

**Mike
Woitalla**

Is the USA's ability to produce great goalkeepers threatened by early specialization?

Field play makes better keepers

IN HIGH SCHOOL, GOALKEEPERS BRAD Friedel and Tim Howard starred at soccer and basketball. Tony Meola kept playing baseball even at the University at Virginia while he was starring in goal and launching a national team career that would include two World Cup appearances.

Gold-medalist goalkeeper Hope Solo played basketball and volleyball, in addition to soccer, at which she played forward until converting to full-time goalkeeper in college.

In fact, Solo scored 109 goals in high school, leading to her Parade All-American selection twice as a field player. She's similar to Meola and Howard in that way. They too played forward for their high school teams and were prolific scorers.

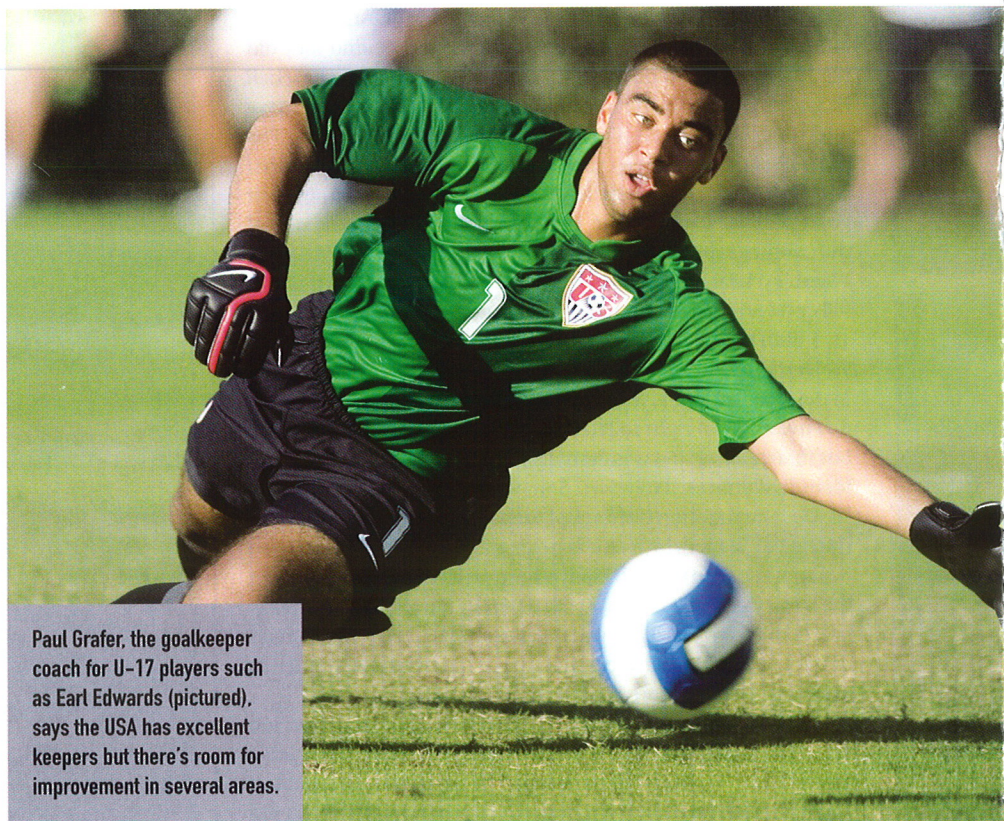
Brad Guzan, the backup keeper to Howard with the U.S. national team, was a consistent starter in MLS at a younger age than any previous keeper before he moved to the English Premier League. Guzan played in the field for his youth club, the Chicago Magic, and Providence Catholic High School, where he earned all-state honors as a midfielder.

It would seem, then, that playing other sports and other positions in soccer might be beneficial to a goalkeeper's development. But whether that's the path the future American keepers take may be threatened by the ultra-competitive environment of today's youth game.

"A lot of coaches worry that a player is going to fall behind if he doesn't play goalkeeper all the time," says U.S. Soccer goalkeeper coach Tim Mulqueen "I don't agree with that."

Mulqueen, who has coached U.S. keepers at the U-17 and U-20 World Cups and the Olympics, says playing other sports and playing other positions on the soccer field is an important part of a player's development.

"There needs to be a healthy balance," he says. "If the kids play soccer the whole time, they can obviously suffer from burnout. For me, the



Paul Grafer, the goalkeeper coach for U-17 players such as Earl Edwards (pictured), says the USA has excellent keepers but there's room for improvement in several areas.

