



SESSION A3 • STANDALONE PLAN

The Goalkeeper — The Player Who Never Gets a Session

Goalkeeping • Reference format: U12 9v9 • 60 minutes • 14–16 players, including 2 goalkeepers

AT A GLANCE

TIME	MINS	PHASE	PRACTICE
0:00 – 0:10	10	■ Warm-up	A3.1 Hands
0:10 – 0:25	15	■ Technical practice	A3.2 The Arc
0:25 – 0:40	15	■ Skill game	A3.3 Come or Stay
0:40 – 0:55	15	■ Conditioned match	A3.4 The Keeper's Game
0:55 – 1:00	5	■ Reflection	Questions and homework

USING THIS SESSION

This is a standalone plan. It does not depend on any other session in the set and can be run whenever it is useful to you — as a one-off, out of order, or repeated. Nothing here assumes the players did something last week.

U12 nine-a-side is the reference format, not the audience. The session is written at 9v9 because something has to be, and the phone index adapts it to the other four Irish FA formats — pick your team at the top of it and this session will tell you whether to run it as printed, scale it, adapt it, or leave it for another age.

Scaling up, and down as far as 7v7, is a matter of numbers. Keep roughly the same space per player: to 7v7 that is about a fifth smaller with a player off each team, to 5v5 about a third. **For eleven-a-side** add ten to fifteen metres to the length of the bigger practices and put the extra players in as outside players or a second team, never in a queue.

Below U10 it is not just a matter of size, because the game itself is different. There is no offside, no throw-in — restarts are a dribble or a pass in — no referee, and no league result. At U8–U9 the technical practice usually wants shortening or dropping. At U6–U7 there are no goalkeepers at all and the four-phase hour is the wrong shape entirely. The Formats tab in the phone index has the rules for each stage.

WHY THIS SESSION MATTERS

The goalkeeper appears in every session of the main curriculum — playing out from the back, defending crosses, commanding the box, restarting quickly. In none of them is the goalkeeper actually coached. That is normal, and it is the single biggest hole in grassroots football: two children in every squad spend a season being included, being shot at, and being blamed, and nobody ever teaches them how to catch a ball. **Tonight is theirs, and it is built so that nobody else stands around.** The outfield players serve, cross, finish and shoot in every practice, which is exactly the volume of finishing they enjoy anyway. The keepers get the specialist work embedded inside it. There are three ideas and they are all simple. **Catch it properly** — hands above the waist, scoop below, and always move the feet before the hands. **Stand in the right place** — most saves at this age are not saves at all, they are a keeper who was already there. **And decide** — coming and staying are both correct, and dithering between them is the only genuine mistake. **One thing to say before you start, in front of the whole squad:** the goalkeeper is a footballer who is allowed to use their hands, and a mistake by a goalkeeper is exactly the same as a mistake by anybody else. It changes how the group treats them for the rest of the season.

BY THE END, PLAYERS CAN

- **Catch a ball three ways** — above the waist, below the waist, and to the side.
- **Move the feet before the hands**, always.
- **Start in the right place** — on the line between the ball and the middle of the goal.
- **Decide to come or to stay**, and say which.
- **Distribute to start an attack** rather than to end a problem.

