

The Goalie

It's late in a very important game with the score close. The ball is in dangerous territory on the soccer field. The defender has the ball on the right edge of the penalty box. The goalie screams, urging him to clear the ball out of danger. "Send it! Send it!" The defender instead tries to make a move and dribble past the opposing forward. The defender fails. The forward takes the ball and fires toward goal. The goalie leaps into the air, his body horizontal to the ground, and snares the round ball in his gloved hands, keeping it from the upper right corner of the net. All of a sudden he's up and screaming at the defender. He shoves the defender and yells, "If you ever fucking do that again I'll kill you!"

The goalie.

They are a species unto themselves in the genus of athletes. They alone are charged with the main responsibility of keeping the opposing team from its appointed goal. If they succeed they are lauded as heroes, if they fail, blamed as goats. "There is no position in sport as noble as goaltending," said former Russian great Vladislav Tretiak.

A goalie must clot the wound, stem the tide, divert the river, save the day. Goalies are singular in that they face the brunt of the wrath of opposing fans. They can do the impossible by making a great save or do the unthinkable by giving up a soft goal. "The goalie is like the guy on the minefield. He discovers the mines and destroys them. If [he] make[s] a mistake, somebody gets blown up," said NHL goalie Arturs Irbe.

Goalkeeping is a job you wouldn't wish on anyone. "The only job worse is a javelin catcher at a track and field meet," said former New York Ranger goalie Gump Worsley.

"We are the sort of people who make health insurance popular," said former Detroit Red Wing goalie Terry Sawchuk.

Yet goalies love their trade. "It's so much fun, I would never trade it. When it comes to a big game, there's nothing more fun than playing in goal," said Matt Perl, one of the goalies on the Brown club soccer team.

Goalies tackle the most pressure packed position in sports. “All that I’ve gone through can’t hold a candle to the pressure I’ve endured as a goalie,” said former US national water polo team goalie Craig Wilson in his guide to goalkeeping.

Some call them crazy. "Any discussion on hockey goaltenders must begin with the assumption that they are about three sandwiches shy of a picnic. I can prove this. From the moment Primitive Man first lurched erect, he and those who came after him survived on the principle that when something hard and potentially painful comes at you at great velocity, you get the hell out of its path. Goalkeepers throw themselves into its path. I rest my case," said ice hockey columnist Jim Taylor.

Goalies are different. Goalies are special.

“Goalies are weird,” said Brown women’s ice hockey forward Patty Long. “They have to be. They’re always alone on the ice; they don’t have the camaraderie on the bench. They have to deal with being the last line of defense. They get 80 mile per hour slap shots at their head. Weird.”

“It takes a different breed to tackle this position,” said Brown hockey goaltender Scott Stirling.

But, what exactly is that breed?

They go by names like the Eagle, Saint Patrick, Weeds, Perl Necklace, the Dominator, Stirls, Brew-dog, Ad-Rock, the Bandit, Satan’s Wallpaper, the Mask, Octopus, The Cat, Hollywood, CuJo, Shamu, the Cheese, Scoops, the Peroxide Kid, Blue Line, the Accountant, the Leprechaun from Palmarolle, and Olie the Goalie.

Some go into battle dressed in armor like medieval knights others like gladiators with only their bare hands to protect them. They have one job to do- don’t let the other team score. How do they prepare? What goes through their mind as they perform their task? How do they respond to failure and the never ending jeering of the opposing fans? Why do they do what they do?

Part of what makes goalies appear so quirky are their superstitions. Superstitions are a large part of all sports. They help athletes mentally prepare to play, to gain a level of comfort or intensity for peak performance. Most athletes have their little quirks, goaltenders usually more so than others. “While there are always intense players at

whatever position, a goalie needs overt intensity to assert himself”, said Adam Weinstock, one of the goalies for the Brown club soccer team.

“I have to prepare differently than my teammates,” said minor league hockey goalie Brent Belecki. “They have to get their adrenaline pumping. I have to stay more relaxed and focused and calm.” It is in this need to gain extra intensity or focus that a goalie gains extra eccentricities.

Superstitions are often simple, sometimes hilarious. Some goalies dress left side first, or listen to Garth Brooks, or eat caramel chocolate bars and grapefruit before every game. Others leave the TV on in their apartment on a certain channel or have their girlfriend carry a puck in her purse. One even gave the goalposts names, naming one after his mother.