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correlation between playing soccer and basketball, baseball or lacrosse – to me that makes a whole lot of sense. Besides there being skills that translate over to soccer for goalkeeping, it keeps them fresh mentally. It keeps their body fresh. It's a win-win for me."

Paul Grafer is the current goalkeeper coach for the U-17 boys national team. Before he took that position he spent three years studying youth sports trends in America at Adelphi University.

"The movement to have the youth soccer player specialize at an even earlier age ... I'd say that's consistent among all sports," says Grafer. "Every sport is trying to garner as many

kids as possible, so specialization is an issue for every sport."

This early specializing has become one of American youth sports' most controversial issues. For one, studies have shown that it could be the reason for an increase in "overuse injuries" among children.

"Many theories abound but most experts point to one main causative factor: year-round training in a single sport," says Dr. Dev K. Mishra, an orthopedic surgeon and member of the team physician pool with the U.S. Soccer Federation. "What we are talking about here is structured, organized training. I cannot recall seeing these

injuries in kids playing pickup soccer, hanging out at the park or even playing several 'seasonal' sports."

Some youth clubs expect even preteens to dedicate themselves year-round to a single sport. One motivation for this could be that paid coaches need year-round income, although they'll say it's because children must specialize to excel. However, other coaches believe that a varied experience turns them into better athletes, which will help them when they do eventually specialize.

Tony DiCicco, a goalkeeper coach who was head coach of the U.S. women's 1996 Olympic and 1999 World Cup triumphs, is head coach of Women's Professional Soccer's Boston Breakers.

"I think there may very well be less exploring of other sports by children today," says DiCicco. "I'm not saying that's right or wrong, but personally I think that playing a variety of sports, especially for preteens and even in the early teens, is very good for you. And it's especially good for goalkeepers to play sports like basketball and baseball because of hand-eye coordination."

DiCicco said when he coached U-10s, he would rotate keepers, giving almost all of them stints in goal. Even at the U-13 level, he says half his players took turns in goal.

Solo says the No. 1 question she gets from parents is about choosing a single sport for their children at an early age.

"They'll say, 'I want my daughter to focus on one sport,'" Solo says. "I guess it's because in this day and age, parents want their kids to get further along as fast as possible, so they can get a scholarship. But I don't know if that's good. If I had played the same sport the entire year, I know I would have gotten burned out."

As a youth player, Solo rarely played goalkeeper. She says that if she had started playing only keeper at a young age, it would have turned her off soccer. She says that playing in the field helped her agility, her reading of the game and her foot skills, which Olympic team goalkeeper coach Phil Wheddon says are extraordinary.

"It wasn't until I was an adult that I could really appreciate the qualities of being goalkeeper," Solo says.

DiCicco, Wheddon, Mulqueen and Grafer all agree that playing in the field is crucial for a goalkeeper's development. And that keepers who specialize too early, even if they've mastered most aspects of the position, may find themselves losing out to keepers who had more experience in the field when they reach higher levels.

"Foot skills still seem to be lacking overall in the goalkeeping department," Wheddon says. "I

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— Phil Wheddon, U.S. Soccer goalkeeper coach

think at the youth level, we often pigeon-hole players very, very early. OK, you're a goalkeeper, you're 7 years old. It's unfortunate that we do label kids so early. And we don't develop their foot skills enough from an early age onward."

While the success of Kasey Keller, Marcus Hahnemann, Howard and Friedel in the English Premier League indicates the USA produces excellent goalkeepers, Grafer says there are general deficiencies that he sees in American keepers when he scouts for the U-17 national team program.

"We do have good goalkeepers," Grafer says. "We tend to make a lot of great saves, deal great with crosses and are courageous. But when it comes to foot skills, distribution, communication and organization of the team — the tactical areas and positioning—I'm not sure we match up as well as we could with keepers from other parts of the world."

"Understanding where the danger spots are. Cutting out through balls and that organizational part that is almost like preventive goalkeeping — where you don't even have to make that emergency save — those are skills that players can develop by playing in the field."

Which is why

the national team keeper coaches advocate that youth coaches shouldn't encourage youngsters to specialize too early.

"I think our keepers tend to specialize fairly early," says Grafer. "Some people say it shouldn't be until age 14. I don't know if there's any real rule, but we'd like the young goalkeepers to also be playing in the field." ■



Gold medal-winning goalie Hope Solo played various sports and was a high-scoring forward during youth soccer.

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