KIT LIST

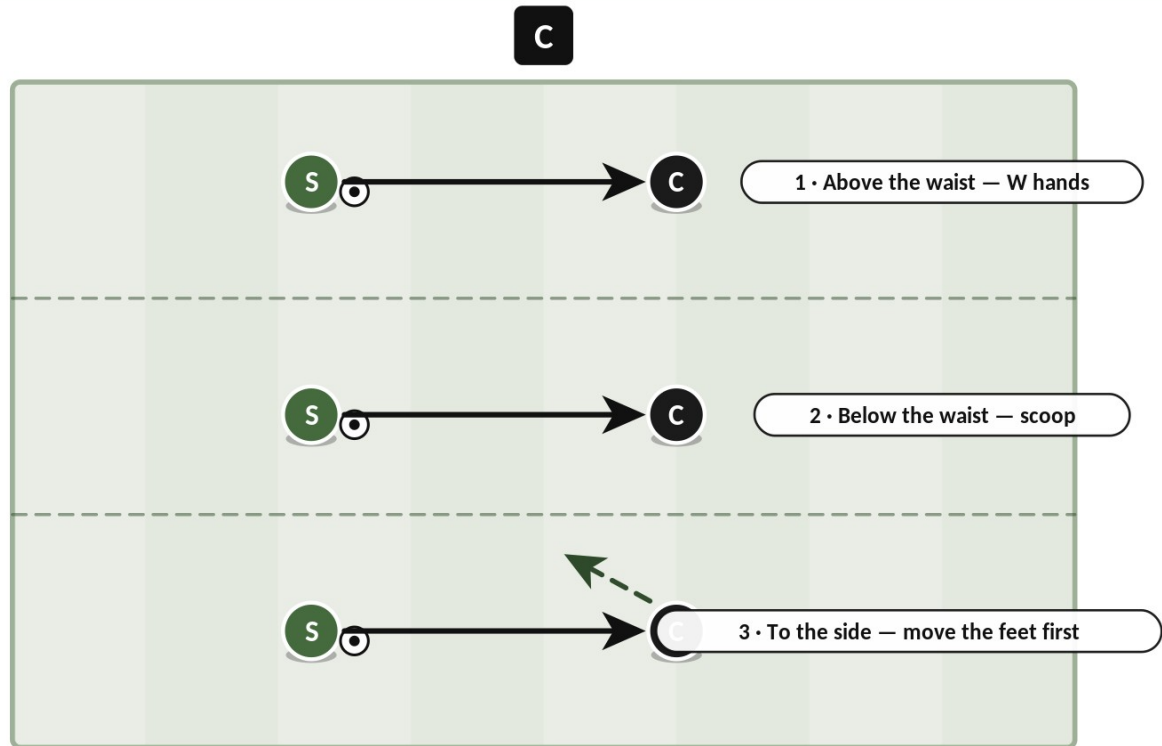
Ground needed: about 50 × 35 m with at least one proper goal. **The design rule for this session is that the goalkeepers work and everybody else works too.** Outfield players are servers, crossers and finishers throughout, which gives them a session of shooting they will enjoy and gives the keepers three hundred repetitions they would never otherwise get. **Rotate the goalkeepers every three or four minutes without exception** — facing continuous shooting is exhausting and demoralising, and a tired keeper makes everybody's technique look worse than it is. **And if you have a third player who fancies it, let them.** Under-12 is exactly the right age to find out you like going in goal, and the player who discovers it tonight may be your keeper for the next six years. Ground rules on safety: gloves on, no shooting at close range above waist height, and stop the practice if anybody lands awkwardly.

ITEM	QTY	USED IN
Footballs (size 4)	20	All practices
Flat markers	44	Boxes, arcs and target zones
Bibs — red / blue / yellow	8 / 8 / 4	Servers, finishers and keepers
Full-size goals	2	A3.2, A3.3 and A3.4
Cones	6	Marking the arc in A3.2
Goalkeeper gloves	3 pairs	Including a spare — somebody will forget

A3.1 HANDS

Everybody, not just the keepers. Three catching techniques in pairs — above the waist, below the waist, and to the side — because handling is a skill every player should have and one of them is going to end up in goal.

32 x 20 m • everybody, not just the keepers • three ways to catch a ball • 10 minutes



EVERY PLAYER LEARNS THIS • ONE OF THEM WILL BE A GOALKEEPER

● Servers ● Catchers ● Ball ➔ Served ➔ Set, then take it C Coach

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SET UP

- 32 x 20 m split into three lanes.
- Pairs, 8 m apart, one ball between two.
- Each lane rehearses one technique; pairs move up a lane every three minutes.
- Goalkeepers work in pairs together at the far end with the coach.
- Coach moving between the lanes.

HOW IT RUNS

- Minutes 0–3 — arrival.** Greet each player by name, ball each, dribbling and passing. **Ask one question at the door, to everybody:** *who has ever gone in goal?* More hands go up than you expect.
- Minute 3 — above the waist, ninety seconds.** Hands in a W behind the ball, thumbs almost touching, elbows soft so the ball is absorbed rather than blocked. Fifteen catches each.
- Minute 5 — below the waist, ninety seconds.** Hands turned down, little fingers together, forearms forming a barrier, and the whole body behind it.
- Minute 7 — to the side, ninety seconds.** The point is the feet: **move first, then catch.** A ball taken while stretching is a ball that will be dropped.

5. **Minutes 7–10 — competitive.** Pairs count consecutive clean catches. Anything dropped resets to zero, which produces both concentration and a lot of noise.

RULES & SCORING

- **Serves are firm but sensible** — thrown, not kicked, in the warm-up.
- **Clean catch only** — anything parried, juggled or trapped against the body resets the count.
- **Feet move before hands** on every side serve.
- Everybody does all three techniques.
- Goalkeepers work as a pair with the coach and get double the volume.

