

Ron DeMarse: Welcome to the Six-Yard Box, a podcast dedicated to the art, the craft, the science and the study of goalkeeping in the beautiful game. This show is designed for players and coaches of all skill levels and all ages. Anyone who wants to be a better goalkeeper, or better understand the position. Each week, we bring you the keepers who are where you want to be, as well as the experts and the coaches who can help you get there. Whether you call it football or soccer, we'll help you keep it out of the net. Thanks so much for joining me. My name's Ron DeMarse.

I'm joined today by Dan Blank, best-selling author and longtime college soccer coach, both at the small college level and later as a defensive coordinator in the SEC. Dan has the distinction of running the SEC's best defense - in terms of the lowest goals-against average - for two consecutive years at two different universities - first at Ole Miss and then at Georgia. He's the only coach to ever do that. It's a pleasure for me to talk to him, because for years, I've been a big fan of his writing. If you've not read any of Dan's books, you need to. He's probably the most practical, easy-to-read soccer author on the market. I'll post links to his books over on our show notes page, at 6ydbox.com/005.

You'll also want to head over there for another reason. This interview went screaming past our 30-minute limit, so there's plenty more to listen to in the outtakes segment. So after the episode, if you like the first 30 minutes, you can get more over at 6-y-d-b-o-x.com/005. But I won't waste any more time on the intro. Let's get right to the interview.

Dan Blank, welcome to the show. I really, really appreciate you being here.

Dan Blank: Hey, thanks for having me, Ron.

Ron: Sure, so I really want to get into your coaching experience and certainly all the best-selling books that you've written over the last 5 or 6 years. But first, if you don't mind, I want to maybe step back and talk about you as a player, before you ever got into coaching. If I remember right, you grew up in New Jersey and played collegiately at Bethany College. Is that right? In West Virginia?

Dan: Yeah, that's correct. I grew up in Trenton, New Jersey, which at the time, was one of the hotbeds of soccer in the country. New Jersey as a whole. I grew up in the era – I played against John Harkes and Tab Ramos and Tony Meola. So, New Jersey was producing a lot of big time Talent at that time. By the way, I'm not including myself in that group. Just people I saw on the field. Yeah, so I grew up in a good soccer area and I played at a small private high school. As much as my parents sent me there kicking and screaming against my will, by the time I was a senior in high school, I decided I really liked small schools, so I decided to play college soccer at a small school in the northern tip of West Virginia called Bethany College. It's a Division 3 program. It was a very good soccer program.

- Dan:** I was one of two or three Americans in the starting lineup. We had a lot of international guys on the team. So yeah, I played there. And then I was a cross between a student assistant coach and the radio broadcaster for my final year in college. And then, after that, I jumped into becoming a college assistant coach.
- Ron:** Now, prior to Bethany, you were primarily an attacking player – so a forward or a midfielder – and then they converted you to defense?
- Dan:** Yeah. Yeah, my entire life, I was either a forward or an attacking center mid. And I got to college and they said, “Hey – how about you play right back?” For me, it was just, whatever I could do to be on the field. Playing college soccer is a heck of a lot more fun than watching college soccer, so I didn't care where they put me. I just wanted to be part of the game.
- Ron:** I remember – I think it was from the first volume of Soccer IQ – you mentioned, in one of your first practices, they just said, “Hey, your priority should be – identify the strong leg and the weak leg of your opponent.”
- Dan:** Yeah, it's amazing what a difference that made. They put me at right back because I was pretty fast and I was pretty physical, and I was decent with my feet. And they're like, “You can make a pretty good outside back.” The problem was, I had no idea how to defend. So on day one, our assistant coach, Graham Ramsey, said “Hey, this guy is right-footed. Keep him on his left foot.” What a difference that made. It was huge, and it was amazing to me to see how many players were so dependent on their dominant foot. If you took that away from them, they became a very average player. Yeah, just a little common sense point that nobody had managed to point out to me in my first 10 or 11 years of playing soccer.
- Ron:** I would guess that is already maybe a point of advice for a goalkeeper there, right? Especially at the high school level and at the club level, these players are going to be even more dependent. If you know what foot these players are looking to shoot on, that could already impact the way you set up.
- Dan:** Oh, absolutely. I don't know, at this point, what scouting is like at the high school level. I don't know how much of it's actually done. At the college level, by the time I was done, we were producing DVDs on our opponents – our upcoming opponents – with all the tendencies of their attacking players and video of all their attacking players. So our goalkeepers had a pretty good idea. “Hey, if this kid gets on her right foot, she's going to fire away.” So yeah, having that knowledge is certainly going to help a goalkeeper.
- Ron:** When you finished playing, I think your first assistant gig outside of Bethany was at Wheeling Jesuit. Is that right?
- Dan:** That's correct.

