[The art of]

goalkeeping

Life has never been easy for the man who wears the gloves. But, as Europe's custodian greats explain, the job is harder than ever

Words Alison Ratcliffe **Photos** Empics, Getty Images

The trouble with goalkeeping is that genius can look like incompetence. In the 1982 World Cup, Northern Ireland keeper Pat Jennings was responsible for a lot of spilt Guinness when he batted the ball over Spanish forward Juanito's head before falling on top of it. In his autobiography, Jennings explains his uncharacteristically clown-like behaviour for the benefit of mere mortals. Spain had been awarded some dubious penalties in the preceding matches and Jennings had this in mind. "I could see the ball was too high for Juanito to reach," he says. "If I made contact with him I might be penalised and the game would slip from our grasp. I knew exactly what I was doing when I tipped the ball over his head and dived to retrieve it. However it looked, I had the situation under control."

While fans thrill to the goalkeeping blinder, they tend to miss the mental dissection process, the vision – normally attributed to a fop-haired fantasista – that every keeper must have. In a study of Gordon Banks's immortal save from Pelé at the 1970 World Cup, Arsenal's former goalkeeping coach Bob Wilson lists six different scenarios Banks had to take into account when anticipating Brazil's next move.

This kind of analysis is so instantaneous it is almost indistinguishable from instinct, but that is the essence of vision. Tellingly, Alfredo Di Stéfano, Bobby Charlton and Glenn Hoddle, among other visionaries, were all useful goalkeeping understudies.

An arguably masterful piece of custodianship by Jens Lehmann was rewarded more cruelly against Panathinaikos last season. Many lambasted Arsenal's stopper for rushing out of his area to head the ball away – whence it was spectacularly lobbed into the net by Ezequiel González – Wilson says: "I would have been proud of sweeping up like that. Lehmann often takes up an advanced starting position when the ball is in the other half that other goalies never attempt. It means he makes saves in positions that other goalies do not make. When it works it's fantastic, but the more advanced you are the more space you leave behind you. It's a calculated gamble." González's goal was so improbable that in the vast majority of cases, Lehmann's gamble would have been valid.

There's no shortage of support for Lehmann's actions in the footballing scriptures. The 1950s Hungarian side, stars of every tactical thesis, had a suitably pioneering keeper. Gyula Grosics often swept up well outside his area and was integral to the Magyars' system of play.

"Holland have been doing this for some years," says Italian national goalkeeping coach and ex-Inter and Azzurri keeper Ivano Bordon. "Today, we Italians are playing a similar style, as are the Spanish, to a lesser extent. We're almost at the level of Holland, of England, although a keeper's team-mates don't pass to him as much as in Holland and in England."

It's still a tactic best applied with prudence, though. Jacky Munaron, who kept goal for Anderlecht and Belgium, now trains his old club's keepers. "It depends completely on tactics and circumstances. When you're playing a small side in the Belgian league and when you're playing Chelsea in the Champions League, the team has a completely different attitude, the keeper in particular. In the Belgian league, the ball will be in the other half 75 per cent of the time – the keeper has to know how to play as a sweeper, to manage the space behind the defence. When you're playing a big team, it's us pinned in our half and there'll be less space behind the defence."

> "Lehman makes saves other keepers can't. But the more advanced you are the more space you leave behind you"

But the likes of Lehmann are always more likely to live on the edge – in every aspect of

"We'll see the birth of a race of mutants who have the skills of an outfield player and a goalkeeper" Bernard Lama

their game. "People made jokes about Bruce Grobbelaar and Sepp Maier, who seemed to be made up of spare parts," says Wilson. "In truth they were brilliant goalies who trusted their instincts and gambled a little. They didn't have the presence of a David Seaman or a Peter Schmeichel, who in their goalkeeping were more calculating and played percentages. There is no blueprint that says 'you keep goal like this.' There are only basic rules, which even then can be broken."

Modern swerve-friendly balls add spice to the gamble for any keeper. These 'beach balls' are Wilson's bête noire and it's hard to find anyone who's ever donned a pair of gloves who disagrees with him. Except Dino Zoff. Speaking at a recent goalkeeping convention, Zoff admonished the moaners: "They're not so different to the old balls," he said. "They have a prescribed weight and circumference. I let in a strange goal in a friendly just before the 1982 World Cup and people said it was the new ball. That was rubbish – I just dropped a clanger."

Clangers notwithstanding, this is one of ➔

The brilliant but erratic Jens Lehmann waits in vain for a big hole to just swallow him up

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the finest keepers in the history of the game talking. For those less gifted, Munaron recommends as much habituation time as possible. "In each country and competition there are different balls of different types, made by different manufacturers. We try to get hold of the ball the opposition is using and to get used to it for at least a week."

Thankfully, goalkeepers have had a lot of practice getting used to new things over the years, having frequently found themselves the football legislators' playthings. "To start with I felt as though 20 years of my life had been called into question," said former France and Paris Saint-Germain keeper Bernard Lama when the back-pass rule was introduced. "They were suddenly asking us to climb into a new skin. We are going to witness the birth of a race of mutants, youngsters who will have the abilities of an outfield player, as well as those of a goalkeeper."