COACHING POINTS — THE FOUR CORNERS

Technical	Above the waist: W hands, thumbs together, elbows soft. Below: hands down, little fingers together, body behind the line of the ball. To the side: feet first, then hands, and always take it in front of the body.
Tactical	Get the body behind it. At under-12 almost every dropped ball is a ball taken beside the body rather than in front of it. Nothing else in goalkeeping is as cheaply fixed.
Physical	Light. A genuinely good warm-up for hands, shoulders and feet.
Psychological	Outfield players are usually surprised to find handling is difficult. It builds a bit of quiet respect for the keepers, which is a useful side effect.
Social	Pair the two goalkeepers together for part of it — they rarely get to work with somebody who does their job.

WATCH FOR

WHAT YOU'LL SEE	WHAT TO DO
Catching beside the body	<i>In front of you. Body behind it.</i>
Stiff arms	<i>Soft elbows. Take the pace off it.</i>
Reaching instead of moving	<i>Feet first. Every time.</i>
Fingers pointing at the ball	The commonest cause of a jammed finger. Fix it immediately.
Serves being fired too hard	Stop it. This is a technique practice, not a test.

ASK THEM

- Where should your hands be for a high ball? A low one?
- What moves first — your hands or your feet?
- Where should the ball be when you catch it?
- Why do we get the body behind it?
- Who fancies going in goal later?

ADJUST IT

HARDER	EASIER
Serves from closer.	Serves from further away and softer.
One-handed catches for the goalkeepers only.	Two-bounce rule before catching.
Serve, turn, catch — the catcher starts facing away.	Underarm serves only.
Twenty consecutive catches to win.	Ten consecutive catches to win.

IT'S WORKING WHEN

Bodies behind the ball.

Feet moving before hands.

Clean catches rather than parries.

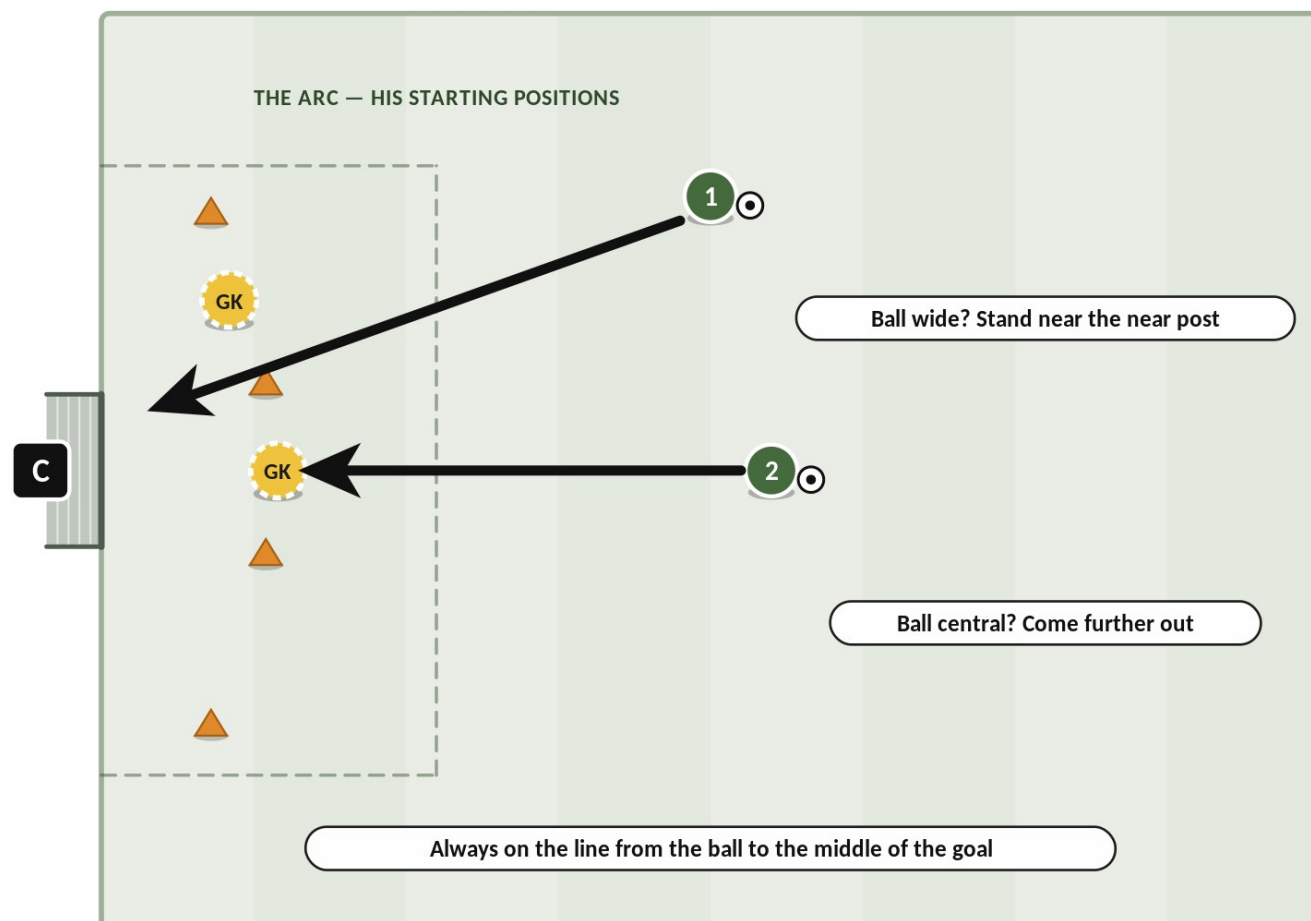
Everybody doing all three techniques.

