

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 really excited to have the chance, today, to chat with Chris Seitz, the goalkeeper for the Houston Dynamo of Major League Soccer. Chris has found success at every level that he's played. We'll talk through his college years, on a totally stacked Maryland Terrapins team, where he won a national title - and defensive MVP award - as a true freshman. We'll also talk about his time in Dallas, where he added a Supporter's Shield and a US Open Cup to the trophy case. And then his big move this year to the Houston Dynamo.

Along the way, we'll talk about the responsibilities of the goalkeeper, the need for coaching - even for players at the highest levels - and tips for keepers that find themselves on new teams, or with a new back line they need to get familiar with.

On a personal note, I've been a Chris Seitz fan since the 2010 season, when he was only 23 years old and thrust into a starting role with the expansion Philadelphia Union. Allocations in MLS weren't the same as they are today, and it was a long season for Philly and for Chris. We talk about how a season like that can affect your development, and what you can learn from it. And also his biggest takeaway from Philly, that made it all worthwhile. All through that year, Chris seemed like a hard worker and just a decent guy. So it was great to see him find success in Dallas, and not at all surprising to read a story that popped up in 2012. It's not every day that a professional athlete has a chance to save a person's life. And we'll get into that too.

But first, I just want to thank you - whoever you are, wherever you are - for tuning into the show. I know there are a thousand other shows you could be listening to, and a million other things you could be doing. I really, truly appreciate you spending 30 minutes with me, here in the Six-Yard Box. So let's get to it.

Welcome, Chris. Thanks so much for being with me today.

Chris Seitz: Yeah, I'm excited, man.

Ron: We're already well into the MLS season now. Kind of strange to see you wearing orange this year. How's the transition been, to Houston?

- Chris:** Yeah, it's been a good one. It's been positive for me and for my career and for my development, to be honest with you. Athletes need a change of scenery every once in awhile and a fresh start, and I was definitely in need of one. I'm excited to be down here and working with the staff that we have and the defense that I've come into. I've obviously still got a lot to prove, but it's a good start. Everything's been going great so far.
- Ron:** Yeah, a four-nothing win and a clean sheet. Not a bad way to kick the season off, right?
- Chris:** Yeah. We've got to find that form again now and get back to it. But yeah, it was a great start.
- Ron:** Now I know, obviously, it's important for a goalkeeper to have some chemistry, especially with the defenders. Are there any shortcuts to create that when you come into a new situation like this?
- Chris:** No, I think it's about being as genuine as you possibly can. Not pretending to be somebody or something that you're not and being your true self and allowing your play to dictate the role that you have with the team. A goalkeeper's always going to be a position that has some sort of influence and some sort of leadership. They don't need to be the captain. They don't need to be the main voice in the locker room, but they do need to be someone that is constantly in their defenders' ears and getting to know the defenders. Because, look, at the end of the day, you need to find ways to motivate each and every one of them, in certain ways. And one person will want to be motivated in one way and another person reacts to it in a different way, and you've got to figure out what works for each individual player as quickly as possible. Because the more you can get them to do in front of you, the better off you're going to be, and the easier shots you're going to face, and the less work and body of work that you're going to have to do.
- Ron:** Has that always been something that has come easy for you, or is that something that you had to learn? To make those connections and make them quickly, like you said?
- Chris:** I think it's definitely something that you learn. I think it really took me until my time in Dallas to realize that it's not just one blanket approach that works for everybody. You know? I had some young guys that I had to find different ways to motivate, and it paid dividends down the road. Obviously, a guy like DeMarcus, you don't have to do a whole lot of talking to. Just give him shouts to let him know when runners are coming, and he's good elsewhere. But you have other guys that need a lot more instruction and a lot more of your time and ear, you know? You've just got to figure out what works for them and find which way is going to make them most successful and which way is going to make the team most successful.

Ron: Sure. Speaking of Dallas, is there any baggage that comes along with making a switch to a rival? I was racking my brain, and I can't think of any other players that have played for both of those clubs.

Chris: Not personally, no. I absolutely loved my time in Dallas, and I was grateful for it and the length of it. But at the same time, it was time for a change for my family and I. I weighed all of my options – and I had other options – but I thought Houston was a great team and a team that I could go into and work closely with the guys and really have an opportunity to have a chance to start and to make an impact.

Ron: One of the things you said when they first announced the move was you were excited to work with Paul Rodgers. Can you talk a little bit about him and training?

