually play [same age level] with the best clubs. The best clubs usually dominate their competition until they reach the regional level. This leaves the goalkeeper with a shortage of competitive games during the year. Playing up a year or two is never a bad idea for a promising goalkeeper.

***Don’t get down on the keeper when they make a mistake.** Players never learn unless they make a mistake

***Practice with the keepers saving chips.** If the keeper feels confident saving chips or lofted balls they will feel more comfortable playing off of their line. This will give them a tremendous positioning advantage on shots, crosses and through balls.

***Attention Span.** Many young players struggle with staying alert during the game. This is true among goalkeepers. Work with them so that they stay focused at crucial times of the game. The best keepers are relaxed and highly alert when the ball is around their goal area.

***Don’t heat them up.** Goalkeepers aren’t punching bags. Playing keeper is demanding on the mind and especially the body. For some reason many coaches are overdoing training sessions. Keep your keepers sharp by working them hard and shortening up the sessions.

Diagram 1

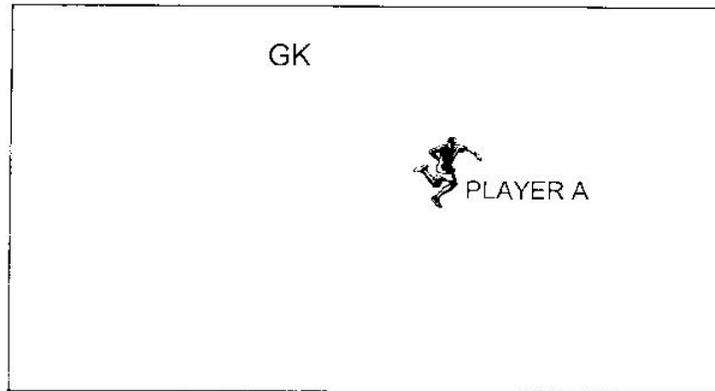


Diagram 2

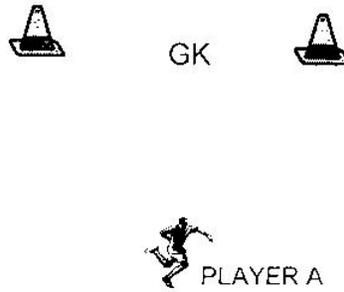


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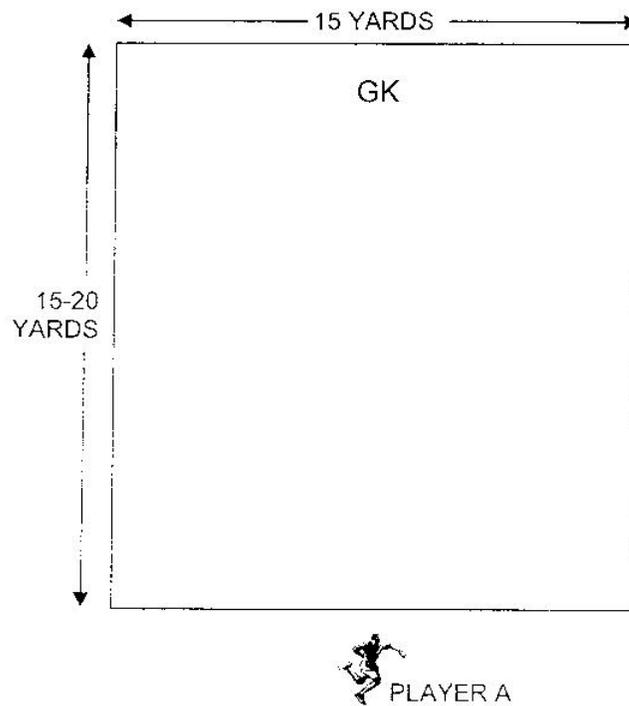


