Martin Thomas, England U21 Goalkeeper Coach, and Tim Dittmer, England U19 Goalkeeper Coach, tell The Boot Room that the England DNA stresses goalkeepers must be seen as the eleventh player in the team and not apart from the rest of the group.

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The Eleventh Player

Tim Dittmer: The goalkeeper being part of the team, and not viewed in isolation, is the first and most important aspect. When we have been looking at the how the game will be played in the future and how we want our future England goalkeepers to play when we have the ball, we want the goalkeeper to be an additional outfield player – the eleventh player.

Whether the goalkeeper is playing a part in retaining the ball in the first third, helping to progress the ball through the thirds and break lines, or whether the goalkeeper is contributing to the creating and scoring stage by setting up counter-attacks, utilising the goalkeeper as the eleventh player will be crucial.

What are the key goalkeeping messages in the England DNA?

Martin Thomas: The modern goalkeeper probably has as many touches, if not more touches, than any individual outfield player so the impact the goalkeeper can have in terms of starting attacks is hugely significant.

Whether that is actually counter-attacking or looking to penetrate and get into the mid-third in controlled possession or even playing out and retaining possession, the goalkeeper will play a significant part in all aspects of the game in the future.
How would you summarise the goalkeeper’s responsibilities when the ball is lost?

**TD:** When our teams don’t have the ball the goalkeeper has two main jobs. The first is to take up their own position in order to affect the ball and protect the space and the goal.

Secondly, the goalkeeper must help the other players’ positioning. The 180 degree view goalkeepers have of the game provides the ideal base from which to do this.

To be successful at both aspects the goalkeeper has to understand all the principles behind when, where, why and how to press the ball so that they can provide effective information to the rest of the team.

**MT:** The role of the goalkeeper when the team is out of possession links into the strategy of how high and how early the team are going to press. The goalkeeper’s responsibility is to support and deal with the space behind the back line.

Understanding the momentum of the game as well as the philosophy and strategy of the head coach and how they want to play is crucial to this. A good level of tactical understanding is crucial in international football.

How do we improve young goalkeeper’s decision-making?

**TD:** We have to create an environment for them to express themselves and to be creative with their distribution. We don’t want our goalkeeper’s to be boring or one dimensional in their play. We want them to express their advantage of being that eleventh player.

Clever practice design is also important. Sessions and exercises which demand goalkeeper’s to make specific decisions over varying distances are really important. Then the coach’s role is to set the conditions and the challenge and help the players make decisions within that framework.

If we’re afraid of putting the goalkeepers into that situation they’re never going to become comfortable making decisions. With the right environment and clever practice design we can improve that.

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Grassroots goalkeeping

Tim Dittmer discusses some of the key issues in grassroots goalkeeping

Since the ‘retreat line’ was introduced into the grassroots game has there been an improvement in our young GKs playing out from the back?

Two or three years ago on a Sunday morning you would have seen a young goalkeeper with the ball in their hand running to the edge of their box and kicking it as far as they could. With the introduction of the retreat line this is no longer the case.

Something we have tried to do here at The FA is to lose that word ‘kick’. When a goalkeeper does have the ball, everything is a ‘pass’ whether it is out of their hands or with their feet. It is an important psychological slant for the goalkeeper when they are in possession and something which has started to filter into the grassroots game.

The retreat line again links back to clever practice design. It exposes the goalkeepers to a situation where they have to see a picture and then select the right kind of pass over different distances. It helps to develop decision-making skills and an appreciation and relationship between players. It is a condition that can be incorporated into practice sessions too.

How young would you start to identify goalkeeping talent?

Some of the professionals clubs are working with goalkeepers as young as six. This is something I have done myself, and witnessed both the pros and the cons.

If we pick our two keepers for the team at a really young age, how much are they missing out on in all other areas? How many other members of the squad might actually have the potential to become a goalkeeper in the future?

So what is our method to try and test that? Should we give young players, in both the grassroots and professional game, the chance to play in goal once a week? Do we encourage all players to take a turn in goal during training? Maybe it is something you could try every now and then? Young players aren’t on a linear journey towards any position. There are a number of examples of outfield players who have become goalkeepers, and vice versa.

At that age, young goalkeepers might not know they enjoy being a GK until they try it?

Correct, and vice versa. The nine-year-old who turns up as young as six. This is something I have done myself, and witnessed both the pros and the cons.

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