Chris: Yeah. Look, his pedigree speaks for itself, right? He is a top-end goalkeeper coach in this league and this country, and he's worked on, obviously, national teams and things of that sort. He's a very technical goalkeeping coach, and it's not about the length of reps or the amount of reps that you do, but it's about the quality within those reps. We might do two or three reps on certain exercises and be done with it and move on. Because he's like, "Look, you're technically clean through everything. We don't need to be doing this. Let's work on something else." His experience and his expertise have been exactly what I've needed at this time in my career, and it's a big learning curve for me because it's a different style than what I've been used to in the past. It's a welcome change. There's obviously going to be a learning curve and a learning period for it, but it's something that I'm excited for, and I'm trying to make the most of.

Ron: A lot of young players are probably kind of wondering, "How does a guy at your level – how much coaching do you actually need?" I remember, years ago, when Tiger Woods was at his peak, seeing him working with a swing coach and thinking, "Wow – who could coach Tiger Woods?" But apparently there's room for coaching at all levels, right? You don't stop needing a coach.

Chris: Well, what happened when he switched his swing coach?

Ron: Right.

Chris: You know what I mean? Look, you need different things and different pointers. They might be small. They might not be massive changes. But they are changes and things that can make you better and, for me, there's actually quite a few things that he's noticed and that we're working on. You want new challenges and new things and a coach that sees – not necessarily different issues – but different ways of doing what you've been used to in the past. And finding success in it obviously makes it easier to continue moving forward with it, and becoming more confident with it.

Ron: Cool. So, so far so good? Gelling well with the new team and the new city?

Chris: Oh yeah. It's been great, obviously, to get through preseason and get my family down here and start our life down here. You know, it's a big change for my kids and for my wife and I, but we're excited about it. And we're trying to dive head-first into it and make this home for us.

Ron: Now, to rewind a little bit, when you were growing up, when did you start playing this game? When was soccer the main sport for you?

Chris: I was a three-sport athlete all the way through high school. Once I hit high school, I played – my freshman year, I played soccer and football. 8th grade and 7th grade, I was playing basketball, baseball and soccer, and I played one year of football, my freshman year. But I think, especially for goalkeepers, it's important to cross-train and have different sports. You can take a lot as a goalkeeper from basketball. You can take a lot from – not necessarily baseball – but I guess, hand-eye coordination. But there's different things you can take from different sports and use them to better you within your sport. You look at a guy – Bill Hamid – who didn't start playing goalkeeper until late. You look at different guys who played other sports their whole lives, and they're able to use those sports to give them a jump start within the position, and it's important.

Ron: You were coming out of a time that was sort of pre-Developmental Academy, at least in the US. So now, a lot of these keepers – especially by the time they reach high school – are not playing other sports. Do you think they lose something? Or does the quality of the training make up for that?

Chris: I think they've lost some things, but I think they've made massive gains in others. You know, maybe they've lost a little bit of the different things that you can learn from different sports, but at the same time, you've move yourself into a higher quality of training – a higher quality of atmosphere and professionalism – at an earlier age. And you can get things from both directions. You look across the world, and you've seen the benefit of Developmental Academies or academies in general, and what they've been able to do for players, and we're trying to get to that level.

Look, when I came out of high school, there was no glimpse of anything that we currently have. We were an ODP style – ODP regional teams and national teams – and from there, there was nothing. LA Galaxy, San Jose, none of these teams in California had anything like what they have now. I think, personally, it's a massive step forward. But at the same time, I don't know a whole lot about it, because I've been out of it, you know? But obviously, I'm familiar with Dallas's Academy and their setup – what they've done there. And I'm learning – and trying to learn – the setup here. But it's all a little bit different, still.

- Chris:** And not everyone's on the same page or same style, but I think the fact that every team in this league has an academy, and has the ability to bring players in on a daily basis to train with the first team, is huge. And it's experience that, when I was that age, I would have died for.
- Ron:** So when you were that age, you were high school player of the year, so you were obviously playing at a high level. When were you on college radars? You are heavily recruited, right? When did you decide to go to Maryland?
- Chris:** Yeah. Basically, my junior year, I wanted to make the decision and get it over with and let my senior year just kind of focus on more development, and not carry the decision longer. The first day I could talk to coaches is the day I made the decision. I went on two junior visits, to both Maryland and UCLA. And I knew that my ultimate goal was to go professional, right? So for me, if I could grow up and have some time away, I knew that I wasn't going to be playing in my hometown, and I wasn't going to be playing in a familiar setting, in California – unless by chance I went to one of those two clubs. But for me, it was a time to grow up. And Maryland and Sasha and the pedigree of that university was huge in the decision. And, to be honest, it was a great decision in the end.
- Ron:** Yeah, right. Obviously, it paid off immediately, right? Can you talk about your freshman year?
- Chris:** Yeah, we had a huge recruiting class. We got Robbie Rogers late. He was a good friend of mine from California, and so we got him in. We got Graham Zusi that year, and AJ DeLaGarza. Moe came the year before. Our team was absolutely stacked with young talent, but they'd been to three straight final fours before we got there. So the talent was there as well. I mean, look, we had a great – my freshman year was an unbelievable year, obviously, personally. But as well, as a university. I think we won the ACC regular season and then we won the NCAA tournament. If you can win two out of three your freshman year, you've had a successful – you've have a very successful first year in college.
- Ron:** Or an entire career, right?
- Chris:** Yeah, seriously. We had a great group of guys, and Sasho has done a great job of making that university competitive each and every year, even after we were all gone.
- Ron:** So you came in, and I think it would always be difficult as a freshman to come into a team and – especially in your position, as an 18-year old kid – and command a back line. Like you said, you don't have a choice. You have to be vocal and have a commanding presence, but even more so with a team with that much talent on it. Was that a difficult transition, or did you fall right into it?

