



## “Muscle-Memory” - The Key to Reaction Saves!

By Todd Hoffard

National Director - ONE on ONE Soccer  
Former MLS Goalkeeper Coach - New York Red Bulls

I get asked all the time about putting goalkeepers through reaction save situations. This is obviously a very key part of goalkeeping but there are a lot of things that go into being successful at it. Almost anyone can “stop shots” as the basics of it is pretty simple and easy. However, a true goalkeeper is very efficient and clean technically. So when they are forced to react and make a save, they will do it smoothly and either hold the ball or deflect it out of play/immediate danger.

### The “Shot-Stopper”

To be honest, I hate when people call someone a good shot-stopper as I feel that it is a bit insulting to the player. Why? Because as I said before, anyone can stop shots! Being a shot-stopper is only ONE element of being a quality goalkeeper. Simply put, you can be a good shot-stopper and NOT be a very good goalkeeper. What are other elements that make a goalkeeper? Angle play, cutting out crosses/through balls, communication, etc. The goalkeeper will “eliminate opportunities BEFORE they ever become them.” The Shot-Stopper will just stand back and “stop shots.”

To create a good example of this is easy to do...put a field player in goal during a shooting exercise. Will they save shots? Of course they will save some shots...but, will they hold the ball? Deflect the ball in the proper areas? Will they have the best angles covered? Etc. The answer is no! The reason they will have moderate success is that they will throw their hands, body, etc. at the ball to save the shot. But, they are likely not going to have the body control to be efficient at it. They simply do not train their body to perform in this way on a day in and day out basis like the goalkeeper.

I certainly would not expect the goalkeeper to save every shot in this same shooting exercise either. But I would expect them to deal with things a lot better and make the saves look easier. For that is why pros in any sport make the game look so easy and simple...they have very limited wasted movement and their body moves effortlessly because it knows exactly “how” to move efficiently.

How does the body know how to do this?

### Technical Training is Key!

I harp all the time to every goalkeeper that I work with about their technique and how vital it is in order to be successful! The reason? It is ALL about creating the proper “muscle-memory.” Static technical training needs to be an essential part of your daily training. You will never out-grow this type of training if you are looking to have a long career in the game. Repetition after repetition of simple activities will activate not only the body but the mind as well. For this is the reason that I am not a believer in so-called advanced goalkeeper training. Quality goalkeeper training should be kept very simple! I challenge you to go watch professional goalkeepers train. You will find that the exercises will be extremely simple in nature! But the difference between them and the amateur is that they will be able to conduct this training at a very high level and control their bodies at every moment. Their sharpness will come from this daily training. At this level, it is all about maintaining sharpness and confidence.

Your body and mind is not very intelligent unless you tell it how to perform. The repetitions of perfect technical work will allow the body and mind to begin to know what to do and how to do it when it is called upon to do so. The body needs to learn “how to react!” This technical training will program your body and mind to keep the proper shape of your hands, body, etc. So, when you are forced to react, then your “muscle-memory” will kick in and you will be able to react better and make cleaner/easier saves. For this is goalkeeping!

I don't want you to think that goalkeepers will only conduct static technical work in their sessions. That is not the case at all...there has to be reaction saves in their regimen too. For that is what goalkeepers are encountering all the time in a match, they must see a situation and react! Our training should certainly replicate match situations. There are hundreds of different types of reaction save exercises...I will leave you to your own types of ideas, etc. for that. What I would recommend to you though, is to always start out with some static/technical work during every training session to maintain sharpness with your “muscle-memory.”



Gradually bring in your reaction exercises and make sure you are continuing to be successful with it and have full control of your body when in these situations. We want to get you to the point that you make a big-time save and you get up, brush yourself off and say to yourself, “how did I do that?” Then you know that your body and mind are working together! For the “muscle-memory” is instinctual and you are on your way to becoming a Goalkeeper!