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Goalie coaches play key role

By Brion O'Connor
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"The only friend a goalie has is the other goalie across the ice. He's the only one who understands." -- Frank "Ulcers" McCool, Toronto Maple Leafs, 1944-46

The lot of the hockey goaltender has changed little since the days of Frank McCool. Despite all the talk of how the position has evolved, from bulletproof gear to superior techniques, the goaltender is still the last line of defense, the only player who has the sole responsibility of keeping the puck out of the net.

Most D-I hockey coaches agree that the goaltender is the most pivotal player on the team. Many, like BU's Jack Parker and Northeastern's Greg Cronin, often refer to the maxim popularized by USA Hockey coach Dave Peterson: "They should call the game 'goalie' because of the impact that one position has on the game."

At no time does the spotlight shine brighter and hotter on the goalie than during the playoffs, which have already gotten under way in ECAC Hockey, and begin Thursday in Hockey East. Expect the goaltenders to play a huge role.

"I've seen bad teams with good goaltenders win, and good teams with bad goaltenders lose," says Merrimack coach Mark Dennehy, who has a gem between the pipes in Joe Cannata. "The position has probably changed the most out of any in my tenure as a player and a coach, and a lot of it comes down to the coaching that these kids have received."

That "coaching" coincides with the stunning advances in the position. Unlike the goaltenders of McCool's era, goalies today have access to top-flight coaching from Mites to the pros. And it typically costs a pretty penny. At the college level, however, the goalie responsibilities usually fall to one person: an unpaid assistant coach.

Still, the impact of the goalie coach can be enormous, from tweaking technique to cultivating confidence. These coaches are part instructor, part video analyst, part psychologist, part cheerleader and part confidante.

A case in point is Jimmy Healey, the former Merrimack goaltender and the Warriors' current goalie coach. "With someone like Jimmy, it might not always even be a mechanical adjustment as much as he's keeping our goalies on mental task," Dennehy says. "What makes a good goaltender great? I think a lot of the time it's the head.

"To have someone that's gone through it as well, that type of relationship is really important for a goaltender, because there's a lot of pressure," he says. "You get to be the hero, but you get to be the goat, too."

A solitary team player

There are few positions in team sports that stand apart from other players quite like the hockey goalie.

They look different, with a distinctly different set of gear. They're generally confined to the small blue crease beside their 6-foot-by-4-foot net, and they stay on the ice the entire game while their teammates race up and down the ice in 30-second shifts. They don't score, but often hold the key to the outcome of any game. That brings enormous responsibility, and enormous pressure.

"It is a specialized position, not just in the equipment and the techniques, but also in the psychology," says Joe Bertagna, the Hockey East commissioner and former Harvard goalie who has run Bertagna Goaltending for 38 years.

"For the most part, goalies end up playing for coaches who have never been a goalie," says Harvard goalie coach Bruce Irving, who played at Cornell from 1981-85. "They don't get the necessary attention in most standard team environments."

Often, the position is as foreign to regular players and coaches as Latin is to a sixth-grader. "Back in the day, we were left to fend for ourselves," says Brian Daccord, a former Merrimack goalie who owns Stop It Goaltending. "No one understood goalies, and the position wasn't defined technically. Now there is a technique for everything."

Today, the art of coaching goalies has become as specific as the art of playing the position. On the technical side, the key is to keep things simple, Irving says.

"I haven't changed my approach that much, to be honest," he says. "I got rooted in fundamentals by Joe [Bertagna], and I really try to stick to those. You don't try to make any dramatic changes, because these kids show up being pretty darn good to begin with. You just try to fine-tune their fundamentals."

Conversely, mental preparation is the chief concern of the goalie coach in season.

"The goalie coaching position is now defined two ways," Daccord says. "You have a performance coach, and then you have a development coach. All the kids now have two coaches. In the summer, they'll have a development coach, and during the season they'll have a performance coach."

"In season, it's about results," says Daccord, who works with Cannata and a number of D-I goaltenders off-season. "Basically, in the summer, you're working on improving technique, improving quickness, working on your strategies and your technical game, so you know how you want to play every situation. You want to work on your weaknesses, try new things, try to implement new facets to your game."

"You can't do that during the season," he says. "In-season, it's about getting that goalie ready for that next game. That means physically and mentally."

The role of the college goalie coach

Goaltenders are so critical to a team's success that head coaches put a premium on getting the right person in the goalie coach position.

