



JUST4GK CURRICULUM

READING THE CROSS

A Goalkeeper's Guide to Crossing

Six cross types. Six attacking principles.

One job: read it early, start in the right place, and commit.

AGES 8 – 19

Goalkeeper training resource · Small group & individual sessions · Southlake, TX

Laws references current to the 2025/26 IFAB Laws of the Game.

THE CROSS IS YOUR EXAM

Every other moment in a game gives you a partner. A shot from distance is you against one ball. A cross is you against a ball, six bodies, a moving line, and a clock that runs in tenths of a second. It is the single most complete test of a goalkeeper: reading, positioning, footwork, bravery, hands, voice, and then doing it all again two seconds later for the second ball.

Here is the good news, and it is the whole point of this guide. **A cross is not a reaction. It is a prediction.** The moment the winger picks up their head, the attack tells you what it wants — which foot, which body shape, which runners, which space. Every one of those clues arrives *before* the ball does. So this guide is built backwards from the attacker: coaches teach crossing as a way to create goals, and we take that same material and flip it. **Their intent becomes your early warning system.**

HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

- **Keepers:** read one cross type per week. Watch for it in your next game. Then bring it to session and ask to be served it.
- **Parents:** you do not need to coach technique. Section 9 and the checklist on page 8 are the parts you can genuinely help with — the language and the reset.
- **Every cross type follows the same four steps:** READ it → START in the right place → DECIDE once → EXECUTE and reset.
- The quick-reference table on the final page is your pre-game cheat sheet. Screenshot it.

FOUNDATIONS: WHAT HAPPENS BEFORE THE BALL IS STRUCK

You cannot out-athlete a bad starting position. Almost every cross conceded at youth level is lost in the two seconds *before* contact, not in the air. Fix the start and the rest gets easier.

Depth — your working zone

Depth is the distance between you and your goal line. Too flat and every ball goes over you. Too high and everything drops behind you. Your depth is not a fixed spot — it slides with the ball. Use the **six-yard line** as your landmark and these three reference points:

Where the ball is	Your depth	Your position across goal	Why
Wide and deep — crosser near the byline, tight angle	Half a yard to one yard off the line	Near post. Front foot roughly on the post line	From a tight angle the danger is the near post and the ball squeezing in behind you.
Wide and level with the edge of the box	One and a half to two yards off	Middle of the goal, favouring the near half	Widest range of outcomes — you must be able to go forward, back, or across. Start neutral.
Deep and central — crosser 30–40 yards out	Two to four yards off, toward the edge of the six	Central, square to the ball	Early-cross and lofted territory. Depth lets you attack a ball dropping behind your line.

Angle — split the difference

Do not stand square to your own goal, and do not stand square to the touchline. Turn your hips and shoulders so your chest is **half-open to the field** — roughly bisecting the angle between the ball and your far post. That single

adjustment gives you **split vision**: ball in one eye, box in the other, no head-swivel required. If you have to turn your head to find the ball, you are standing wrong.

Ready position for air — taller than you think

- **Stand taller** than your shot-stopping stance. Aerial work is a jumping action, not a diving action — you cannot spring from a deep crouch.
- **Hands at chest to upper-chest height**, in front of the body, elbows soft. Hands below the waist means your first movement is upward instead of forward.
- **Weight on the balls of the feet**, heels light. Feet roughly shoulder-width, **never crossed**, never still.
- **Small, live feet**. A quiet, static keeper is a late keeper. Keep a low bounce going so the first step is already loaded.

Footwork — the drop-step comes first

The most common technical error in the age groups we coach: the keeper's first movement on a cross is a **flat sidestep across the goal**. That step gains you nothing and loses you the ball over your head. The sequence is always:

Step	What you do	Coaching cue
1. Drop-step	First step goes <i>back and open</i> — the rear foot turns out and takes ground toward your own goal.	"Open the gate."
2. Cover ground	Side-on running steps or a crossover toward the drop point. Face the ball, run the flight — not the goal line.	"Run the flight, not the line."
3. Gather	Shorten the last two steps to load a one-footed take-off from the outside leg.	"Short, short — up."
4. Attack	Lead knee drives up as a shield, arms extend, take the ball at the highest point in front of the head , not above it.	"Knee up, hands early."