Ron: And that was kind of by chance. That was not your intention.

Dan: It was totally happenstance. I finished college classes in December of 1990, which coincided with the first Gulf War, and I ended up ... I gotta get my years straight. I ended up trying to get into the Air Force. I ended up graduating college in May of 1991. I tried to go into the Air Force, and I took my Air Force officers test on May 1st, 1991. I still don't have my results, which is probably good news for the Air Force. But while I was waiting on the results, I moved to Pittsburgh to be near my girlfriend and quickly ran out of money and had nothing to turn to. I mean, I was I was so broke I couldn't pay attention. I literally had nothing. I'd gone a couple days without even having a meal.

So, just sort of out of desperation, I called my college coach. And I wasn't asking him for anything other than advice. But it just so happened he said, "Look, camps start tomorrow or this afternoon (or whenever it was). Why don't you drive down here, and you can work three weeks at camp." Which sounded great to me. I was living in, basically, a ghetto in Pittsburgh. We had no hot water, no air conditioning, and we had cockroaches everywhere. And like I said, I hadn't eaten in a few days, and he's like, "Come down. You got air conditioning. You got three weeks of a clean bed and meals." As soon as he said "food."

Ron: Right.

Dan: He had me at "food." So I worked three weeks down there. During the second week, I was an assistant coach for Jim Regan, who was the men's and women's coach at Wheeling Jesuit College, and he was also a Bethany grad. He graduated before I started, but he was still a big part of the alumni crew there, so I was serving as his assistant during that second week. We were coaching a team out of Hackensack, New Jersey. Just a great group of kids. We had a blast with them, and our team did great during the camp week, and Jimmy and I were getting along real well. And during that week, the guy who was his college assistant called him to say that he wasn't returning. So, all the sudden, Jimmy needed an assistant. I needed a job. So he invited me to be his assistant at Wheeling. Which I did. I had no intention of becoming a soccer coach. And even once I had the job – once I signed on to it – for me, man, I wasn't particularly excited about coaching women's soccer. I was excited about having a place to sleep and a little bit of money and food. But literally, after the first session, I was hooked. I was all in from that point forward.

Ron: So that was the start of almost 25 years of college soccer.

Dan: Yeah, 24 years of college coaching.

Ron: So from there, you eventually moved to Brewton-Parker.

Dan: Brewton-Parker College in Mount Vernon, Georgia. Rural, rural south Georgia. If you've ever heard of Vidalia onions.

Ron: Yeah.

Dan: That was the closest big town, and 'big' is a relative term here. That was the closest town to us.

Ron: I actually taught at Valdosta State University, so I know right where you were.

Dan: Yeah, alright. So if people said they were "going to town" on Friday night or whatever, that meant they were going to Vidalia.

Ron: Right.

Dan: Yeah, we were in the middle of nothing. But I got on a bit of a recruiting coup. This was just before the onset of email, and I wrote letters to like 110 national soccer federations, asking if their women's team had any players that they would want to send to the U.S. to play college soccer. And I ended up getting like eight either youth national or full national team kids. So all the sudden, we went from being just a bad team to one of the best teams in the country. My first year as a head coach, our team scored like 181 goals in 21 games.

Ron: Wow.

Dan: Yeah. It's the second highest all time. You know, it was funny, because we had these international kids. Some of them went on to play in the Olympics and the World Cup. Just incredible players. And then at the other end of the bench, we had some kids who weren't nearly so good. To put it gently. So it was challenging in that sense, but it was fun, man. The team did really well. We ended up making it to the national Final Four. That was a good experience.

Ron: Now, the next step I'm not as familiar with. But you actually started a program down in Florida?

Dan: Yes, so from Brewton-Parker, I moved on to Embry-Riddle University in Daytona Beach, in February of 1998. They had a club soccer team – a women's club team – and they were elevating it to varsity status for the following Fall. So that was interesting. Most of the players on the team – when you get the job in late February, you don't have a lot of time to recruit. So I think I had maybe two kids that I actually recruited on that team our first year. The rest of the team were kids who I'd inherited from the club team, and a lot of them had never even played high school soccer. They started playing soccer when they got to college. So we weren't good. Put it that way. We actually ended up winning two games that year.