At least one outfield player asking to go in goal.

A3.2 THE ARC

Starting position, which is the single most productive thing you can coach a young goalkeeper. Most saves at this age are not saves — they are a keeper who was already standing in the right place.

40 x 30 m • where to stand before the shot is struck • 15 minutes



BE IN THE RIGHT PLACE AND MOST SAVES ARE EASY

● Shooters ● Goalkeeper ● Ball ▲ The arc ➔ Shot C Coach

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SET UP

- 40 x 30 m with a full goal and a marked penalty area.
- Mark the arc with four cones — the curve the goalkeeper's starting position follows as the ball moves across.
- Shooters in three queues at 16 m: one wide left, one central, one wide right.
- The two goalkeepers alternate every four shots; the coach moves the ball between queues.
- Coach beside the goal.

HOW IT RUNS

1. Minutes 0-4 — no shooting at all. Walk the ball slowly across the three positions and let the goalkeeper move along the arc. Stop three times and ask: *where's the middle of the goal from here?* The keeper should always be on that line.

2. **Minute 4 — the two rules, sixty seconds. Ball wide, stand nearer the near post. Ball central, come further out.** That is the whole of angle play at this age.
3. **Minutes 5-11 — live shooting**, one queue at a time, called by you. Keepers score 1 for a save, 2 for a save held rather than parried.
4. **Minute 11 — add the set position.** As the shooter's foot goes back, the keeper stops moving, feet apart, hands out, weight forward. **A moving goalkeeper cannot dive.**
5. **Minutes 11-15 — random queues**, so the keeper has to adjust before every shot. Rotate the keepers every four shots.
6. **Shooters have their own job:** low and to the corners, from Session 30.

RULES & SCORING

- **The goalkeeper must be set before the ball is struck.** A shot taken while he is moving scores nothing for him.
- **Keepers score 1** for a save, 2 for a save held rather than parried.
- **Shooters score 1** for a goal, and must strike low and inside the posts.
- One queue shoots at a time, called by the coach.
- Goalkeepers rotate every four shots.

COACHING POINTS — THE FOUR CORNERS

Technical	The set position — feet slightly wider than shoulders, weight on the balls of the feet, hands out in front and low. And the small steps that take the keeper along the arc rather than big strides across the goal.
Tactical	Stand on the line from the ball to the middle of the goal, and come as far out as you dare. Every metre forward makes the goal smaller. And the near post is never left open — if a keeper is beaten at their near post, they were in the wrong place, not unlucky.
Physical	Repeated short adjustments and dives. Rotate on schedule; the ground is hard on hips and shoulders.
Psychological	Goalkeepers get blamed for goals they had no chance with. Tell them plainly which of tonight's goals were their responsibility and which were not — nobody ever does, and it matters enormously.
Social	Get the shooters to say where they were aiming after each shot. It teaches both sides at once.

WATCH FOR

WHAT YOU'LL SEE	WHAT TO DO
Standing on the goal line	The default. <i>Come out. Make the goal smaller.</i>
Still moving as the ball is struck	<i>Set. Stop your feet.</i>
Near post beaten	Always a position error. Show it rather than saying it.
Big sideways strides	<i>Small steps. You can't dive from a big one.</i>
Parrying everything	<i>Catch it if you can. A parry gives them another go.</i>
Shooters blasting from 20 m	Enforce low and inside the posts — it makes the practice useful for both.

ASK THEM

- Where's the middle of the goal from where you're standing?
- Ball wide — where do you stand? Ball central?
- When do you stop moving?

- Which of those goals could you have stopped?
- Shooters — where were you aiming?