"When [former Red Sox pitching coach] John Farrell left to take the Toronto job, that was all the buzz throughout baseball, and certainly Red Sox Nation," Dennehy says. "How was that going to affect the [Red Sox] pitching staff? If you don't have good pitching, you're not going to win championships. Same with goaltending."

Last year, Dennehy brought in Healey, who played for Merrimack from 2004-07, to fill the goalie coach vacancy. John Carratu, who works for Daccord's Stop It Goaltending, became the goalie coach for Northeastern during Brad Thiessen's All-American run on Huntington Avenue three years ago. Now he mentors another pro prospect, Chris Rawlings.

Others, like Boston University's Mike Geragosian, Boston College's Jim Logue and Harvard's Irving, have much longer tenure. They've all witnessed the advances in goaltending in the past 15 years, and acknowledge that these days most D-I goalies, while not finished products, arrive on campus much more polished. But their objectives are the same.

"I try to have my guy make two more saves every game than he should have, and I try to scout the other goalie to get one more goal than we should have," Geragosian says. "That's a plus-3."

These longtime coaches, like any successful teacher, have adapted to the changes in the game and the goaltending position. "Over the last 30 years, goaltending has improved exponentially in reference to a baseline of, say, how much better has your best centerman got? Or how much better has your best defenseman got?" Irving says. "The position itself has evolved more than any other position on the ice."

"You have to stay current," Geragosian says. "That's why I coach camps. No position has been influenced in the game as much as goaltending, because of the equipment, because of the size of the kids and because they're better athletes. There's no question about it."

The goalie coach, they agree, serves as a crucial conduit between the paid coaching staff and the goaltenders.

"When you get to the higher levels, the goalie coach's job is as much to coach the head coach as it is to coach the goalie," Bertagna says. "With older goalies, at the Division I college level, we assume they have the tools. That doesn't mean they can't adjust, or they don't need someone monitoring their development. But what the goalie coach really does at that upper level is be that go-between that links the full-time coaching staff and the goalie.

"And the trick for the goalie coach is that you are an advocate for the goalie, you pull for the goalie, you can relate to what the goalie is going through physically and emotionally, but you're a member of the staff," he says. "You can't forget that."

For many coaches, even hockey lifers like BU's Parker, the goalie coach is not only a valuable resource but also the last word on the position.

"I'm the first to admit I know nothing about goaltending," Parker says. "Mike Geragosian makes all decisions regarding the goalies. He has final say, or just about final say, about who we're recruiting. He has say who is going to play on a given night. He has say on when we want to give a guy a rest. He is totally the guy."

Big job, little financial reward

Jim Logue enjoyed a storied career at Boston College from 1959-61, and is now in his 18th season as the Eagles' goalie coach. His jersey is retired in the rafters of Conte Forum, and he has overseen the college careers of NHLers Cory Schneider and Scott Clemmensen. BC's stalwart senior netminder John Muse, who has backstopped the Eagles to two national championships, says Logue "has always been there for me, ever since I came to campus."

"He's really good with my mental state, keeping me calm," Muse says. "He's always had my back, and I really appreciate that."

But to get a true sense of Logue's value to the program, consider BC head coach Jerry York's assessment. "He's almost like a quarterback coach," York says.

With one important distinction. While most D-I football programs employ between 10 and 11 paid coaches -- seemingly a coach for every position -- hockey programs have a head coach and two paid assistants. And rarely is one of those positions filled by the goalie coach. The job, frankly, is a labor of love.

"I'd love to make a couple bucks at this thing, but we're not quite there yet," says Healey, a commercial lender for TD Bank. "Right now, it's just fun giving back to the sport that gave me a lot."

BU's Parker, when asked why there are so few paid goalie coaches, says "It is kind of odd, in some ways, in that the goalie position is so important, you'd want to have that guy [the goalie coach] totally involved in the program."

Even many D-I goalies admit they were surprised to learn that most goalie coaches on the collegiate level are strictly volunteers. "I actually had no idea that the majority of goaltender coaches throughout the country were unpaid," Muse says. "I thought we had a unique situation here at BC. But it is a position that definitely needs a goalie coach, someone to help out."

"Goalies haven't gotten any respect for the last 50 years," Healey says, laughing. "Way back, the goalie was the fat lazy kid who couldn't skate who was thrown between the pipes. That mentality is still around, to some degree. Things have gotten better, and a lot of teams now respect and value what a goalie coach brings to the table, but I still don't think it's the equal [to position players]."