“I listen to music before the game to get me into the game mode,” said Brown women’s soccer goalie Elise Roy. “A lot of times I will go up to the field the morning before a game and walk around and think about what I want to accomplish.”

Brown water polo goaltender Noah Himmel swims three laps freestyle then three laps breaststroke then does the same leg drills in the same order before every game. “At the beginning of period I slap the crossbar with both hands,” said Himmel.

“I always wear the same shirt under my jersey during every game. I gave it to my brother now he wears it to all his games,” said Matt Perl. “I always make sure the posts are pulled in before the games. I always think that extra half inch makes a difference.”

“I talk to myself to pump myself up,” said Weinstock. He also uses visualization before games. Weinstock describes his technique, “Close your eyes...imagine a green dot; see that dot; now that dot is growing into the field you like to play on more than any other field...Then continue, [seeing] details about making saves in practice and game scenarios.”

Weinstock adopted visualization before a particularly big game in high school. “I arrived at our home field early--ecstatic. I could not wait for the game. I lay down on the team bench, the field abandoned at the time. I closed my eyes and found that green dot. Completely relaxed, my visualization flowed. I saw myself playing goalkeeper the way I enjoyed the position--well and efficiently.” He has been using the technique ever since. “The visualization was what mentally prepared me for many successful games.”

A goalie must transfer their pre-game mental approach to the ice, field or pool and maintain intensity for the whole game. They must take a different approach from all the other players and fight the demons in their brain.

"The most important part of goaltending is what's inside your head," said NHL goalie John Vanbiesbrouck on ESPN's *Up Close*.

"Because the demands on a goalie are mostly mental, it means that for a goalie, the biggest enemy is himself. Not a puck, not an opponent, not a quirk of size or style. Him. The stress and anxiety he feels when he plays, the fear of failing, the fear of being embarrassed, the fear of being physically hurt, all the symptoms of his position, in constant ebb and flow, but never disappearing," said Ken Dryden, former goalie for the Montreal Canadiens. "The successful goalie understands these neuroses, accepts them, and puts them under control. The unsuccessful goalie is distracted by them, his mind in knots, his body quickly following."

If a goalie controls their brain, they can relax and focus. "You have to be relaxed yet extremely into it and totally focused. You can't prepare yourself for what will happen - you have to want to win anyway you can - you just have to make yourself excited that you get to go 1 on 1 with this player - that you get to show everyone what you have and that you get to compete," said Elise Roy.

Once focused, confidence or anger drives a goalie's success. They must think positive and defend their penalty box or their crease as if it were the Holy Grail. They must carry an air of invincibility.

"I need to believe that I will block the shot before it comes, whether it is an All-American or a regular player shooting. Cockiness is the key," said Noah Himmel.

"I think a goaltender more than any other position has a lot of time to sit back and really think about things and if you start thinking negatively in a game you're going to get yourself into trouble. And whether it's people in the stands screaming at you or your own negative part of your mind telling you that you just messed up or you could mess up, that's when you start getting problems," said Brown women's ice hockey goalie Ali Brewer.

"You can't give a shit. You just can't care what anyone thinks. I mean really big crowds, friends, parents, girls, really good-looking girls in the stands, you can't be afraid

to mess up. The biggest thing is you have to be decisive. Sometimes you challenge for a ball in the air and you drop and you miss it, and it's a goal, and it's obvious you messed up and you just can't care. You can't care what anyone else thinks, you can't care," said Perl. "There are times when you just feel like no one can score on you."

"I always try to get mad. It makes me play better, gets me really focused. That's probably the reason I tried to hurt people because I really felt like that if I was really into the game that if I really wanted to keep the ball out bad enough, I really wanted to hurt them, then I'd play better," said Perl.

Whether through hurting others or simply stopping the ball or puck, a goalie must make the goal their domain and no one else's. "As a goalie, I need to maintain a special mentality that I own the penalty box and I must take it personally when someone thinks they can try to penetrate my goal; so I assume the mentality that no one can get by me...this is my ball, this is my goal, and I'll do whatever is physically possible to assert my presence in the space of the penalty area," said Weinstock. "While it's important for all players to have confidence and assume the attitude that no one can beat them, it is particularly so for the goalie to possess such an attitude. It is when you question yourself that you make mistakes and fail to assert your presence as a goalie must do."