ADJUST IT

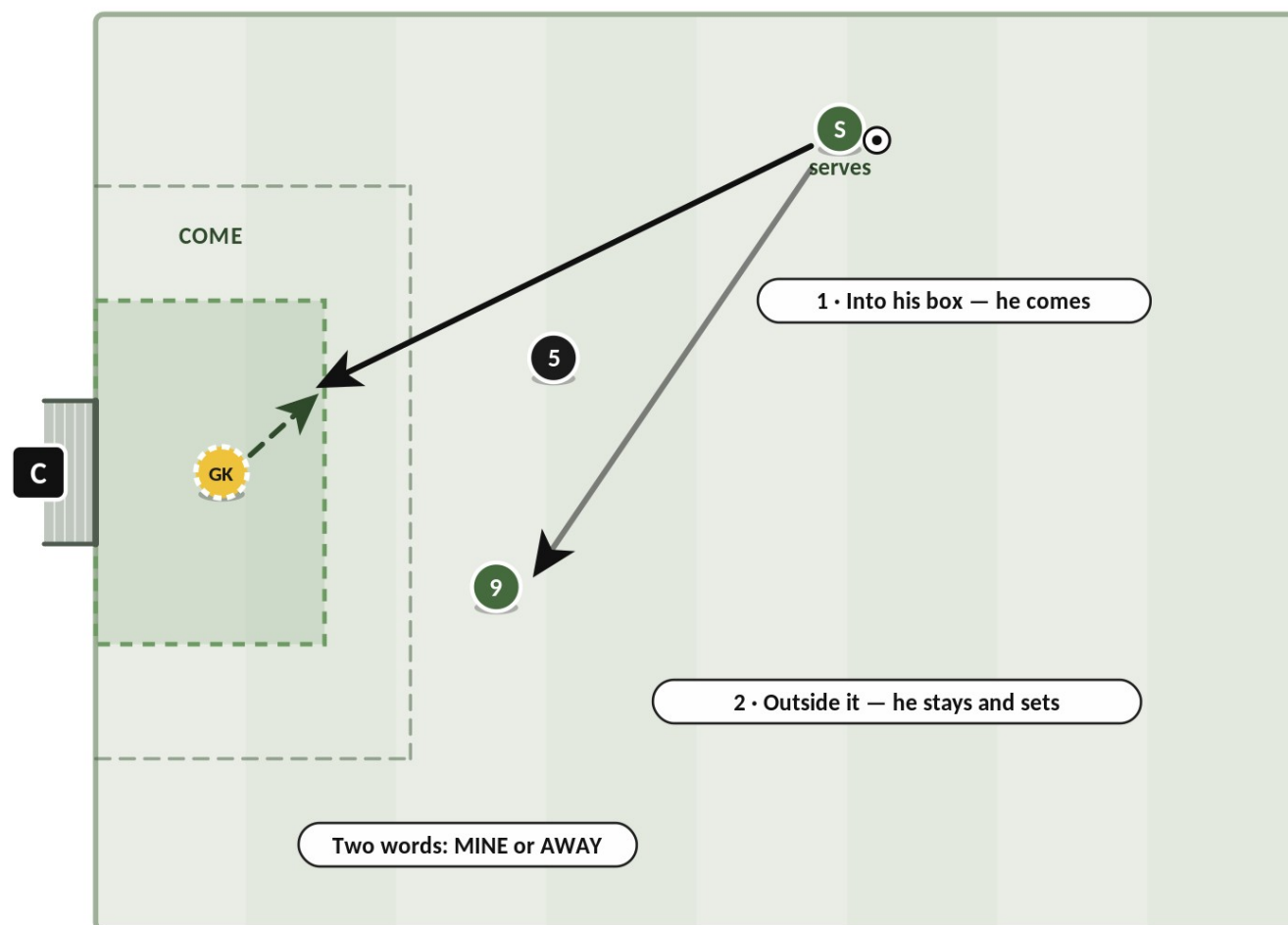
HARDER	EASIER
Two shooters, one ball, so the keeper adjusts twice.	Shots from 20 m and along the ground only.
One touch and shoot.	Announce the queue every time.
Shots from 12 m.	Walk the arc twice more before shooting.
The keeper must catch to score — no points for parries.	Points for any save, held or not.

IT'S WORKING WHEN The goalkeeper set before every shot. Starting positions following the arc. The near post not being beaten. More catches than parries. Both keepers rotated regularly and still enjoying it.

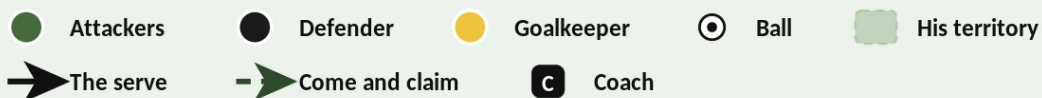
A3.3 COME OR STAY

The decision that shapes a goalkeeper's season. Balls served in behind and into the box, one defender and one attacker, and a keeper who must choose — and say which — before anybody else moves.