- Chris:** It was. I mean, we switched games to start my freshman year. I didn't win the spot in preseason or anything of that sort. There was a keeper that was there before, named Noah Palmer, who was a four-year starter. And there was a guy named Craig Salvati that came in with him and redshirted a year. So he was a fifth-year senior. Him and I started and split games, the first couple games, and then they ended up going my direction. But you learn a lot from those guys because he's been there and done that, and been a part of a successful team for a long period of time. It definitely was a transition and I had my ups and downs. It wasn't always peachy clean and pretty, and you learn a lot through those times.
- Ron:** But obviously, it ended well with a national championship. And I believe you were the defensive MVP, right? Of the college cup?
- Chris:** Yeah, I think I was. I think I was.
- Ron:** And then plenty of accolades the next year in '06. But then, after you've won a national title, there's maybe not as much incentive to stick around, right? It was after your sophomore year you went pro, is that correct?
- Chris:** That is correct, yeah. I wanted to – obviously, we wanted to end on top, and it was a disappointing way to lose in the tournament. When you're at a university like the University of Maryland, you expect to get to the Final Four every year. That's the sort of pedigree and the type of people that you have on your team, and it was a tough loss. I mean, we had a good year. It wasn't replicant to the year before or anything like that, but we were a strong team. And if you look at the team on paper, it's ridiculous. There are still probably eight guys still playing from that team, professionally. It's definitely one of the most noted college teams of all time, I'd have to say, the team those two years.
- Ron:** So Real Salt Lake is where you started professionally, and then you finally got your first big, consistent break with Philadelphia in 2010. But that was, I mean, it's a rough year playing for an expansion team, seeing all kinds of shots. I guess you probably grow up fast in an environment like that.
- Chris:** Yeah, it's a sink-or-swim environment, for sure. I came off of a 2009 season with Salt Lake where we ended up winning the title
- Ron:** Right.
- Chris:** And I got actually told that I was traded after the parade.
- Ron:** Wow.

Chris: That night, after the parade. So it was literally like three days later. We flew back, and that next day, we did all of the parade stuff, and I was told that I was heading off to Philly. It was. It was tough. We were in a tough situation because 12 of our first – sorry, 11 of our first 13 games, I think, were on the road. And so there was a lot of growing up that our team needed to do. The expansion setup wasn't as it is today, in terms of the amount of resources the teams are allocated and what they can do with them. And we learned quickly, and it's honestly something that I'll look back on as a big growing up experience for me.

Obviously, it was a year where I got a lot of games and it was also a year where I probably didn't play as well as I could have or should have. I'll look back at Philly as a big year for me, professionally, and it's something that changed – not necessarily my lifestyle – but my mindset of the position and, moving forward, how I would react to things.

Ron: So if you had it to do all over again, is that an important enough year that you're glad it's part of your pedigree?

Chris: My wife would kill me if I said otherwise. I met her there.

Ron: Oh, really?

Chris: I married a Philly girl. So yeah. Absolutely, I would do it over again.

Ron: Cool. So then, off to Dallas where most of your career has been spent. The 2016 season has to be the pinnacle though, right?

Chris: It was. It was. I think that was the year that it all came together for me. I never had a consistent run of games until 2016, with them. I think my record was always really good whenever I played, but I never did enough to win the position outright until that year, and things came together. We had a really good squad. We had a chance to do something real spectacular, and I mean, look, we won the double. We won the Supporters' Shield and the Open Cup, and set ourselves up to do really well in the MLS Cup. We fell a little bit short, but that was a great team and a great squad. I'll look back at that year as a really good year, personally, but also team-wise and soccer, in general.