- Dan:** Which, still to this day, blows my mind. So then, it was a matter of recruiting and recruiting and recruiting until we became the dominant team in the conference there for awhile.
- Ron:** You were the head coach of that program for eight or nine years, right?
- Dan:** Yes. Yeah, nine years. And from there, went on to Ole Miss, where Steve Holman was the head coach. I actually arrived at Ole Miss as a volunteer assistant, and after the second season, two paid assistants left, and I got elevated to the paid assistant. And then a year later, Steve took the job at the University of Georgia, as the head coach there, and brought me along with him.
- Ron:** So you were an associate head coach at Georgia.
- Dan:** Yes.
- Ron:** And in both places, your focus was defense, correct?
- Dan:** Yeah, at Ole Miss and at the University of Georgia, I was basically referred to as the defensive coordinator.
- Ron:** Okay. Now, did you prefer that more specialized focus, or did you prefer the head coaching, covering the whole gamut?
- Dan:** There's things that I love about both, right? One of the things that I love about being an assistant coach is, I just think the job's more fun. You don't have to deal with nearly the amount of non-soccer crapola that the head coach has to deal with. You still get to deal with plenty, but just not as much as the head coach. I think the assistant job is just a little more enjoyable. You get to be a little bit closer to the players and, as far as the specialization goes, it didn't matter to me that I was specializing with the defense or attackers or anything. The ability to take a part of the team and kind of build it as its own unit – I really enjoyed that a lot. I like kind of that team-within-the-team philosophy.
- Ron:** And so I guess the one thing that kind of consistently runs through all of this – through your playing days and through all of your coaching – is goalkeeping has never been front and center.
- Dan:** Yeah, I got nothing. I did a little bit of goalkeeping when I was about 10 and 11 years old, just in my rec league. Our team was so bad. My dad was our coach. He would put me in goal and hope that the game was 0-0 or maybe we're losing by a goal with 10 minutes left, and then he would pull me out of the goal and hope that I could score. But I never had any goalkeeper training whatsoever. When I first became a coach at Wheeling. I think, when I arrived there, we had two goalkeepers. Both of them were seniors.



- Dan:** And then the next year, I don't even think we had a goalkeeper recruited. We ended up kind of pilfering a girl who had been on the softball and basketball teams and turned her into a goalkeeper. And she did a fantastic job. Just a great kid, and so eager to learn. But I was in charge of training her how to be a goalkeeper, which is the blind leading the blinder. I did try to learn. I tried to pick up what I could from other coaches. I paid attention, but I was never confident in my ability to technically train a goalkeeper. My philosophy was, "Just just keep the ball out of the net, we're going to get along fine."
- Ron:** Right. So I when I first bought Soccer IQ 1 and 2 – I have two daughters, one who is a goalkeeper and the other is a field player. And I thought, "Well, this is something I could share with my field daughter." But because I'm a nerd, I have my little post-it notes, and so I started post-it noting each of the chapters that I was going to make my goalkeeper daughter read. By the time I got to the end of it, there were more post-it notes in chapters than not. So much of being a good soccer player will also help make you a good goalkeeper.
- Dan:** Oh absolutely. Absolutely and this specialization at the younger age groups of becoming a goalkeeper at the expense of developing as a field player, I think, it leaves kind of a bit of a hole in the goalkeeper's development. So I'm a big fan of, you train as a field player. And then, if you want to be a goalkeeper, that's something you do extra. You know, it's not at the expense of your field player development.
- Ron:** Cool. So you think all players – even if you've decided at a young age, "This is the position I want," – it's not an excuse to not train just as hard as everyone else.
- Dan:** Absolutely. I'll tell you what, I remember playing in a pickup game — this is like 1993 — college recruiting events used to have lunch breaks and it wasn't uncommon for the college coaches to get a little pickup game going during the lunch breaks. And I remember this one in St. Louis, we were playing, I guess it was like 2v2 or 3v3, and one of the guys was a goalkeeper. I don't know if he was from Trinidad or Jamaica — one of the islands — and he was phenomenal with his feet. And I didn't know he was a goalkeeper until after the game, and he was clearly the best player in that game. And when I found out he was a goalkeeper, it's like, "You've got to be kidding me. How are you that good with your feet?" And then as my career grew and I got more experiences, I realized that, internationally, goalkeepers are fantastic field players. If you're a high level goalkeeper in Europe, you're a high level field player, too. You're good with your feet. And that's something that tends to get missed in the U.S.
- Ron:** Now, one of your big accomplishments at both Ole Miss and Georgia — and correct me if I'm screwing this up — but I think your last season at Old Miss you guys had the best goals against average in the SEC.

Ron: And then the next year — I think you're still the only coach to ever do this, right? — at Georgia, once again — brand new team, brand new defenders — posted the best goals against average.

Dan: That is correct. Absolutely.

Ron: So not a goalkeeper but certainly an affinity for defense. Now, as you were coaching these defenses, was the goalkeeper part of that package or were they off on their own?

Dan: It depended on the goalkeeper. They were welcome. One of the things we did with the defenders and the goalkeepers is, I put together a handbook saying, this is how we're going to defend. And, you know, it is pretty specific stuff.

Ron: Right. Which is now Shutout Pizza, right?

Dan: Yeah, it's been expanded greatly and goes into much more detail. But yet that handbook basically evolved into the book Shutout Pizza. But the goalkeepers, you know, it depended on how willing they were to ... accept the gospel? I don't know how else to say it.