42 x 32 m • the decision that decides a goalkeeper's season • 15 minutes



COMING AND STAYING ARE BOTH FINE • DITHERING IS NOT



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SET UP

- 42 × 32 m with a **full goal** and the penalty area marked.
- **Mark the keeper's territory** — roughly the six-yard box extended — so 'come' and 'stay' have a visible boundary.
- **A server at 25 m**, one attacker and one defender starting level 20 m out.
- Queues of two attackers and two defenders; keepers alternate every four repetitions.
- Coach beside the server.

HOW IT RUNS

1. **Set it up in 45 seconds.** The server plays a ball either into the keeper's territory or short of it. The keeper decides.
2. **Minutes 0–4 — no coaching.** Expect dithering: a step forward, a step back, and an attacker reaching it first. That is the picture the session exists to fix.
3. **Minute 4 — the boundary, ninety seconds.** *Inside that area is yours. Outside it, stay and set.* Then the two words: "mine" and "away", shouted before moving, not while moving.
4. **Minutes 5–11 — live and scored.** Keeper 1 for a clean claim or a save, 2 for either with the correct call made first. Attacker 1 for a shot, 2 for a goal.
5. **Minute 11 — add the one-against-one.** Serves short of the box, so the keeper must stay, spread and make themselves big rather than diving early.
6. **Minutes 11–15 — mixed serves**, unannounced, so the decision is genuine every time.

RULES & SCORING

- The keeper must call "mine" or "away" before moving. No call, no points.
- Inside the marked territory is the keeper's; outside it belongs to the defender.
- Keeper 1 for a claim or save, 2 with the correct call first.
- In a one-against-one the keeper may not dive until the attacker has touched the ball.
- Rotate every four repetitions.

COACHING POINTS — THE FOUR CORNERS

Technical	Coming: attack the ball at its highest point, one knee up for protection, two hands, and take it in front. Staying: set, get big, and delay the dive until the attacker commits.
Tactical	Coming and staying are both correct answers; dithering is the only wrong one. A keeper who commits fully to either will be right most of the time and recoverable when wrong. And the call is what makes the defenders useful — a defender who hears <i>mine</i> gets out of the way, and a defender who hears nothing gets in the way.
Physical	Repeated dives and get-ups. Rotate frequently and stop if the ground is very hard.
Psychological	The fear of coming and missing is real and rational. Make it explicit: <i>if you come and get it wrong, that's my fault for asking you. If you dither, that's the only thing I'll mind.</i>
Social	The defenders should be reacting to the keeper's voice. If they are not, the keeper is not loud enough — and the defenders can be asked whether they heard anything.

WATCH FOR

WHAT YOU'LL SEE	WHAT TO DO
Dithering	The whole session. Two steps out and one back concedes every time.
Silent decisions	<i>Say it. Nobody can read your mind.</i>
Coming for balls outside the territory	Also an error, and the boundary is there to show it.
Diving early in a one-against-one	<i>Wait. Make him touch it first.</i>
Defenders not reacting to the call	Ask them what they heard.
Keepers being punished for a brave decision	Never. Say so out loud when it happens.

ASK THEM

- Come or stay? Why?

- Which two words?
- Where's the edge of your territory?
- In a one-against-one, when do you go down?
- Defenders — did you hear him?