Matt Perl remembers one of these mistakes vividly. "I remember giving up a goal, it was senior year, my last game. It was the tournament championship. We had already won the regular season title. We were ranked #3 in the area. We were playing Bollus, who were sort of a perennial power. We had beaten them twice in the regular season. We were up one nothing. We just wanted to beat them so badly. A ball was played down to this guy on the left. My friend was a defender, he screamed at me to come out. I said what the fuck. I don't even know why I listened I shouldn't have done anything, but I took about 3 steps forward and soon as I started I was like what the fuck and I realized, shit, and the guy hit a shot. I managed to come out and then I started to run back. I didn't have any orientation at the goal. I started to run at the back post and the guy drilled the shot, I dove and I almost got it, but it went right into the top corner. I was just like, Fuck... It was like our entire season was kind of like this crushing feeling, it was like I couldn't believe it, I couldn't believe I had just made this mistake." (Note: Consider changing this to prose)

Goalkeeping mistakes, like Perl's are the most obvious to the casual observer. "A goalie is judged only by the goals he gives up, and each one activates a red light that illuminates his failure for the world to see," said *Sports Illustrated* writer Skip Rozin.

Letting one get by and into the back of the net can be devastating. "It just gives you a sick feeling in your stomach when you let in a goal. Then when you let in another one, you feel like shooting yourself," said NHL goalie Blaine Lacher.

Adam Weinstock had one particular game when his impenetrable fortress was infiltrated early and often. "I will not say it was *like* a nightmare, but rather it *was* a nightmare," said Weinstock. "I still cannot recall a time in which I have felt as ashamed and embarrassed and helpless as I did that horrific afternoon."

"The bottom line is that you are the last line of defense and if the puck or ball gets by you, you've let your teammates down," said Scott Stirling. "I never want to let down my teammates, which is one of the biggest things that enters your mind when you get into the net."

Yet a goalie must put these failures behind them and carry on as if nothing has happened.

"The goalie must maintain a positive attitude," said Craig Wilson. "The position lends itself to being placed in a pressure cooker. A positive attitude is infectious. If you stay positive, your teammates will believe in you and share your outlook."

"The hardest thing really, the biggest thing is to make sure the guys in front of you still have confidence in you and you let them know that you still have confidence in yourself no matter how bad the goal was you just let up or how bad a play they just made," said Perl. "Everyone on the team has a role. It just so happens that you're playing goal; your role is that if you mess up, they're going to score."

"When I let in a goal, I feel very discouraged and frequently pissed at myself," said Weinstock. "I question the decisions I may have made and consider how I could have handled the situation better, if only I had known. But [then] I translate my frustration with myself into positive energy and more focus and determination to make the future saves."

Sometimes all the positive energy in the world can't stop disaster from striking for a goalie, and when it does the other team's fans are certain to let the goalie know about it.

“How would you like it if you were sitting in your office and you made one little mistake. Suddenly, a big red light went on and 18,000 people jumped up and started screaming at you, calling you a bum and an imbecile and throwing garbage at you. That's what it's like when you play goal in the NHL.”

-- Jacques Plante, former Montreal Canadiens goaltender.

Brown versus Harvard women's ice hockey. The first and second ranked teams in the country. Harvard leads 4-2 late in the final stanza.

Harvard attacks. Two white and red clad attackers skate up ice, rushing at only one brown clad defender in a charge toward Ali Brewer's goal. The puck is passed from the left to the right, sliding in front of Brewer, just out of the reach of her stick. The other Harvard attacker takes the puck on the backhand. Brewer slides across the crease, as the puck is lifted over her outstretched pads and glove hand and into the net. Goal. A red light goes on behind her. Suddenly 1700 people, a record crowd for women's college hockey, rise in unison, clapping and screaming their lungs out. Brewer bangs her stick on the ice and against a goal post before fishing the puck out of the net. Seven guys who sit in the packed stands with no shirts on have H-A-R-V-A-R-D spelled out on their chests. These seven pick up long cones of the type used by cheerleaders to amplify their voice and begin chanting, “Brew-er, Brew-er,” the way Boston Red Sox fans chanted Dar-yl Dar-yl at Daryl Strawberry in the 1986 World Series.