Ron: So around 2013, is that when the first Soccer IQ book was published?

Dan: It was actually published in July of 2012. So, I had no visions of grandeur with this book, right? I had been writing it for a year or two, and I knew I would eventually publish it. And it got to a point where I was like, "You know what? I might be on to something here." The book was almost done before I ever went on to Amazon and looked up soccer books. And when I did, I realized that, basically, there were two kinds of books in the soccer category. One was biographical or autobiographical. The other kind of book was written to coaches. And to teach them how to teach players. But nobody had ever written a book directly to the players. You know, we've got 15, 20 million kids playing soccer in this country. It seemed like a good idea to write a book to the players. So at that point at, there was a bit more urgency. I was like, "Wow. I might actually have something here." And then I started kind of freaking out a little bit that somebody would beat me to it. Eventually, it was going to happen. Then it became kind of a hurry. And also, during that time, I ended up marrying into a 6-year old daughter. And I really wanted her to see that her daddy had written a book. So again, that kind of pushed me forward. And in 2012, I self-published this book. To this day, the grand total of marketing hours I put into it is maybe three. But the one thing I did was, I sent a copy to Jay Martin who was the editor of the NSCAA Soccer Journal. And I did that in like April of 2012. I'm sorry, April 2013. So the book has been out for over a year. Or almost a year and a bit.

Ron: At that point, did it have any traction?

Dan: No, it was selling like 25 to 35 copies a month. And I didn't expect much more than that. But I was like, you know, I'll just take a flyer on this one and then see what happens if I send this guy a book. Six months later, I guess, I get a call from my buddy who says, "Have you looked at the soccer journal?" And I said, "No, why?" He goes, "Your book's in there." I said, "What are you talking about?" He said, "Jay Martin did a Top Five Books of the Year. Your book's right there." And that was the tipping point. I don't know how many coaches get that magazine. But a lot of them decided to start buying my book. And the one thing I always kind of knew was, if a coach read it, there's a solid chance he would want his players to read it. And that's what happened. Then, all of a sudden, coaches were ordering 20 or 30 copies for their players. Or they were telling their players to read this book or they were telling their parents to buy the book for their kids. So all of a sudden, I had like the world's greatest volunteer sales force working for me. Then the book, all of a sudden, in the middle of November 2013, it became the best-selling soccer book on Amazon. And that's a position it's pretty well held ever since.

Ron: It was such an approachable book. You mentioned the other coaching books that are out there, written mostly to coaches at a pretty high level. A high school coach with limited experience or a club coach with even less experience may not get much out of that book. But these are really bite-size bits of common sense tactics. The kind of thing that a coach can appreciate. And then, like you said, pass it along to players, because there's no reason they can't appreciate it. too.

Dan: Yeah, there are some commonalities in the feedback that I get. The most common compliment that I get is, "I love the short chapters." That should be a priority for anyone who wants to write a book. Keep the chapters short. The other thing that's pretty funny is a coach will say, "This chapter reminds me so much of this player that I coached and this chapter reminds me of a different player," and I think a lot of coaches reading this book are going, "Oh my God, that's so so-and-so. He might as well be talking directly to Susie or Jenny or whoever." So yeah, it's easily relatable for coaches because they have players who suffer from these maladies that I kind of catalog in that book.

Ron: And since then, seven additional soccer books and, did I read right, there's a children's book too?

Dan: Yeah, yeah it's Thigpen McThwacket's Incredible Racket, which, by the way, is my favorite one. It's a really good book, and if you can pull off a Sean Connery accent while you're reading, it makes it even better. I actually wrote that while I was at Wheeling. I was like 22 or 23 years old and I wrote it in basically a half an hour. It just came out of me and I just sat on it for years and years and years, and then last summer, I finally kind of bit the bullet and hired an artist and got it published. Yeah, I really like that one. I'm proud of that one. That's my favorite one. I turned out a bunch of soccer books after soccer IQ came out.