ADJUST IT

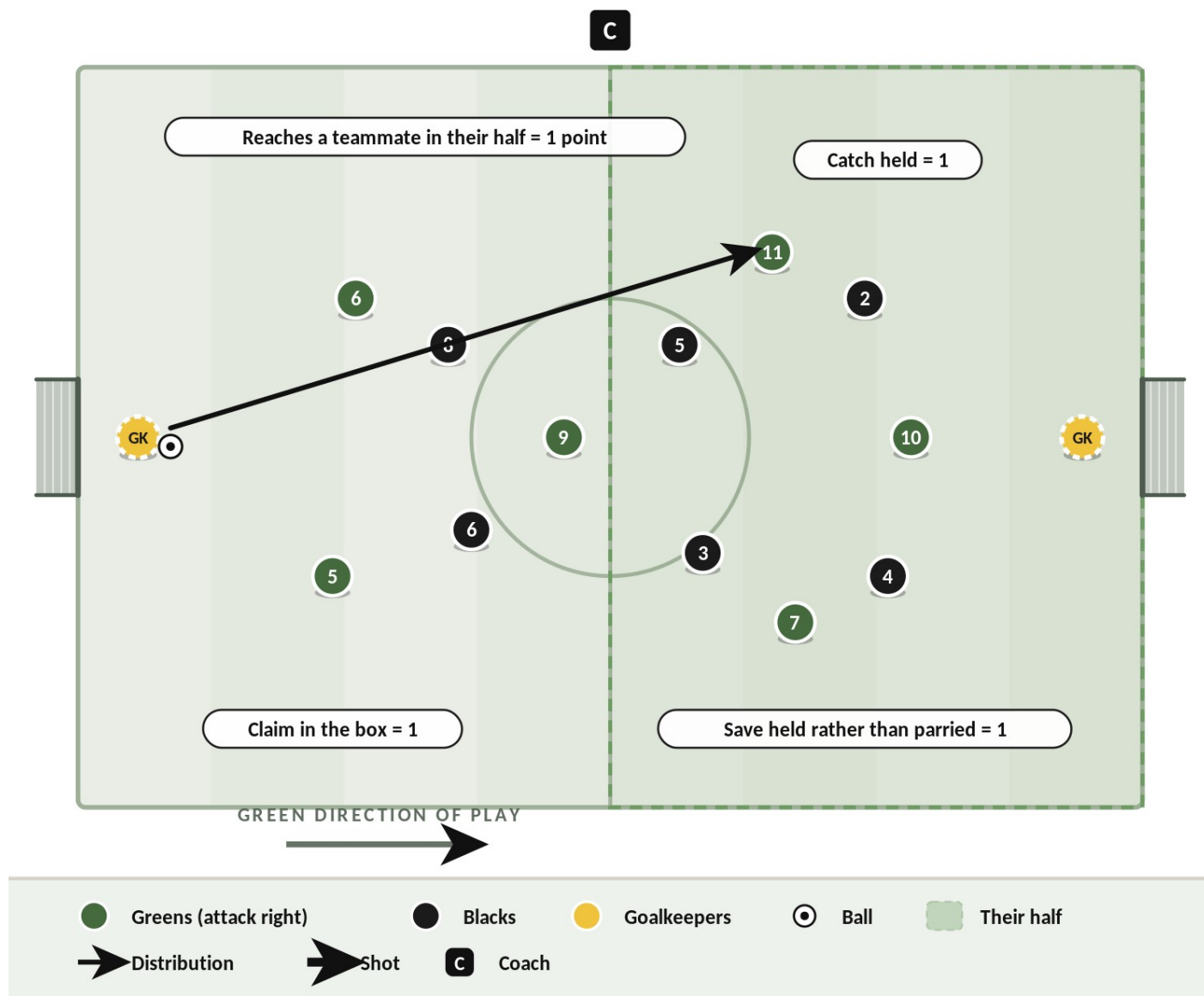
HARDER	EASIER
Two attackers against one defender.	Announce each serve type before it comes.
Serves disguised — the server looks one way and plays the other.	One attacker, one defender, slower serves.
A third serve type: the through ball to the edge of the box.	Bigger keeper territory.
The keeper must distribute accurately after every claim.	Remove the one-against-one and keep only the claim.

IT'S WORKING WHEN Decisions made early and committed to. Both words being used audibly. Defenders reacting to the call. Claims taken in front of the body. No dithering by minute 12.
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A3.4 THE KEEPER'S GAME (6 v 6 + GKs)

A normal match in which the goalkeeper scores points for the team. Catches held, claims in the box, saves held rather than parried, and distribution that reaches a teammate in the opposition half. For once, the keeper is the one who can win the game.

46 x 32 m • the goalkeeper scores points for his team • 15 minutes



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SET UP

- One pitch, 46 x 32 m, both full goals with a goalkeeper in each.
- 6 v 6 outfield plus two goalkeepers (14). With 15–16, roll substitutes every two minutes.
- **Write the four goalkeeper scores where everybody can see them.**
- Spare balls behind both goals.
- Coach on the halfway line, awarding the keeper points loudly.

HOW IT RUNS

1. Teams, bibs and keepers in 60 seconds.

2. **Explain in one sentence:** *Goals are 2. The goalkeeper can score too — a catch held, a claim in the box, a save held, or a throw or kick that reaches one of you in their half. One point each.*
3. **Minutes 0–6 — award the keeper points by name and loudly.** It reframes the whole role within about four minutes.
4. **Minute 6 — one question to the outfield players:** *how do you help your keeper score?* The answer is *show for the ball*, and it is the beginning of a squad that gives their keeper an option.
5. **Minutes 7–13 — add the six-second rule** for restarts, so distribution has to be quick as well as accurate.
6. **Minutes 13–15 — swap the goalkeepers into outfield** and let two outfield players go in goal. It is the best two minutes of the session for finding your next keeper.

RULES & SCORING

- **A goal = 2 points. The goalkeeper scores 1** for a catch held, a claim in the box, a save held rather than parried, or a distribution reaching a teammate in the opposition half.
- From minute 7: **restarts within six seconds.**
- No offside.
- Outfield players may not pass back to the keeper more than twice in a row — the keeper is an option, not a hiding place.
- Goalkeepers and two outfield players swap for the last two minutes.