Healy says the coaching evolution hasn't caught up with the evolution in the position. That reality is reflected in the NCAA regulations regarding the number of permissible paid coaches, which don't recognize the singular requirements that goaltending demands. For example, D-I hockey programs are allowed the same number of paid coaches as D-I basketball programs. However, hockey teams have twice as many players, and there's no position as unique as the goaltender on a basketball team.

So even wealthy programs that could afford to pay a fourth coach to work specifically with the goalies can't, because the NCAA prohibits them from doing so. As a result hockey programs, which rely on paid assistants to recruit, must make do with volunteer goalie coaches.

"It's become the lot of the goalie coach," Bertagna says. "You're the specialist who comes in a limited number of times, so it's natural that you get the short straw financially."

The NCAA further limits the role of goalie coaches who make a living teaching the position. If they were affiliated with a specific program, they couldn't visit the players they instruct, for fear of recruitment violations.

"If you're a coach, you can't go out and watch other kids, because it counts as an evaluation. You've got to play by the NCAA rules," Dennehy says. "Brian Daccord's stable of goaltenders is increasing because he can go out and see them. That would be near to impossible if he was coaching."

Daccord, a former Bruins goalie coach, provides goaltending instruction for goalies from 6 to 60 in numerous settings -- from clinics to camps to private lessons -- through Stop It.

"At the end of the day, if it wasn't for the NCAA, I'd be coaching college hockey," he says. "There's two things that prohibit development coaches from coaching the goalies in college. One is the money. There is no money. Number two is that a volunteer coach is not allowed to recruit."

The big picture

The advent and increased use of video has further expanded the role of the volunteer goalie coach. While goalie coaches can't scout upcoming opponents off campus, readily available video allows them to do it from their desk.

So they spend their time poring over clips, looking for tendencies of opposing forwards and weaknesses of not only their own goalie, but of opposing goaltenders as well.

"My responsibility is twofold," Carratu says. "It's getting my goalies ready to play against their team. But it's also trying to find a little edge about their goalies to give to my team."

"I want my goalies prepared. Teams do certain things, certain attacks. I want my goalies to have that in their mind," he says. "But I also want my team to know if the other goaltender has a tendency [that Northeastern can take advantage of]. It benefits the whole team, not just the goaltenders."

The volunteer goalie coach also has to be ready to jump in when the staff is short. Geragosian refers to himself as a "gap filler" who can take over bench duties if either BU assistant -- Mike Bavis and Buddy Powers -- is on the recruitment trail. Most goalie coaches do the same.

"A lot of these staffs have to have one or two guys on the road, recruiting," Irving says. "That's why I'm very lucky. I'll be right alongside Ted [Donato] the entire game, because we've got a guy on the road."

The fraternity

With so many schools in close proximity to each other in the greater Boston area, and a number of former goaltenders living there, many goalie coaches know each other, and often work together.

Logue and Geragosian started All-American Goaltending Camps together in the late 1970s. Carratu, who calls Bertagna the "godfather of goalie coaches," worked at Bertagna's camps before moving on to Daccord's Stop It Goaltending. Irving works for both in the offseason. It is an exclusive fraternity within a broader hockey family.

That sense of fraternity extends to each team. While many programs will ride a stud netminder for the bulk of the season, even the starters are quick to point out that goalie coaches don't play favorites.

"Mike [Geragosian] is a great goalie coach because he's on their side," Parker says. "I think that's true of most goalie coaches. They let the guys know, 'I'm in your corner. I'm representing you to the coach. I'm trying to make you better every day.' He's neutral with all these guys. He wants them all to get better."

Carratu says all three of Northeastern's goaltenders play an essential role in helping the team, though Rawlings gets the lion's share of the game action.

"A big credit goes to the other two goalies on the team, Clay Witt and Bryan Mountain," he says. "They're at all our video sessions. Between periods, whatever they see from the bench, we use that input. I'm looking down from the press box, Chris is looking out from the goal, and they're seeing the game from a whole different perspective from the bench area."

That approach rubs off on everyone, including each team's No. 1 netminder.

"Me, Clay and Bryan are a team within a team," Rawlings says. "It's not just me out there. No matter who's in net, we're always there to support each other. And John's kind of the leader of the pack."

It's an arrangement Frank McCool could only dream about.

Brion O'Connor is a contributor to ESPNBoston.com.