Ron: Any personal highlights that year? Like, any moments that you think back on?

Chris: I think, statistically, if you're a stats guy, it was by far my best year. My back line was unbelievable. It was fun to work with and play with on a daily basis. I think there's a lot of games in there we can look back on and laugh and remember about. But it was just a special year and a good group of guys that connected and fully embraced what they had in front of them.

Ron: Now, in the background during a lot of this time, you were also part of the US national team setup, the youth national team and then the senior. Can you talk about that experience a little bit?

Chris: Yeah, when I was – I started with the 18s. I was never in residency or anything of that sort. I was basically the age right after that where I started to be involved. I went with the 18s and then the 20s. With the 20s, we had a really good squad. We went to Canada and the U20 World Cup and did really well. I think we probably lost our easiest game and that was the knockout stages, so we were out early. But I mean, we beat Brazil, we beat Poland, we beat South Korea and we beat Uruguay. We beat a lot of big teams. We had a really, really strong lineup. It was a great year, and then we move on to the 23s.

Personally, the Opening Ceremony at the Olympics – being a part of that was a highlight of my career. Especially as a young kid who grew up watching the Olympics and always watching and idolizing the people on TV at it. To be able to walk out and be a part of that was truly special. A great group of guys as well, there.

Ron: I think, a lot of times, we – especially people at home watching the games – they love their team, they love their players. But they kind of lose track of the human side of the people they're watching. One of the stories about you that always kind of stuck with me was 2012, 2013, somewhere in there. The Phil Richiuso story. And it started way before then, right? The bone marrow transplant. And you had a teammate at Real Salt Lake that got you on the registry.

Chris: Yeah. So in 2008, Andy Williams – who is an RSL legend – his wife was diagnosed with a rare form of leukemia. And in a show of solidarity and support, our team did a bone marrow drive that we all got swabbed for, as well as other teams around the league. It was really a league thing as well. And I didn't hear another word about it until I was notified and told that I was a match for somebody, or I could be a potential match for somebody. I wasn't even guaranteed to be the best match for him at that time. So, probably it was five years, four years that went by without even hearing a word. I didn't update my address. I didn't update anything.

I had the same email address and phone number through that time, and that's how they connected with me, and that's how we moved forward. And it was unbelievable that they were still able to get ahold of me, because I had completely forgotten about it, to be honest with you. And the timing of it was truly meaningful because my uncle at that point had just been diagnosed with leukemia, while I was going through the process. And my dad was a match for him, and so it hit really close to home. It was something that I knew I wanted to do, and I needed to lean on the club to find a way for me to do it. And credit to them. They brought a guy back that was on loan, on a season-long loan.

Chris: They brought him back in order for me to do it, and I'm very thankful that I was given the opportunity to be able to put soccer on hold for a bit and do something that meant a lot to me, and obviously to Phil as well.

Ron: Now, for people who aren't familiar with this process, it's not an easy surgery. That takes a lot of recovery, right?

Chris: Yeah so there's two ways of doing it. My dad's was – I was kind of confident because my dad had done it, and he was able to do it intravenously, through an IV. They pump you full of a bunch of meds that push the white blood cells basically into your bloodstream, and then they can – it's basically like a release when they come out. You just sit on a sofa bed with an IV hooked up to you and it takes it out of you. And that only works for certain types of cancers. Unfortunately, Phil had a different type, and I had to be put under. And it depends on the size of the person, but he was a big guy, so I was put under and I had 52 holes drilled into my lower back to take the bone marrow out of my hips. It was 26 on each side. It's crazy because it only comes out of two holes, but they do 26 different drill marks into you lower back and hips. And that's where they extract the bone marrow.

Ron: Wow, you were out through the rest of that season, right?

Chris: I was. I probably could have come back quicker. We were not very good, and we weren't making the playoffs, so there was really no push in order to get me back for one last game or the off-season trainings. So, we went a little bit slower and, to be fair, if you have an ACL injury, there's a game plan. There's a protocol that you follow to get them back fully healthy and fully fit. There's nothing like that for an athlete coming back from a bone marrow injury, and I was basically the first of them to do it.

So, we really were working and learning as we went. I was very anemic the first couple days and the first week or so and slowly came back. We were just cautious because your hips and that area of your body is so important to athletes that we wanted to make sure I was fully recovered and healed, and all the needle marks within the bone were done, and I was good to go, and I was stronger than when I left. And at the end of it, I was. When you break a bone, it calcifies and heals and becomes stronger. That's basically what happened with my hips. And we are good to go.