Moments later it begins again. A rush by the girls in white. A shot on goal. Brewer goes down and slides to make the first save with her pads. Or does she? Maybe it hit the post. The fans on the far side of the ice rise in anticipation, trying to get a better look. The puck rebounds away from the goal. Brewer turns back towards the goal, not knowing where the puck is. A Harvard player retrieves the puck and winds up a slap shot. The puck fires toward net. Brewer spins round back toward the goal, desperately trying to find the puck. One of the Brown defenders sees the puck heading for the net

and dives futilely to block the open net, in the process knocking Brewer to the ground as the little black disc rockets into the netting for Harvard's sixth goal of the game. Brewer simply gets up, turns around, crouches in position and stares toward center ice. The boys behind her with the painted chests, this time joined by the Harvard band and a third of the heavily partisan crowd, start another chant. "Hey Brewer, you're not a goalie, you're a sieve. Hey Brewer, you're not a sieve; you're a funnel. Hey Brewer, you're not a funnel; you're a vacuum. Hey Brewer, you're not a vacuum; you're a black hole. Hey Brewer, you're not a black hole; you just suck! You just suck! You just suck!"

Heckling and obnoxious fans are a typical and wonderful part of all competitive sports. Unfortunately for goalies, they take the brunt of the abuse from fans. "Goaltenders get heckled the most," said Brown women's ice hockey defender Cara Gardner. Imagine thousands of fans hurling insults at you from above about your mother or your girlfriend or boyfriend, and you have to continue to throw yourself in front of a flying high-speed projectile whose specific purpose is getting past you. The mere thought is daunting to someone who hasn't experienced it. "Brewer loves it," said Gardner

"I wish we were winning so I could have winked or something at the people who were yelling at me," said Brewer of the Harvard game. "[I'm] flattered that someone took the time out of their day to try and mess with [my] head. That's the way I take it when any one ever tries to get inside my head, I just take it as hey, if they think that I'm important enough for them to waste their day yelling at me, then hey I feed off that. I think it can be frustrating when you're losing 6-0. It's really easy to sit there and laugh at people in the stands when your team's ahead."

None the less says Perl; a goalie simply can't avoid jeers. "You can't run away from it. You just have to ignore it. You just have to feel like fuck it, whatever."

Like Brewer, Weinstock feeds off the heckling of opposing fans. "I've often had fans talk trash to me from behind the net," he said. "I love it. It helps keep me focused and determined to not give them the satisfaction of seeing the ball in my net."

Fans torturing you from the stands; letting down your teammates; being isolated on the field, asked to do a completely different job than the rest of your team; getting in the way of six ounces of vulcanized rubber or an inflated leather ball coming at you at

upwards of one hundred miles an hour; almost inviting serious injury- all these things are part of playing goal. What would make someone partake such a task? Why put yourself through all the trouble?

Perhaps they play because of the indescribable feeling of making a save or helping your team win. “When all is said and done the most rewarding part of being a goalie is the satisfaction of a win and knowing that you were part of making that happen,” said Stirling.

“When you make a big save it’s...great. It’s just fun, making a big save; I can’t really describe it. Not even just a high, it’s sort of like good let’s get another one,” said Perl.

“The animated times in which I make a save that every one knows impacts the outcome of the game are the experiences that make the position and the sport sometimes the greatest aspect of my life,” said Weinstock. “They are what motivate me to play goalkeeper and soccer.”

An attacker rushes up the middle of the soccer field toward the goal. The defender takes the attacker down from behind with a vicious slide tackle. A shrill sound rings out across the pitch as the man in black blows his whistle. The referee points to the white chalk dot twelve yards away from the goal. Penalty shot. Everything stops. All the players save two leave the eighteen-yard area that is the penalty box. One, the shooter, stands a few steps away from the white dot where the ball sits. The other, the goalie, stands a measly twelve yards from the ball on the goal line. The satisfaction of making a big save pumps up the keeper. He smiles. A well placed, well-struck ball will mean the goalie has no chance. Easy goal. Yet the goalie smiles. He knows he is mentally stronger than the shooter. He steps on the chalk of the goal line, bouncing hard on his toes, his arms outstretched to assert his space. It’s his goal, not the shooter’s. The goalie whispers words of encouragement to himself. His total focus is on the ball. He doesn’t even look at the shooter as the shooter begins his trot toward the ball. He stares at the ball, nothing else. He tells himself, “That ball is mine.” He must react, not anticipate. He must be ready for the ball to go anywhere, high or low, left or right. When the shooter reaches the ball, the goalie splits steps on his toes and stays balanced. The ball is struck. The keeper takes a strong step in the direction the ball is kicked and

takes off. Full extension on the dive toward the side of his net. The ball is in his reach. He collapses on it. “My ball,” he says to himself.

“When a game gets intense,” said Weinstock, “everything feels like life or death.”
Are goalies indeed one sandwich short of a picnic? If so, at least we know why.