COACHING POINTS — THE FOUR CORNERS

Technical	Distribution: the roll, the low throw, and the driven kick — three techniques, all of which improve fast with feedback nobody normally gives them.
Tactical	A goalkeeper who can find a teammate in the opposition half is worth a midfielder. At under-12, the distance is achievable and almost nobody works on it. And a save held rather than parried ends the attack — which is why it is worth a point and a parry is not.
Physical	Standard game for the outfield players; busy for the keepers. Give both keepers a proper drink at minute 7.
Psychological	This is the session's real purpose. A goalkeeper who has spent a season being blamed spends fifteen minutes being the reason their team is winning, and it changes how they arrive next time.
Social	Watch how the outfield players talk to their keeper once the keeper can score for them. It is usually a marked and slightly comic improvement.

WATCH FOR

WHAT YOU'LL SEE	WHAT TO DO
Keepers parrying by habit	<i>Catch it if you can. That's a point.</i>
Nobody showing for the distribution	<i>He can't throw it to nobody.</i>
Keepers hesitating to come	Straight back to A3.3 — one prompt only.
Outfield players hiding behind the keeper	The two-pass-back rule stops it.
Who volunteers for the last two minutes	Note the names.
The keeper's mood at the end	The honest measure of whether this session worked.

ASK THEM

- How do you help your keeper score?
- Keeper — how many points did you get?
- Which is better, a catch or a parry? Why?

- Where's your first look when you've got it in your hands?
- Who wants to go in goal for the last two minutes?

ADJUST IT

HARDER	EASIER
Distribution must reach the final third to score.	Distribution reaching anybody scores.
Four seconds for restarts.	Ten seconds for restarts.
No hands from a back-pass at all.	Smaller pitch (40 × 30 m).
Bigger pitch (52 × 34 m) so distribution has to travel.	Any save scores, held or parried.

IT'S WORKING WHEN

Keepers scoring points regularly.

More catches than parries.

Distribution finding teammates rather than touchlines.

Outfield players showing for the ball.

Two goalkeepers who leave in a better mood than they arrived in.

Finish, match day & homework

REFLECTION — 5 MINUTES, SITTING DOWN

- Where are your hands for a high ball? A low one?
- What moves first — hands or feet?
- Ball wide — where do you stand? Ball central?
- What are your two words? Mine and away.
- What's the only wrong answer at a cross? Dithering.
- **Tell each goalkeeper one specific thing they did well tonight**, and — just as important — name one goal that was not their fault. Nobody ever does the second one.
- Finish by asking the whole squad: *who wants to go in goal at some point this season?* Write the names down and mean it.

MATCH-DAY LINK

MATCH OBJECTIVES	WATCH FOR	ASK AFTERWARDS
- Set before every shot. - One clear call at every cross — mine or away. - Every distribution reaches a teammate, not a touchline.	- How many saves are held rather than parried. - Whether the keeper comes for anything at all — and whether the defenders react to the call. - Where the distribution goes. Count how many reach a teammate.	- <i>How many did you catch rather than parry?</i> - <i>Did you come for anything?</i> - <i>Which of those goals was actually your responsibility?</i>

HOMEWORK — "HANDS AND FEET" · 15 MINUTES, THREE TIMES — FOR THE GOALKEEPERS, AND ANYBODY CURIOUS

- **Wall catching.** Throw a ball against a wall from 4 m and catch it cleanly fifty times — twenty-five above the waist, twenty-five below. Reset the count on every drop. It is the single most improvable goalkeeping skill and it needs nobody else.
- **Set position.** In front of a mirror or a window, take up the set position twenty times: feet wide, weight forward, hands out and low. Hold it for three seconds each. It feels ridiculous and it builds the habit.
- **Distribution.** Roll and throw a ball at a target 20 m away, thirty times. Then kick thirty from your hands for distance and direction. A goalkeeper who can find a teammate is worth a midfielder.
- **Watch a game with a job.** Fifteen minutes of any match, watching **only the goalkeeper when the ball is at the other end**. Notice where they stand, how much they talk, and how rarely they are still. It is the part of the job nobody sees.

WHERE TO GO NEXT

A natural follow-on. Session A4 — Throw-Ins. The most frequent restart in football and the least coached — roughly forty of them a match, most given away within two passes. Attacking routines that create a free player, the defensive set-up that stops one, and the technique itself, which almost every under-12 gets wrong in the same two ways. It is a short, cheap session that gets a squad a lot of possession back.

Or simply run this one again. Nothing in the set has to be done once. A session repeated three weeks later with a harder progression is usually worth more than a new session the players are meeting cold.