Ron: It's such an amazing story because there is some risk involved, right? When you're talking about bone density and affecting a part of you that's so important to what you do every day. I mean, there was no guarantee that that was going to come out as well as it did.

Chris: No. And I had no idea. But I knew that if I was able to give somebody an opportunity to live a month longer, a year longer – it's been five years now – so five years more than what he would have otherwise, anything was worth it. You know?

Chris: I was confident that I was going to be able to come back. They tell people that work a desk job that they'll be back in two weeks, so I didn't think it was going to be too crazy. Although, I don't really know, after going through it, how I would ever be back in two weeks, even to a desk job. Look, in the long run, you're giving someone a second chance that wouldn't have it otherwise. I'd recommend it to any human that was looking to do something like that.

Ron: So, it's obviously apples and oranges. But comparing something like that to a College Cup or a US Open Cup – something like that. I guess there's really no comparison.

Chris: There isn't. It comes down to - I say this often, but my wife was pregnant with our first, and if I wanted to be a role model for my kids, and if I wanted to teach them to do the right things, for me, personally, I just wouldn't be able to pass up an opportunity like that. And you think that, "Oh yeah, I'd do it," but at the same time, you have to drop everything and really stop everything that you're doing and commit to it. There's a lot of brave people out there doing it on a daily basis and giving people second chances that wouldn't have it otherwise. The more that it's promoted, the more that people learn about it, it's a simple cheek swab to be in the registry, and you have a chance to do something really special.

Ron: Well Chris, I really can't thank you enough for your time. People that want to keep up with you and keep up with the Dynamo this season, where can we send them? Social media or web sites or anything like that?

Chris: Yeah, I've got both Twitter and Instagram. It's @Seitz1 for those and, obviously, @HoustonDynamo, both of which are good follows. You see a lot of pictures of my kids and my family, but that's because they're my life, and that's who I do this for.

Ron: Well, again, thank you so much. Best of luck to you and to Houston going forward this year.

Chris: Thank you very much. Nice talking to you.

Ron: So I hope you enjoyed that interview with Chris Seitz. Be sure to keep up with Chris and with the Houston Dynamo at houstondynamo.com, and also [houstondynamo](https://www.instagram.com/houstondynamo) - all one word - on both Twitter and Instagram. Also, [Seitz1](https://twitter.com/Seitz1) - that's S-E-I-T-Z-Y and the number 1 - on Twitter and Instagram. And if you're interested in being swabbed and potentially saving the life of another person - as Chris did - check out bethematch.org. That's the national bone marrow donor program.

That link and all of the others are on our show notes page. And that includes player profiles on a bunch of those Maryland Terrapins from 2005 season. Chris was right - that was a pretty incredible collection of U.S. talent. So if you think it would be fun to see college photos of Graham Zusi and Maurice Edu, those links are all at 6ydbox.com/004.

Ron: And before I go, a quick preview of next week's episode. I'm excited to welcome best-selling soccer author Dan Blank to the show. He'll be the first to admit that he's sort of an imposter on a show like this. Dan was not a goalkeeper, nor did he specifically coach goalkeepers. In fact, he's been annoyed by his fair share of goalkeepers, and he's not shy about mentioned that. He was a head coach and also a defensive coordinator for several extremely successful college programs - from small colleges to some of the elite programs in the SEC. He's also probably the most common-sense soccer coach and soccer author that I've come across. So we'll talk about the changes he's seen in goalkeeping over the past 25 years and his insights on how to keep moving forward. So please come back for that.

In the meantime, if you want to help us out, please head over to iTunes and leave a review of the show. It doesn't have to take long. Just a rating and a couple sentences. In these early days of the program, those are the things that tell iTunes that the show is worthwhile. That we should keep doing it and they should keep promoting it.

But what if you have criticism? I guess you could leave a scathing review on iTunes. Which really wouldn't be very helpful. But I do want to hear that feedback - even if it's critical - especially if it's constructive. So we set up a page for that at 6ydbox.com/survey. If you have a few minutes to write up some more detailed feedback, I'm extremely grateful. Let me know what's working - and also what's not working. Or even just what you'd like to get more of. And that might include guest suggestions as well. If there's a keeper whose story you think would be inspiring or enlightening, or a coach who could bring some specific goalkeeping insight to the show, I'd love to hear about them.

So again - iTunes reviews - hopefully positive - to help keep the show going. And all of your survey feedback - good and bad - to help make the show better. And if you're willing to do it, I promise to read every word. Either way, thanks again for listening. Big thanks to Chris Seitz and the Houston Dynamo. And to all of you, have a great week. I'll see you in the next episode.