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BASIC CATCHING

This session on basic catching can work for any level of keeper: as an introduction for young keepers, review and repetitions for intermediate level keepers, and warm-ups or review for more experienced keepers. I will note variations on the drills you can use to adjust the session for various skill levels.

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- **Warm Up (10 min)**
 After jog & stretch, have players in pairs doing simple tosses back and forth at shoulder height. For beginners, demonstrate the basic "W" or contour hand position. Then move to basket catches -- again, demo the proper catching technique for beginners. Finally, move to rolling ball pickups. If you have four or more players, have them get in two lines facing each other about 6-7 yards apart; players in one line have balls and the first player serves to the opposite line; players then switch lines. This serving technique reinforces the need to move forward when receiving a ball. With older keepers, I will use a [goalkeeping medicine ball](#) for part of the warm up.
 - Check proper hand position and make sure keepers are using good footwork to get behind the ball and are moving forward to meet the ball. Remind them that anything above the waist requires a "fingers up" ("W") catch, below the waist is a "fingers down" (basket) catch.

- **Two-Ball Circle (10 min)**
 This activity needs six to ten players, but is a very popular exercise. I often incorporate it into other training sessions as a warmup. Have the players stand in a 10- to 12-yard diameter circle. Start with one ball being passed around the circle at shoulder height; it can be passed to anyone except the player next to you. After a minute or so, add a second ball being passed simultaneously. For beginners, keep the passes going slowly; for more advanced groups see how quickly they can move the balls and still keep things going smoothly. For advanced groups, you can also allow balls served at the knees or rolled balls to be mixed in, or a larger circle with balls thrown intentionally a bit off target so good footwork is required. You can also use two different balls (e.g. make one ball a mini-ball or a rugby ball).
 - Keepers must be on their toes for this, both physically and mentally. They need



to be scanning constantly with their eyes to keep track of both balls, while maintaining good catching technique. Focus is a key!

- **Ground Ball Pickups (10 min)**

Scatter as many balls as you can inside a 15x15 yard area. (You need at least one or two more balls than keepers, preferably more. If you don't have a lot of balls or have lots of keepers, have some of the keepers resting while others are working.) Keepers wait outside the area until the coaches signal. At the signal keepers move in and pick up the balls, one at a time, each time securing the ball with a proper moving ground-ball pickup and then placing the ball on the back of their neck before releasing it (this assures the proper pickup). Keepers try to pick up as many balls as possible in 60 seconds (30-45 seconds for younger keepers). Challenge keepers to beat the count of other keepers, or do several rounds and beat their own previous count. For advanced keepers, reduce the number of balls in the area so they have to compete to get them.

☞ Keepers should not stop when picking up balls, but should bend at the knees and move through the ball as they gather it in. This is the key to getting as many balls as possible. Watch for proper hand position (pinkies together, behind and under the ball, not grabbing the top of the ball). Keepers should have their heads up throughout the exercise. This is a high-intensity exercise, so allow rest in between rounds.

- **Small Goal Saves (20 min)**

Have keepers in pairs with one ball and two cones or coaching sticks. Place the cones or sticks about 6 paces apart. One keeper stands in the "goal", the other 8-10 yards away (adjust size based on age and ability) with the ball. Server attempts to roll or throw the ball (head height or below) past the keeper through the small goal; keeper must use proper footwork and catching technique (do not allow dives). As the exercise progresses, widen the goal and move the server back. You can make this a game by having each save count as a point; a save or a miss by the server allows the keeper to stay in the goal, and if the server scores they get to become the goalkeeper.

☞ Servers should vary the height, angle and pace of the balls. The reduced size of the goal allows for more catches and fewer balls out of reach. Insist on good, quick footwork and proper hand position.