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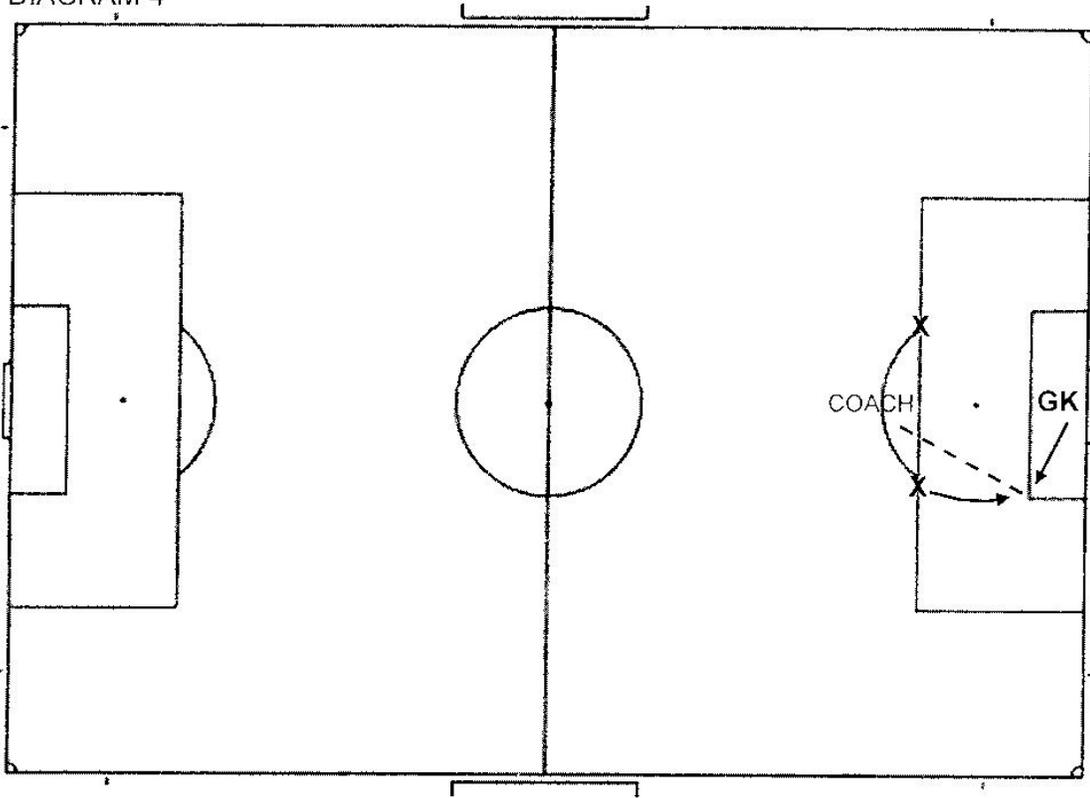


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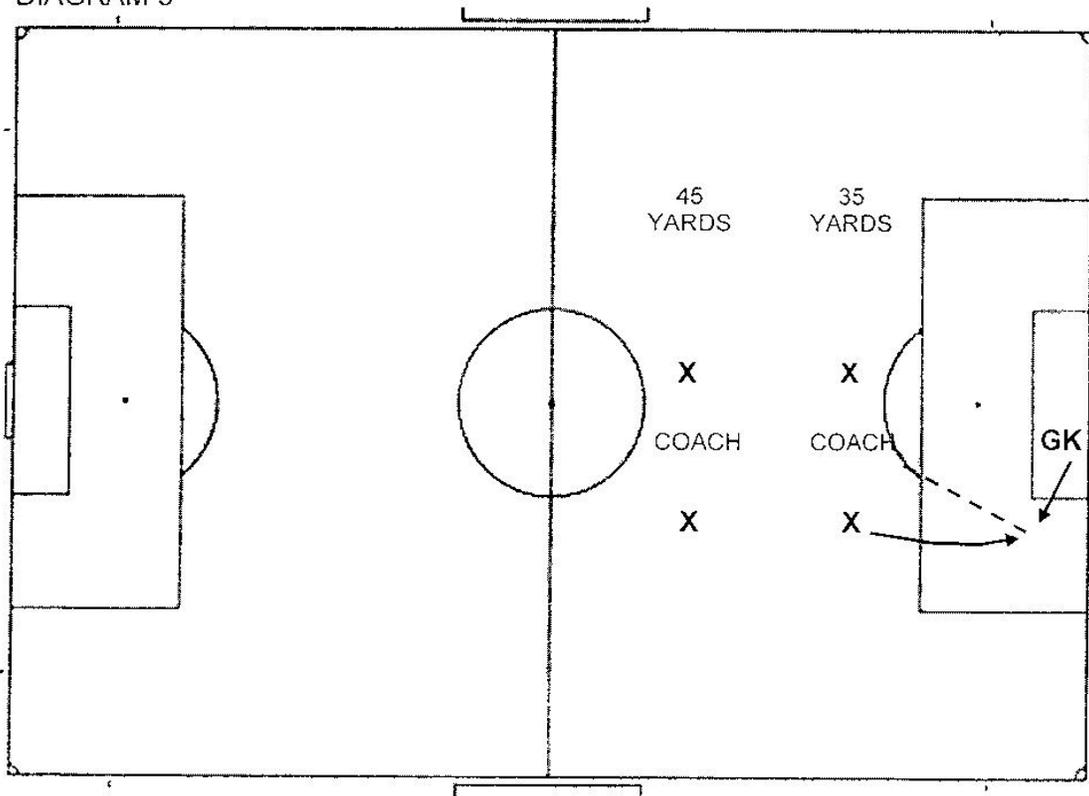