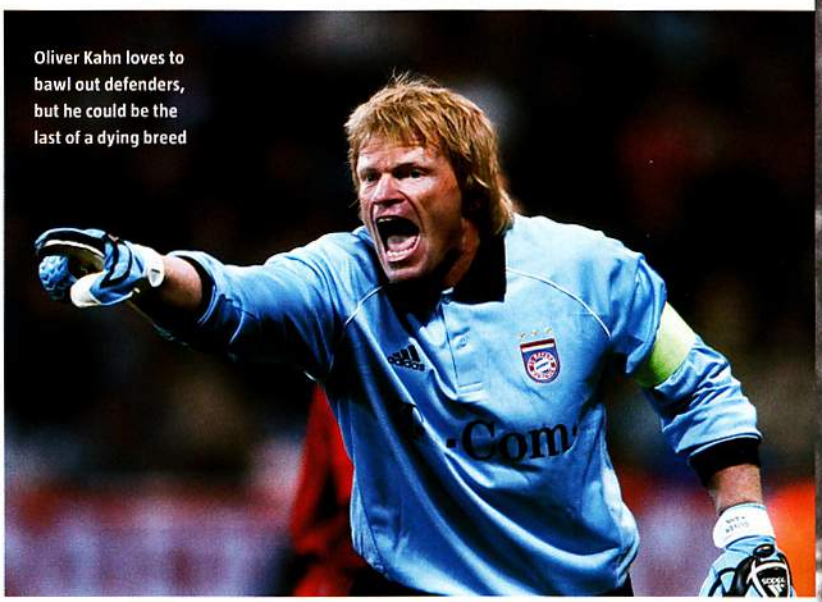
Lama's science fiction prophecy has virtually come to pass. "There are a lot of keepers who are very good with the ball at their feet," says Munaron, "but in the future, you can already see the youngest play a small-sided game with the team during the week and you don't know if it's a goalkeeper or an outfield player, because he's been working on his technical skills since he was a boy. It's no longer just a question of booting a ball upfield – you have to build play, keep possession. Although you're a keeper you're a part of the game."

The goalkeeper, says Munaron, is not only the first defender, he is the first attacker. "As the first defender he has to stop the ball and know how to lead his defence," he explains. "And when he receives the ball from a free kick or a corner or a long ball, he's the first attacker: if he has excellent and precise distribution, it's a real weapon. Especially the throw, if the keeper has the strength and precision to reach the second or third line of the team."

Which is fine so long as your team-mates are as dynamically minded. Lars Leese, plucked from the depths of the German lower leagues, began his career in Premiership football with Barnsley in 1997 by rolling the ball out so his team could build from the back. After the ball had trickled into touch because the defender wasn't looking, and was given away because amused opposition players descended in a pack on the defender, apoplectic assistant boss Malcolm Shotton suggested in agricultural terms that Leese hoof the ball into the channels. Heaven knows what he would have made of the great 1950s Argentine keeper Amadeo Carrizo, who began a fine tradition of crazy Latin keepers by regularly dribbling the ball out past opponents.

While the back-pass rule has made the goalkeeper's job more technically demanding, the automatic red card for a foul by the last defender is restricting his freedom. Keepers like Wilson made a fine art of diving at feet, but the tactic has become too risky. Bordon would like to see the rule changed: "When the goalkeeper comes out for a one-on-one and the forward anticipates this, touching the ball on so the keeper is unintentionally late... a few years ago the attacker jumped over the keeper and went on to chase the ball. Now he touches the ball on and falls over the keeper. Then you have a penalty and the keeper is sent off. The penalty is fine, but it's harsh for the keeper to be sent off too. It spoils the game."

How do our expert custodians view another



Oliver Kahn loves to bawl out defenders, but he could be the last of a dying breed

"Sometimes you need to wake your defenders up or position them for a corner or free kick, but that's all"

"Strikers touch the ball on and fall over the keeper. It's a penalty and the keeper is sent off. It spoils the game" Ivano Bordon

Revolutionary Hungary keeper Gyula Grosics beats England's Stan Mortensen to the ball

particularly delicate aspect of their art, claiming the ball at corners? One argument used by coaches who favour zonal defending at corners is that, with man-marking, canny attackers can ensure the goalkeeper's path to the ball is blocked.

Bordon and Munaron see this as an occupational hazard. For Munaron, learning how to get the referee's attention if you are obstructed is one of the tricks of the trade. Bob Wilson is less sure. "I learned a hard lesson in my day and nothing has changed," he says. "Our biggest rivals when we won the double in 1971 were Leeds United, with the likes of Jack Charlton and Peter Lorimer. They would put these big players on the goalie.

"I was still fairly raw and I would tell our players to mark them. It took Leeds to score to realise how stupid this was: all they were doing was cluttering up my space. I needed to deal with the Leeds players and a little bit of psychology was used: 'Leave him to me – I'll sort him out!'"

Bordon believes that other defensive tactical variations have relatively little impact: a manager can switch between a back four and a back three without perturbing his keeper too much. One exception, he believes, is overlapping full-backs. "If you have two full-backs who don't overlap much, they protect you from crosses," he explains. "It means the opponents can't really put crosses in until they've reached the byline, so you're more protected. But if you've got two good wide men who can help out the defence, then that should have the same effect."

The sight of a Peter Schmeichel or Oliver Kahn bawling out his defence must be one of the fan's favourite goalkeeping images, and communication is a much talked about goalkeeping skill, but both Bordon and Munaron favour a more subtle approach. "If a keeper has been playing with his defenders for a long time, there's an understanding, a routine, built each week in training when you work on all these technical aspects. The keeper knows how his defenders are going to react, and vice versa. Sometimes you need to wake your defenders up or position them for a corner or a free kick, but that's all."

Chelsea's Petr Cech, goalkeeping's newest young star, is another avowed exponent of the quiet-man philosophy. From communicating telepathically with your back line to playing possession football with them, it seems the art of goalkeeping is becoming ever more finely honed.

And though retired stars like Ivano Bordon may let out a wry laugh and mutter about keepers being compromised "in the quest for spectacle", it seems the new generation of number ones are mutating with alacrity. ★