- **Triangle Goal Game (20 min)**

This introduces more movement into the session and we add balls served off the ground. Place three cones or coaching sticks in an equilateral triangle with sides about 6 yards long. 10 yards from each side of the triangle is a server with balls; one keeper is in the triangle. The keeper moves out beyond the cones or sticks to face the first server, who strikes the ball at the keeper. The keeper then quickly moves to the next side of the triangle and saves a shot there, etc. You can do this as a timed activity (who can make the most saves in two minutes) or a counted activity (most saves per a fixed number of shots faced).

☞ The keeper needs to move quickly from one "goal" to the next, finding good position and being ready to face the shot as soon as possible. Ask servers to vary their shots -- on the ground, low or high (but not over the keeper's head). Don't let the fact that the keeper is moving keep them from using proper hand position and getting their body behind the ball.

- **Shots on Goal (20 min)**

For the last part of the session, go to live fire. You can simply put shots on goal (I like to have the keepers come off one post, touch the middle of the 6-yard line or a cone in an equivalent spot, and then make the save). Or, you can put it into a more game-like situation (albeit with fewer shots) by playing 2v2 or 3v3 in a 35- to 40-

yard field with two full-size goals. If you only have one frame, you can play "World Cup" style, with teams of two all attacking one goal against everybody else and the keeper. Rotate keepers every few shots.

👉 I feel a small "pressure cooker" field like this, 40x30 yards or so with two full-size goals and a small-sided game in the middle, is a great way to end just about any goalkeeper training session. It allows for two keepers working at once with lots of shots in a match-like setting, and as a coach you can focus your coaching points on whatever the training topic is for that day.

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TRAINING SESSIONS

CUSHIONING THE BALL

I usually devote one training session near the beginning of the season exclusively to cushioning the ball with all my keepers. It helps develop soft hands, and is something a keeper should always focus on getting better at. To practice this skill properly requires well-paced balls right at the goalkeeper, so it is helpful to have a coach or field player who can strike a ball hard and accurately to serve balls.

- **Warm-Up (15 min)**

Start with a jog, some footwork and stretching. Warm up the hands with some catching in pairs. For beginners, I like to demonstrate cushioning by using an imaginary egg: pantomime tossing an egg high in the air, the players must pretend to catch the egg without breaking it. They will instinctively use their arms to cushion. Have them play catch in pairs a bit more, using the same cushioning motion. Then move to a two-ball circle as above, with emphasis on softly cushioning the ball. If you have a goalkeeping medicine ball, this is a good session to use it: the extra weight of the ball forces good cushioning technique.

👉 Cushioning is done with the arms (elbows) and a bit with back and legs. Make sure the keepers start with their arms extended, almost elbows locked, and then pull the ball in to their chest. Don't let them catch it with elbows already bent 90 degrees, which leaves no room for cushioning. Remind them a good goalkeeper has "soft" hands -- soft means like a cushion or pillow, but also *quiet*. All catches during the warm-up should be as quiet as possible.

- **One-Handed Catches (10 min)**

One handed catching is a good way to reinforce using the arms to cushion the ball. In pairs, players toss the ball back and forth using just one hand to catch and throw. Throws should be about head high, catches made with fingers pointing up. Work the weak hand as well as the strong hand, then have them throw to either hand. Move the keepers apart until it is not always easy to make a clean catch, then challenge them to see how many consecutive one-handed catches they can make.

👉 Again, this should be a very quiet activity. The arm should be extended and the elbow should bend to take the pace off the shot. Make sure they don't forget to keep their feet moving to adjust body position if necessary.

- **Sitting, Volley Serves (10 min)**

Now that they have the basic arm motion down, isolate it by having the keepers sit on the ground with their legs out in front of them. A server volleys the ball from their

hands, right at the keeper, who must use arms (and a little back) to cushion. Volleys like this can be hard to control for some U12 and younger players, so you might want them to serve the ball with an underhand throw. Increase the pace of the served balls as you go.

👉 Again, the keeper's arms start extended and the elbows do most of the cushioning. Make sure the keepers don't lean too far back (afraid of the ball); they should sit up and even lean a bit forward to prepare for the catch.