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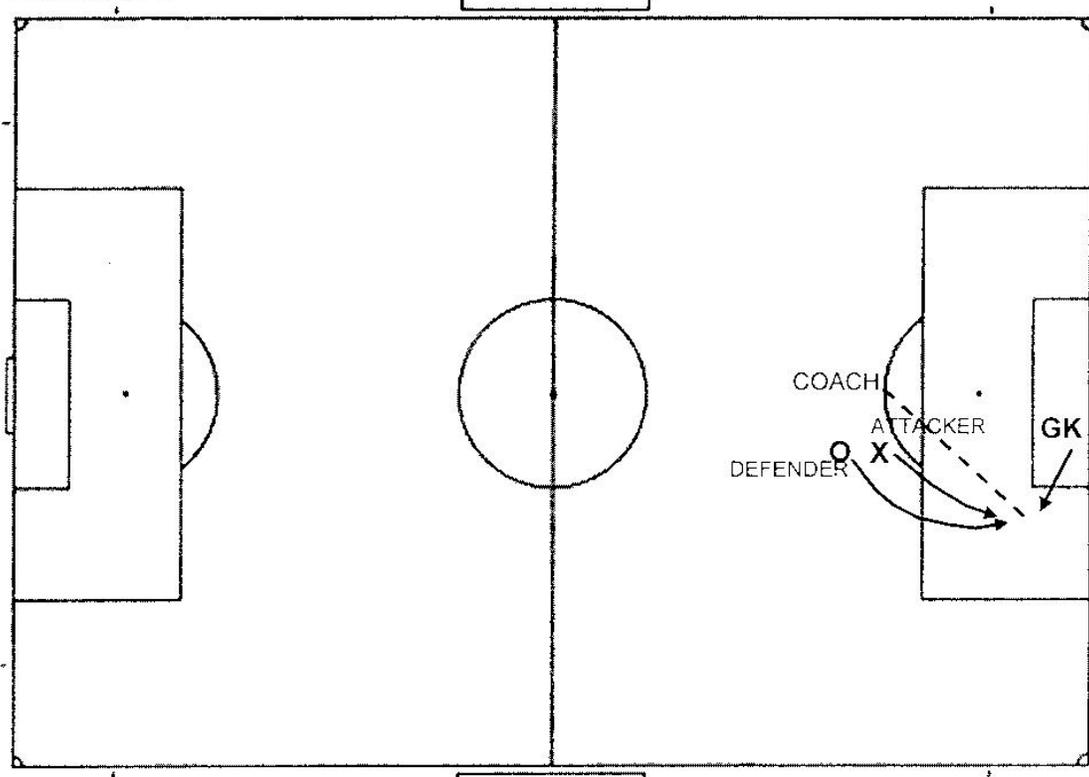