- Dan:** To be honest I've never said this in any kind of public forum before but we knew that eventually we were going to be unemployed at Georgia. We didn't know when it was going to happen but I was like, man, when the day finally comes I need to have some kind of parachute. So, soccer IQ has done well financially, I'm going to turn out more and see if I can soften the fall, which is exactly what happened.
- Ron:** Now obviously, with your track record, it would not have been hard to catch on somewhere else. So, at this point, you've just decided that this is more fun?
- Dan:** Well, I was really stressed out by the end of Georgia. For the better part of 3 seasons, we knew that eventually we were going to get the axe. It wasn't for performance, mind you, but coaches were dropping like flies and eventually it was going to be our turn. It's a heck of a way to go to work every day. It was the only time in my career where I kind of stopped looking forward to game day. All I saw was the worst, you know? I used to wake up on game days going, "Yeah, gameday! This is going to be great. Can't wait for it." By the 2014 season, I would wake up and go, "Gameday. Oh my god, I hope we don't lose." It was just way way too stressful, and it wasn't good for me, it wasn't good for the players I was coaching either. I was too worried about losing my job. I was too worried about the financial implications of losing my job. So I'll tell you what — when we got the call that we were no longer employed, there was just a tiny, tiny bit of me that was just a little bit relieved. Because now, I just knew. There was no more guessing about it. It was done and that was that. It brought on some other challenges, but it definitely relieved the stress of the unknown that had been hanging around for a few years.
- Ron:** That was after a season that you actually made the tournament, right?
- Dan:** Yeah. Yeah, we made the NCAA tournament; played at the University of Central Florida on a Saturday night. Lost 2-1 to a very good UCF team. I think they ended up going to the Elite 8 that year, and the team went back to Georgia on Sunday morning. I drove over to Melbourne, Florida, for the junior college national championships, to recruit. And basically, at halftime of the first game, I got a call from my boss who said, "Come on home." And yeah, that was that. I just didn't want to put myself in that situation anymore. It had stopped being fun so I was like, "You know what? I'm going to stop and try and make a go of it here as a writer."
- Ron:** And no regrets up to this point?
- Dan:** I don't know. It's tough. There's things that I definitely miss. There are some cool experiences that you get and relationships with the players that are just fantastic. But at the same time, whenever I think about the way recruiting has gotten, so young.

- Dan:** It's not a whole lot of fun to go out and watch 13- and 14-year olds play soccer and try to convince them to come to your college three or four years down the road. When I first started coaching, what was pretty cool was, you recruited a kid in October, November, December, and she says she's coming to your school. Then, eight or nine months later, she's actually playing for you. Now at the Division 1 level, particularly, you might not be there by the time the kids shows up. It's gotten really kind of absurd. Whenever I think about going back, I think about that in particular and how that's just not fun. The recruiting element of that just isn't fun anymore. It feels like, I don't know, for lack of a better word, dirty. Just going out and trying to get these kids who have just become teenagers, and trying to convince them to make the biggest decision of their life because you think that's best for your program. So yeah, that sucks some of the fun out of it for me.
- Ron:** So you've got eight soccer books, including some best-sellers. And really good books. I've not read all eight, but I think I have four or five, and all highly recommended. Very straightforward, approachable reads, and I'll put links to all of them on the show notes page. And we've covered your resume, which includes back-to-back seasons with the lowest goals-against average in the SEC, for two different teams. A feat that no one else has ever accomplished. And now, while you're admittedly not a goalkeeper, you don't coach for 24 years at that level and not get a perspective on the position and a level of understanding that most people don't have. So how has goalkeeping evolved over those 24 years of coaching?
- Dan:** Okay, so, to be fair, I'm going to speak specifically on the women's side of things.
- Dan:** Sure.
- Dan:** I coached one season, as an assistant, of men's college soccer. When I first got to Brewton-Parker, I was an assistant for both the men and the women. So other than that, my 23 years have been exclusively coaching women. I would say, on the women's side, no player-slash-position has evolved or improved more dramatically than the goalkeeper. When I first started coaching, goalkeeping was considered something close to a universal weakness in the women's game. If you were a college coach looking to recruit a goalkeeper, the only thing you were really looking for was a shot stopper, because even that was in short supply. If you had a goalkeeper who was a solid shot-stopper, it wasn't exactly an embarrassment of riches, but you were certainly ahead of the curve. There was a time when the magic bullet in women's soccer was the high ball. If someone took a shot from distance that would float in and dip just under the crossbar, 9 times out of 10 it was going to be a goal. There were attacking players who made a living on those shots. If they can get just enough room to pull the trigger, they would launch a ball at the goal from 35 yards. And it's not like these shots were lasers, either.



Dan: It's like they were a part long ball, part chip, and when a player hit one of those shots, as soon as it came off her foot, if you're the coach on the other team, you're thinking, "Oh god, that's a goal."

Ron: Your heart's in your mouth.

Dan: Yeah. You just knew how that story was going to end. So that sort of looping floating highball was like kryptonite to the female goalkeepers. There were so few who could make that save even at very high levels of competition. It was literally referred to as "a girl's goal" because you wouldn't see that go in the net in a men's game. So you had coaches on the recruiting trail looking for goalkeepers with a singular quality: the ability to stop the high ball. And finding that goalkeeper was sort of like finding the Holy Grail. But goalkeepers have gotten so much more talented and athletic, and now the high ball isn't automatic. These days, a lot of the shots that were goals 20 years ago, are comfortable saves.