- **Standing, Volley Serves** (10 min)

Now stand the keeper up and make more straight-on saves off a volleyed serve. Make the serves harder as you go.

👉 Don't let the keepers step backwards to take pace off the ball. They must, if anything, step forwards, and let their arms do the cushioning.

- **Balls and Strikes** (20 min)

Mark two lines from 4-8 yards apart (smaller for younger keepers, larger for older). Two keepers face each other across this separation; keepers must stay within a yard or so of the line. Each keeper has a "strike zone", from top of head to the waist, and as wide as the elbows stick out with hands on hips. The objective is to throw the ball at the other keeper within this strike zone hard enough that they drop it. If the other keeper catches it, they can then throw at the first keeper. Any ball thrown outside the strike zone is a "ball" and the other keeper gets possession. If the other keeper drops a ball in the strike zone, it's a strike; three strikes and you're out -- the other player wins. For younger keepers, start off limiting them to two-handed throw-in style throws; with older keepers anything goes and it can get very intense!

👉 Keepers must stay within a yard of the line; they can't back up and cheat. Balls will be coming close, hard and fast, so keepers must be on their toes with arms out and ready to pull the ball in. Make sure keepers don't cushion by turning sideways and using rotation -- they **must** pull the ball in to their chest so their body is behind the ball.

- **Shots on Goal** (20 min)

Now move to shots on goal, either with a coach serving or in a game-like situation. Focus on catching hard shots and cushioning them. This is where a server who can strike hard, accurate balls is very helpful.

👉 In addition to getting the elbows extended and softly bringing the ball in to the chest, make sure the keepers are still moving forward to the ball and demonstrating good footwork.

- **Water Balloons** (5 min)

If you have extra time to prepare them (and a hot day!), catching water balloons can be a fun way to finish off the session. Have a catching contest with water balloons -- who can catch the most without breaking any; obviously, good cushioning is essential to keep them from breaking.

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TRAINING SESSIONS

HIGH BALLS AND CROSSES

Learning to judge high balls takes lots of repetition. Add in pressure from attackers and congestion in the box, and controlling high balls becomes one of the more difficult (but important) goalkeeping skills. For younger keepers, focus on the basic technique and make sure they get the ball as high as possible -- don't introduce too much pressure right away. For older keepers, review the basics and move quickly into the higher pressure drills and serve driven, crossed balls rather than simple lofted ones.

- **Warm Up (15 min)**

Jog, stretch, a little catch to get the hands warmed up. Then do some high-knee skipping to get the knees up and the body ready for jumping, and finally have the keepers leaping to touch the crossbar (no ball). As the final part of the warm up, have the keepers moving and bouncing the ball, then throwing it high on the coaches call, and catching it.

👉 It's important to be well warmed up for this session, as the keepers will be doing explosive jumping technique. Make sure the hips, quads and hamstrings especially are warm and loose. Make sure the players call "Keeper!" loudly when going up.

- **Basic High Balls with Increasing Pressure (15 min)**

Review basic high ball catching technique if necessary. Now have keepers move within a constricted area, throw their ball high on the coaches signal and catch it. The smaller area will create traffic. Then have the keepers pair up (each will still have a ball). Now, increase the space a bit, but when the coach calls, they now must throw the ball up and catch their partner's ball. As the final step, have the keepers all throw the balls at once at the coaches command and catch any ball they choose. This will be pretty chaotic at first. Challenge the keepers to let as few balls hit the ground as possible. For younger keepers, spend more time on the first few parts of this exercise; they need more work on basic jumping and catching without the pressure. Older keepers can use this to get warmed up for the next exercise.

👉 To successfully handle balls in the air, the goalkeeper's focus must be on the ball, and not on the traffic or other players. As the pressure increases, more balls will hit the ground, and balls will not be caught at the highest point, not because they were uncatchable or difficult to handle, but because players were worrying more about the other people than the ball. Stress focus on the ball, and don't forget to have the keepers maintain good technique.

