

The strength of a keeper

A closer look at two of Wheaton soccer's workhorses

By Anders Rotto
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A soccer goal keeper is one of the highest pressure positions in all of sports. Due to the intensity required for the position, a sense of mutual respect develops between goalies. Often labeled as the "GK Union," this bond is furthered by the plethora of unorthodox training methods used by goal keepers and their coaches to improve their skills and prepare for games. But who are the goal keepers for the Thunder? And what do Thunder fans actually know about them? The answer to the second question is not much, actually. Therefore, consider this an official introduction to two of the most important players on the field for Wheaton College soccer, men's senior goalie Matt Paprocki and women's sophomore goalie Abby Fuster.

Most Thunder fans will remember Paprocki for his incredible saves during last year's run to the National Championship game, including a game-saving block in the NCAA final four game against SUNY Oneonta. However, because of her young age and the fact that she is tasked with replacing All-American and 2015 CCIW Woman of the Year Kelsey Graham, Abby Fuster is a little less well-known. Regardless of their age and experience, though, most fans still do not

understand the amount of time and training that goes into each incredible save that Paprocki and Fuster make.

For Paprocki, a normal practice includes work with goalkeeper coach, Ryan Seager, and the other goalies. They are able to tailor each drill to their specific needs. For example, Paprocki went up for a ball in the Thunder's game on Saturday and was knocked onto his back by a forward undercutting him. To keep Paprocki's confidence in the air at a high level, the keepers did some drills that included handling and taking crosses out of the air during practice the next day. Fuster's practices are similar, as she and the other goalies spend 30-45 minutes practicing diving and grabbing the ball out of the air. Goalkeeper coach Cesar Gomez comes up with some creative drills for the keepers to test their skills. Coach Gomez lines up about a yard away from Fuster and throws the ball down at his foot, expecting Fuster to use her reactionary skills and dive on the ball before it bounces away. She then has to jump up quickly before he throws the next ball.

Contrary to the popular belief that goal keepers do not require very much fitness or stamina, Paprocki and Fuster must stay in excellent shape because of the many short sprints inside the 18-yard-box they need to make to grab the ball before an opposing forward. They are also required to be able to make quick leaps in order to save shots and crosses from opposing players. Paprocki does a combination of plyometrics, strength and conditioning workouts, including burpees and CrossFit exercises, to

improve his quickness and explosiveness. Similarly, Fuster completes many fitness drills like sprinting, biking and lifting to keep her upper core strong enough to bat down any dangerous shots to her net.

However, neither goalie has been able to keep a shutout through their first few games, so both understand that there is room for improvement. Paprocki has put a large emphasis on developing the strength and accuracy of his kicks during his last season, as well as his vertical presence in the air. To improve, he has increased the intensity of his workouts by using a high altitude training mask. During his workouts outside of practice, Paprocki wears the mask to simulate high altitude training, which he hopes will push his body to become even stronger and increase his stamina since the mask makes it more difficult to breathe. Fuster believes that she needs to work on catching balls out of the air at their highest point and coming off her goal line, which has led to an increase in the intensity of her training, too.

For both keepers, the biggest challenges they face are inside their heads.

"Just being alone back there is hard," Paprocki explained. "You're just back there with your thoughts and you really become your own worst enemy. Every keeper has let in a bunch of goals and if you have that perfectionist mentality and you let a goal or two in, you're just stuck there, replaying it over and over again. It really does become a confidence battle."

Fuster agreed, saying, "The mentality behind it all and having the confidence to do make saves and go up for a ball in the air is difficult. You know that there will be another player jumping up for the same ball and you have to get there first."

After being the starter last year, Paprocki knows what it will take to lead the team back to the National Championship game and is working as hard as he can to make that dream a reality. Fuster, who ironically enough grew up playing for the same club team and high school program as Kelsey Graham, says that she feels little pressure in her first year as the starter.

"Actually, I find it exciting," Fuster replied. "It's just some friendly competition."

Thunder fans hope that both keepers, connected by their unique memberships to the "GK Union," are ready to compete against the accomplished offenses they will face throughout the rest of the season. If their workouts are any indication, though, it would be unwise to count either keeper out.

"You really become your own worst enemy."
- Matt Paprocki



GOALS AGAINST:	4
SAVES:	11
SHOTS FACED:	39



GOALS AGAINST:	6
SAVES:	11
SHOTS FACED:	32