If you sent today's goalkeepers back in time, you could probably wipe 15 to 20% of the goals off the board just because of the improved ability to deal with high balls. So the position has evolved to the point where now we expect more of the goalkeeper than just simply being a shot stopper. Now, we expect her to deal well with crosses, to play with her feet, to be effective in her distribution and, to a certain extent, manage the defense. There still isn't a surplus of players who can check all those boxes, but the number is growing with each passing year and I think that's a testament to coaching at the youth and club levels and the move towards strength training at the younger ages. So we're not there yet, but we've come a long way and we're moving in the right direction.

Ron: So where can we still get better? What are deficiencies that you still see on the women's side?

Dan: Alright, I'll give you three. First of all, I think there's still a lot of room for improvement with foot skills. Too many players start specializing as goalkeepers at a young age and they don't spend enough time developing their foot skills or their tactical awareness as field players. Foot skills are obviously an important part of being a modern goalkeeper and on the women's side, even though it's gotten a lot better, it's still a noticeable weakness. I think when we categorize the goalkeeper as a "hands" position and don't provide sufficient opportunity to train as a field player, we don't just overlook the technical development of foot skills. We also overlook the tactical development that gets missed along the way. Just as an example, the ability to look at a 3v2 and understand how the attack is developing and anticipate where the ball is going to go next. That's something you develop in your experience as a field player.



Dan: Another prevalent weakness I note, and this overlaps with the prior point, is the inability or unwillingness of goalkeepers to come off their line to cut off an attack. Too many — and again, I'm talking about the women's game — too many goalkeepers only understand their job to be present at the very end of an attack, to basically stop a shot or grab a cross. But a goalkeeper who is aggressive off her line and out of her box gives her team a huge tactical advantage. Because, not only does she prevent a lot of attacks from ever really becoming dangerous, but you can organize your entire defensive setup around that one skill set. I'll give you an example.

When I was in Georgia, Alabama had a goalkeeper named Justine Bernier. She was a Canadian kid, and she was a very talented goalkeeper, to be sure, a very good shot stopper. But in my eyes, her biggest value was in her ability to cut out balls that were played in behind the defense. It was pretty common for her to race 15 or 20 yards out of the 18 to clear a ball that had gotten behind the back four. Because of her ability to play so aggressively, Alabama was able to hold a very high defensive line. They would basically just bait opponents into playing balls in behind them, because they knew their goalkeeper would be the first one to the ball. Kelly McCormick at Ole Miss — she never played for me, but I recruited her to Ole Miss. She showed up after I had left for Georgia. But she was another very aggressive goalkeeper that snuffed out a lot of attacks before they became dangerous, and both of those teams were a pain to play against because their goalkeepers sort of served as an extra defender.

What those two kids had in common was that they were both fast and they were both very good with their feet and my guess is that both of them had spent a fair bit of time as field players, so they were able to read a play as it developed and anticipate when the opponent would try to play that killer ball.

Ron: That's what I was going to ask. The reason that's a deficiency — is it because a lot of these keepers haven't played in the field, so they don't make that anticipation? Or, you made a point in a few different articles and books before, that courage is something that is maybe undervalued or at least in short supply.

Dan: I don't think it's courage in the terms of fear of contact. I think it might be a courage issue in terms of fear of failure. But I think that the biggest part of it is, they've assumed a role at a young age as the person who protects the goal. And the goal kind of becomes the mother ship, and they kind of become anchored to it. And they just don't understand, they don't read the play as well, because they don't have that field player training. They don't understand that there are races that can be won. My advice to my goalkeepers was, "If you can go win the race, then go win the race. Don't sit back here and wait for the attack to end. Go out there and end it. If that means you have to go 20, 25 yards out of your 18, then do it. But if you can win the race, go."

Dan: I'd rather — I think their first instinct should be to come forward rather than go backward. And a lot of them, their first instinct is, as soon as the ball starts heading towards their half of the field, they're back-pedaling. They want to go get back to their comfort zone which is somewhere inside the six-yard box. So I think it's a combination of things that leads to that kind of lack of awareness and aggression coming forward.

Ron: So the third?

Dan: So the third one I'm gonna mention is basically game management, and the ability to be aware of the score, of the time left on the clock, and to use that information to guide your decisions. I'll give you two examples. Say your team has a one-goal lead with 10 minutes left and the ball rolls over your end line for a goal kick. In the Premier League, this is a 40- or 45-second restart. In women's college soccer, it's a 19-second restart.

At Georgia, I watched a lot of video. Tons. Tons on us and tons on our opponents. At one point, I started clocking the amount of time it took for teams to restart the ball on a goal kick. From the moment it crossed the end line to the moment it came off the goalkeeper's foot. I'm telling you, it was almost always 19 seconds. Regardless of the score, regardless of the venue, and it didn't matter if the goalkeeper's team was winning or losing, it was 19 seconds. Now, referees at the collegiate level won't let goalkeepers get away with a 45-second restart, but you've got to be able to take at least 25 seconds off the clock when you're trying to protect a lead, and hopefully closer to 30.