- **Pairs with Increasing Pressure (15 min)**

Now we want to practice using the proper leg for protection. Have keepers in pairs with one ball. Server faces away from keeper and tosses the ball straight up and slightly to one side or the other. The keeper then gets the ball at the highest point, with the knee closest to the server going up (taking off of the far leg) to protect the keeper. The next step is to have the server give the keeper a slight push in the hip as they gather the ball. Increase the pressure by allowing the server to step to the side the ball is thrown to and put their hip/shoulder into the keeper, then move directly underneath the ball (no jumping), and finally maximum pressure -- the server attempts to head the ball before the keeper can catch it. Young keepers should simply do the first part of the exercise, practicing taking off the proper foot, without much pressure. For experienced keepers, you can start with some level of pressure right away.

👉 Again, focus needs to be on the ball, and not the pressure. In this type of environment, the goalkeeper should be able to catch almost every ball with good form, high in the air. They may occasionally end up on the ground after getting bumped, but they ought to be able to hang on to the ball. Make sure the proper

takeoff leg is used, that the knee is up, and that keepers are not waiting for the ball to descend too much before catching it.

- **Moving Through Traffic** (10 min)

This exercise needs 5-6 players besides the keeper who is working. Have the players stand in a small group with about an arm's length minimum between them. Keeper stands at the back of the group, with the coach on the other side. Coach serves the ball high towards the front of the group; the keeper must come through the crowd and get the ball as high as possible. Once this has been worked for few minutes, have the group move around in a small area as the keeper has to come for the ball. This is a good exercise for learning to judge the ball in traffic, and is a good exercise for beginners to learn to deal with congestion in the area.

👉 A saying for goalkeepers is, "Last to leave, first to the ball". The goalkeeper should not start for the ball too soon, but should take a beat or so to judge the ball before moving. Then, once they've got it tracked, go hard and be the first to the ball. Don't let keepers take the long way to the ball by going around part of the group of players. They must come hard right to the ball with a determined run, moving players out of the way with a shoulder if need be, and get the ball while it's still high in the air.

- **Crosses, Keeper+1v1** (20 min)

One keeper in goal, plus one defender and one attacker. Coach or server is out wide beyond the side of the penalty area serving crosses; all three players play just as they would in a game when the cross comes in. Serve balls from both sides of the penalty area.

👉 This is a more match-related exercise. Make sure the goalkeeper calls either "Keeper!" or "Away!" on every ball so the defender knows what the keeper is going to do, and that the keeper uses the proper leg to protect themselves from the pressure. Do not allow many "Away!" calls, except on mis-hit balls; this is the opportunity for the keeper to try and extend their range. A coaching point for experienced keepers is to have a stance slightly open to the field, and not facing the cross directly -- crosses are usually targeted to land around the penalty spot, so the keeper will more likely be going forward than towards the crosser.

- **"500"** (15 min)

A fun game that everyone likes to play to finish off this session is "500". Have keepers in groups of 5-6 (divided by height or ability if you have a larger session). Server stands about 30 yards away and kicks or throws the ball towards the group, where everyone is trying to catch the ball. Give 100 points for a catch out of the air, 50 points for a catch on one bounce, and 25 points for a clean moving pickup of a ball that has bounced twice or more (no points if they dive on the ground; this prevents pile-ups). When a player hits 500, they have won and are out of the game, continue until there is only one player left. Vary the service: lofted, floating balls, driven balls, in front of the group, over the group, etc.

👉 This is a difficult game because everyone's hands are in the air, unlike a soccer match where the keeper is the only one who can handle the ball. Insist on good catching technique, as high as possible in spite of the traffic. You might wish to deduct points from anyone who just slaps at the ball to prevent someone else from catching it -- and then again, maybe not!

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