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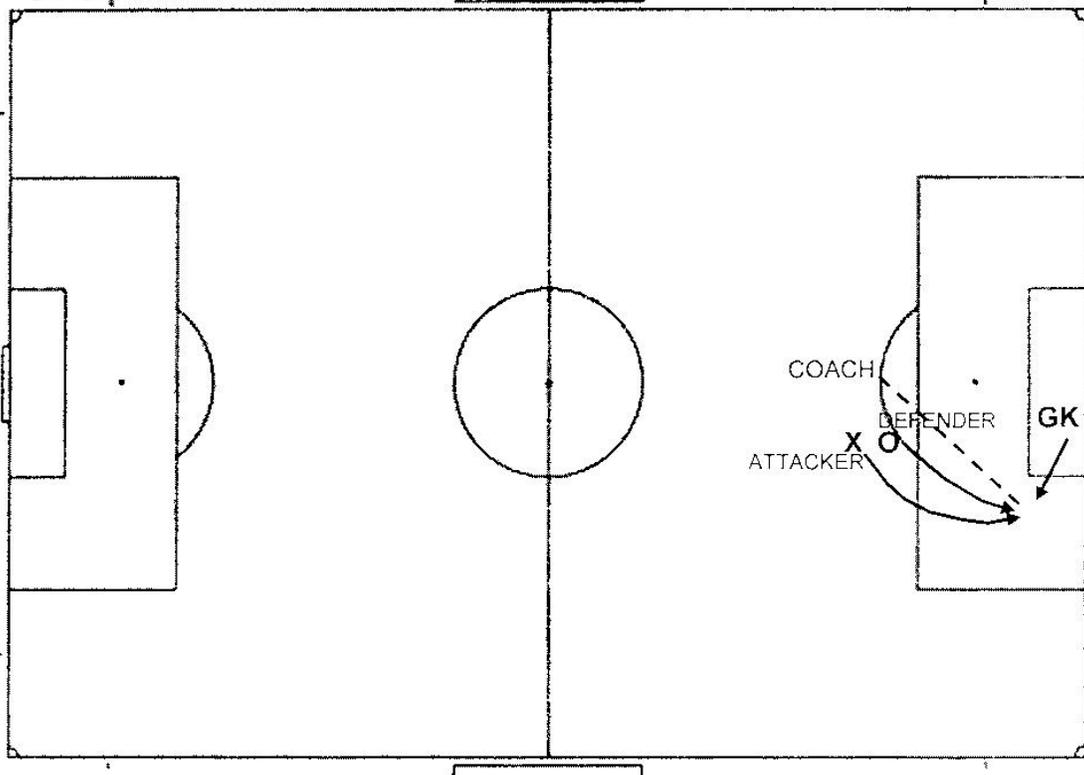


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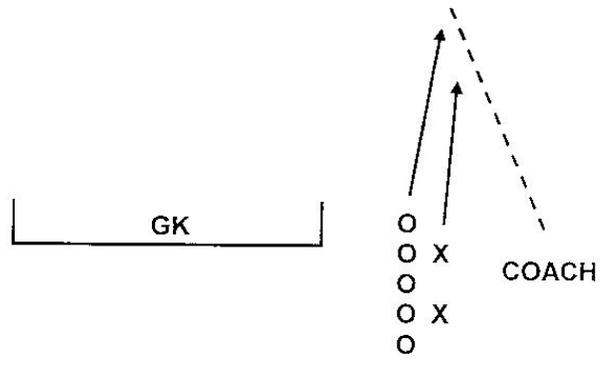
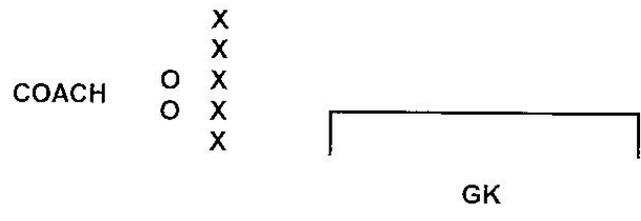