But very few female goalkeepers understand the gamesmanship of that situation. I'll give you another example, and we'll stick with goal kicks. Let's just say the game is tied, and your team gets a goal kick with under a minute to go in the first half. Now, you subtract the 19 seconds it takes to put the ball back in play and let's say, now, you're taking that kick with 20 or 25 seconds left in the half. Your chances of turning that ball back into a goal-scoring opportunity are slim at best, and they're not nearly as good as the opponent's chances of turning it into a scoring chance for their team. You know, all it takes is one mistake and that ball is headed right back down your throat.

So, in that situation, your goalkeeper is better off never putting that ball back into play. And if she has to put it back into play, you should do it with as few ticks left as possible and then drive the ball towards the sideline or over the sideline. I mean, at that point, all you should be thinking about is just getting out of the half. That's just common sense. But the amount of times I've watched my own goalkeepers take a goal kick with, you know, 15 or 25 seconds left in the half? And I'm like, nothing good is going to come from this. There is literally no good outcome to this. At best, we get out of the half with the score as it is right now. That's just little — those little game management things I think are lacking in, again, I'd say, more on the female side.

Ron: Related to that, you had one counter-example or piece of advice that you offered in one of the books about getting rid of the ball once she's got it in her hands. Obviously, you don't pick it up until you have to when you are protecting a lead, but you said, once you do, don't let the seconds tick off. You had an example, if I remember right.

Dan: The Canadians. The Canadians, the Olympics.

Ron: Oh, right, right.

Dan: That's the one. You know, referees are inconsistent with that particular rule, and I think I said this in the book, it's a rule that's rarely called, but it's not never called. To me, that's the one area where I don't mess with. Get that ball out of your hands in six or seven seconds. Don't even give the official an opportunity to give the opponent a free-kick right at the top of your 18. That's how the US ended up beating Canada. I think it was the goal that tied the game, but that call was made, and then the free kick turned into a handball, and the US tied and then goes on to win the game. You just don't want to invite that kind of disaster. I would rather leave one extra second on the clock and take your chances.

Ron: So still related to go keeping, what role should the goalkeeper play in organizing?

Dan: Alright, so I'm gonna have a lot of people yell at me for this answer.

Ron: Alright, good.

Dan: Because I think you have to be careful with this one. A lot of coaches think that organizing a defense really means communicating. They have the goalkeeper who doesn't communicate well or well enough, and they want that kid to be more vocal. Now here's the thing — the reason some goalkeepers aren't very vocal is that they just don't understand what's going on in front of them. Not to the point that they can read the play and direct their defenders. And they don't want to say the wrong thing, so they end up saying nothing. Ideally, who wouldn't love to have a goalkeeper who could manage the defense? Who could vocally coordinate the movement of the back four or what have you? But here's the thing — there just aren't very many goalkeepers, on the women's side at least, with the requisite tactical understanding to do that well.

And when you have a goalkeeper who is out of her depth, tactically, and you task her with organization, then sometimes you're left with a goalkeeper who is basically distracted. She is so busy looking at what's going on in the box and trying to process the information and trying to figure out who should mark who and what to say to her defenders, she has a lapse in focus and the next thing you know, the ball is in the goal. The goalkeeper's primary focus has got to be keeping the ball out of the net. If she isn't maximizing her ability to do that, then the rest of it doesn't really matter.

Dan: One of the best pure goalkeepers I ever coached, I tried to make her a more effective organizer, but she just didn't have the tactical aptitude to see the picture and make those split-second calculations, and she was getting beat on shots that she would have saved before I tried expanding her role. I would see it not just in games, but I would see it in training a lot as well. So I realized, you know, this expanding her role was not a good idea. So we ended up kind of going backwards. We took a step back. In the end I simplified her role. I took away her responsibility of organizing and just let her concentrate on basically being a shot stopper. She never again attempted to organize her defense, but she ended up being a two-time All-American because she was just that good at making saves. Once I complicated her role, it really kind of diluted her shot stopping ability, because she was distracted trying to learn something under live fire.

I think that by the time you get to college, if you don't have at least some tactical aptitude at organizing a defense, it's very difficult to become a high-level organizer. Again, I'm going to say that a lot of that, I believe, has to do with, did you grow up as a field player? Have you had experience as a field player? Because that's going to help a lot when you're on both sides of the ball, when you're playing as a defender or an attacker. But when you get that experience of seeing what's going on in a crowded 18, I think that helps your ability to organize. I think, when you're trying to learn that from scratch at the age of 17 or 18 or whatever, I think that's a long haul.

