

“Will you play in goal, Amy?”

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Amy was almost 9. I remember meeting her and her dad, Jeff, for the first time in the winter of 2010 while coaching indoor soccer. She was smaller than most of the die-hard kids who had turned up to play through the winter. She had very long hair - beyond her waist - and was as thin as a rake. She shook my hand, gave me a big grin and quietly but confidently said “Hi.”

“She wants to play travel soccer in the Spring”, said Jeff, “so we’d like to come and practice with the U10 co-ed team.”

“That’s great”, I said. “We’re pleased to have you.”

“Can I play ‘mid’ (mid-field)”, Amy asked.

“Well, Amy, we rotate positions to give everyone experience of playing in all the different roles, but sure, you can start there”, I said.

One of the first things I noticed about Amy was that she was fearless. She would tackle anyone in sight, no matter what size. She had boundless energy. She clearly loved the game and thrived on competition.

The indoor field was oval and had the feel of an ice-hockey rink: synthetic green turf, more like a carpet than grass, with a clear 8 foot high acrylic wall all around to keep the ball in play. This made the indoor game much faster and, as with ice-hockey, substitutions are made while the game is in play.

I tell the kids, “Don’t worry about getting tired, just put your hand up when you are, and we’ll substitute you.” No-one ever wants to come off unless really tired, so I also tell them I’ll be making regular planned substitutions and to listen for their name being called.

No one does, of course! So it takes three or four loud calls to get any of them to hear their name and reluctantly come off for a break.

Amy was particularly hard to substitute. “I’m not tired”, she would say, or “But, I’ve only just come on.”

In tune with our principle of everyone trying each position, I’d asked each player to take a turn in goal. Amy hadn’t been very forthcoming.

I’ve always admired kids who elect to play goalkeeper or “goalie”, often thinking you have to be fearless or crazy, perhaps both. However, it also gives you a perspective of the whole game as you have concentrate all the time and be ready to jump into action: race out to defend the ball or close down an attacker, react quickly to make a point-blank save, dive to stop a shot, jump to catch the ball or tip it over the bar, organize the defense, even act as an attacker on occasion when your team is trying to gain a last-gasp goal.

We had reached the final game of the winter season and everyone had taken a turn in goal - except Amy. Each week I'd asked her if she'd like to try the goalie position and she said "No thanks." Her excuse was different each week: "I'm too small", "I can't catch", "I don't know the rules", "I'm not sure how to put on the goalie helmet" (a requirement in our program), "I'd prefer to play mid-field."

The first half came and went. The second half was underway and I politely asked Amy if she would like to have a turn in goal - to my surprise she said, she would. "I've never played in goal before and so maybe I should try", she said. "Good job, well done Amy", I said.

I took her to one side and we did a quick recap on some goalkeeping basics: Be aware of where you are standing and move your feet to get into position, keep your hands out in front, try to close down the angle to make it more difficult for the offense to score, curl your arms to pick up the ball, and use your feet to kick the ball if you don't think you can grab it with your hands.

"I'm ready", she said.

With ten minutes to play in our final game I called for a switch and asked Amy to take over from the boy who was currently in goal.

Amy ran towards our goal and the boy she was replacing ran towards her. He took off his goalie helmet and handed it her - but she couldn't figure out how to get it on. Her long hair was getting in the way. First she tried it with her hair straight down her back, but the helmet was too loose. "Do I need to get a smaller one?" she shouted. Then she tried putting her hair up in a bun, but the helmet was now too tight.

In the meantime, the game continued and the other team scored a goal as Amy wrestled with the helmet. She didn't look happy, nor did her teammates. Finally, she figured it out and she was ready.

A scrimmage of 5 or 6 boys was running towards her with the ball somewhere in the middle. They came into her penalty area, and I called "Grab it Amy."

At first, she seemed lost in time and space. Paralyzed almost.

Then she focused, and after a split second, dived in among the pack, wrapped both arms around the ball and protected herself with her body.

There was a big cheer from the crowd.

She stood up, holding the ball, looked up and kicked the ball out of her hands as far as any player had done all season. There was another big cheer.

Moments later, the final whistle sounded.

The players walked off to the applause and shouts of "great job" from parents and siblings.

Amy was last, and I could see her striding off the field with broad shoulders.

As she walked by me, I said “Well done, Amy.” Did you enjoy that?”

She glanced over at me, shook her head and said “Naaaah” as she passed me. Out of the corner of my eye I could see that she had a huge grin on her face. She ran over to her dad and he gave her a big hug.

I smiled too – it had been quite a season.

Now that I’ve started to understand a little child psychology I can move onto my next challenge – working with parents. However I’m not sure my soccer-coaching textbook can help with that!

(Note: The names are fictitious, but the characters are real...)