DIAGRAM 9

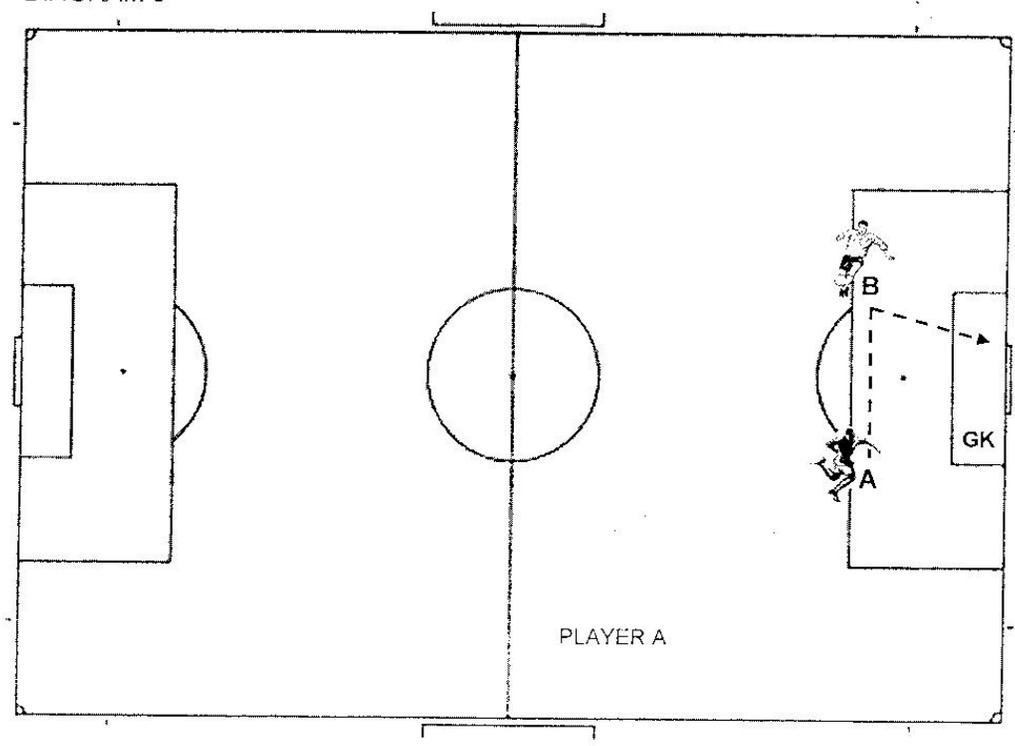


DIAGRAM 10

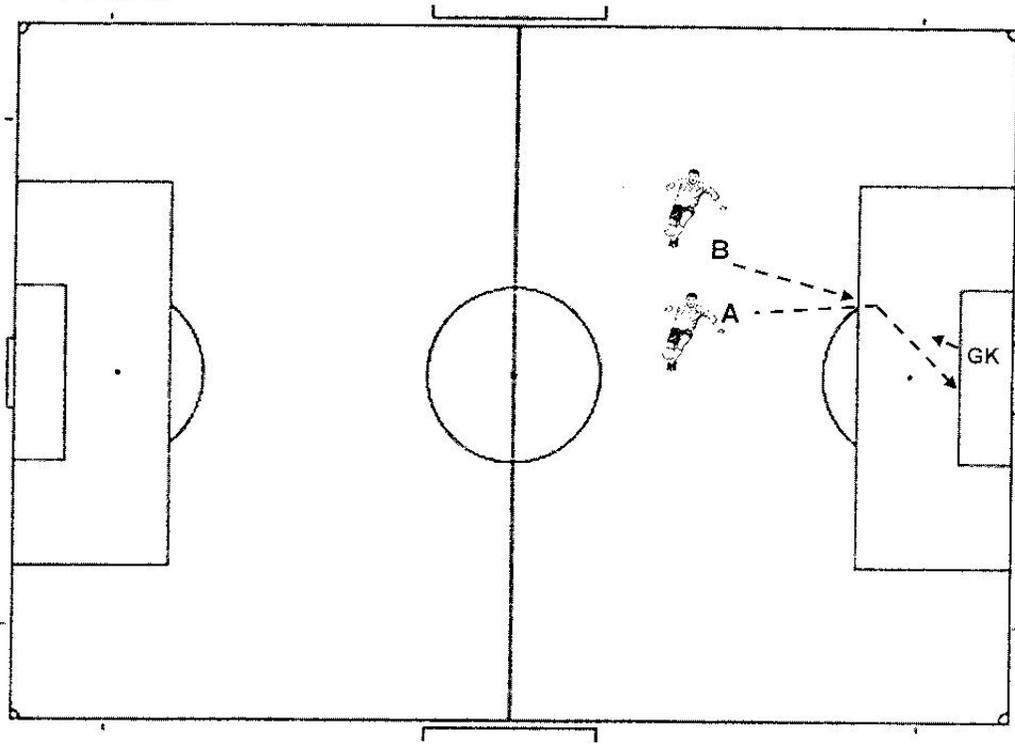


DIAGRAM 11