Ron: That was actually going to be my follow-up. If you're a younger keeper, you're just starting on this journey and you aspire to be that player who has that as one of her tools, your advice would be, "Get yourself out on the field more"?

Dan: Yeah. And I think that falls a lot to coaches. One of the reasons I'll get yelled at for that last answer was the fact that I kind of gave up on the development of the goalkeeper as an organizer. And I confess, I clearly did, but it was in the best interest of my program that she spent her time focused on keeping the ball out of the net. But again, coaches — and parents — need to understand that as well. That there is real value to having a goalkeeper who understands the game with the mind of a field player. So letting kids play — even if it's just 3-on-3 pick up games, without goalkeepers, or 5v5 or whatever — that experience to understand how the pieces are going to move depending on where the ball goes. I think that's an invaluable trait in goalkeepers and I think it's hard to learn without having a good amount of experience playing as a field player.

Ron: A lot of goalkeepers can be a little reluctant to play in the field. Some of them love the opportunity, but others recognize that they can sometimes be the weakest link.

Dan: Yeah, that's exactly right. If you're coaching a college team right now, and let's just say that on any given day for a training session, only one of your goalkeepers is available, right? The other keeper is hurt or whatever, and you decide to play a pickup game or a possession game. Nobody wants the goalkeeper on their team.

Ron: Right.

Dan: You know? Because the goalkeeper, without fail, it's very unlikely that the goalkeeper's foot skills are that of the field players. And don't get me wrong, there are exceptions to that rule, but by and large, the goalkeeper's going to lag behind in the foot skills department. And that's again because they start being funneled off into specialization early, and that's where they become comfortable. We want to do the things that are comfortable for us. That's why your daughter wants to play goalie at a Futsal tournament, because that's what she's best at. But we all know, the only way we're going to get better is to get out of our comfort zone.

Ron: Well hey, I really appreciate it. Now for people who want to keep up with you, what's the best way? Is there social media or the website or where do we have them look?

Dan: Yeah, man, anybody in the world of branding would tell you that I did everything wrong. So my website is soccerpoet.com which is also my Twitter handle. I've got a Facebook page that's also soccerpoet. You could find me on Amazon. My books are on Amazon. I also sell gear now. I started a SoccerIQShop.com with some pretty cool gear, so I'm excited about that.

Ron: Cool! Well, definitely we'll put all of those links in the show notes. I really can't thank you enough, such a pleasure to talk to you today.

Dan: Ron, I appreciate you havin' me, man. I had a blast!

Ron: So thanks a lot to Dan, and thanks to all of you for listening to this episode. Lots of good advice and observations about the game and the evolution of goalkeeping. I hope you enjoyed it. And as I said before, there is a lot more to the interview. You'll want to head over to 6ydbox.com/005 for the outtakes segment. We delve deeper into his coaching experience, both at the smaller colleges and later in the SEC. We talk recruiting, we pull a few excerpts related to goalkeeping from his books, and we talk about the reluctance of some keepers to play in the field. So more good stuff - it just wouldn't all fit into 30 minutes.

And on that same page, I have links to Dan's books. Again, if you haven't read them already, they should be on your list. Very practical, common-sense soccer strategies and tactics that aren't always as common as they should be. Now, I've not read them all, but I have four or five so far, and they're all fantastic. They're also cheap - most of them \$10 or less.

Ron: It's the kind of book you can read over a weekend, and then give it away to one of your players or your teammates. All of those links are in the same place - as well as links to Dan's website and his new gear shop. It's all at 6-y-d-b-o-x.com/005.

Before I go, a quick preview of next week's episode. I have the pleasure of talking to Owain Fôn Williams, the starting goalkeeper for the Indy Eleven. If you didn't already realize there's some great talent in the USL, and some players with rich histories and compelling stories, you'll definitely want to come back for this one. Owain was a part of the Welsh national team that made an historic run to the semifinals of Euro 2016. They were only eliminated by Cristiano Ronaldo and Portugal, the team that would eventually win it all. Owain talks about that experience, playing on an international stage, and also about this inaugural season for Indy in the USL. One of the common intangibles we'll discuss, between the two teams, is the chemistry in the locker room. He talks about how important it is, and what role a goalkeeper can play in it. So you'll definitely want to come back for that.

In the meantime, please visit our website at 6-y-d-b-o-x.com, and the show notes and all the links for today's episode at 6ydbox.com/005. We've had a great response to the release of the first several episodes. I can't thank you enough for listening, or for the kind words and encouragement.

If you want to help us out, one big thing you can do. Tell a friend. If you know a goalkeeper or a coach, it would mean the world to me if you would take a minute and send them a link. Thanks for considering it, and thanks again for listening. And one more big thanks to Dan Blank. And to all of you, have a great week. I'll see you in the next episode.