Catch **in front of your eyes** so you can see the ball into your hands and absorb it into your chest. A ball caught directly above the head cannot be seen, cannot be secured, and cannot be protected.

Eyes — scan, then lock

Before the strike, your eyes work on a loop: **ball → box → ball**. You are counting bodies and finding runners. The instant the crosser's foot goes back, the loop stops and it is **ball only** until the ball is dead. Keepers who keep checking runners during flight misjudge the drop point. Do your looking early.

THE DECISION: FOUR OUTCOMES, ONE CHOICE

Every cross ends in one of four keeper actions. Your job is not to pick the bravest one — it is to pick the **right** one, early, and then go all the way through with it.

Action	Choose it when — the if/then triggers	Execute it like this
CATCH (best outcome)	• Clear flight path — no bodies between you and the drop point • You can get two hands behind the ball • Arriving on the way up, not reaching on the way down • Dry ball, dry gloves	Two hands, thumbs and index fingers forming a W behind the ball . Take it at full extension in front of the head, pull it into the chest, land with the lead knee protecting you.
PUNCH / BOX	• Traffic or contact in your landing space • Ball arriving fast and flat above head height	Two fists whenever you can reach it centrally: a short, firm punch through the middle of the ball,

Action	Choose it when — the if/then triggers	Execute it like this
	- Arriving late or off-balance Wet or greasy ball, cold hands	forward and wide toward the touchline. Distance beats direction — never punch square across your own goal.
ONE-HAND PUNCH or DEFLECT	- Ball is beyond your two-hand reach - Bending toward or over you to the far post, no way to get behind it - Stretching at full extension	One firm hand or a strong fingertip glance taking the ball further away — over the bar or wide of the post. Never a soft touch that drops it back into the six.
STAY & SET	- Ball is moving away from your goal - Drop point outside your reach zone - A defender is favourite to the ball - It is a cut-back or pull-back	Hold your ground, re-set your feet , hands to shot-stopping height. Call "AWAY!" loudly so your defender knows the ball is theirs.

THE ONE RULE THAT MATTERS MOST

- Decide once. Decide early. Then commit fully.**
- Goals from crosses are rarely caused by picking the wrong option. They are caused by picking one and then changing your mind halfway — two steps out, a stutter, a step back. That in-between space has a name: **no-man's-land**, and it is where crosses become goals.
- If you leave your line, you must arrive.** If you cannot guarantee that, do not start — stay, set, and be brilliant at the shot instead. Staying is a real decision, not a failure of courage.

THE SECOND PHASE: THE CROSS IS NOT OVER

More goals come from the **second ball** than from the first contact. A punch, a header, a block, a deflection off a shin — the ball is loose and the moment is still live. Yet the most common sight in youth football is a keeper who has just made a good first save watching the rebound go in.

- Land ready, not relieved.** The instant your feet touch the ground after a punch or a save, your first job is to **reset your feet** and find the ball. Not the crowd, not the referee — the ball.
- Call "SET!" and "SECOND BALL!"** out loud. Your defenders relax after a first contact just like you do. Your voice is what restarts them.
- Recover to your line first, then to the ball.** If a punch has taken you two yards off your line, your **depth** is the priority — a shot into an empty net beats a keeper still turning around.
- Expect the shot from the edge of the box.** Cleared crosses usually drop to the arriving midfielder. That is a shot-stopping moment: get set, get big.
- Never assume the whistle.** Play until it goes. Some of the ugliest goals conceded at every level are keepers waiting for a foul that never came.

YOUR VOICE: COMMANDING THE BOX

You are the only player on the field facing the whole game. That view is useless if you keep it to yourself. On crosses your voice is a piece of equipment — and like your hands, it has to be trained.

The four core calls

Call	It means	Use it when
"KEEPER!"	I am coming and I am taking it. Everyone else clear out of my way.	Only when you are 100% committed and know you will arrive. This call moves your defenders — if you then do not come, you created the gap yourself.
"AWAY!"	I am not coming — nearest defender deals with it. Attack the ball and clear it high, wide, towards the touchline , never square across our own goal. I stay home and set.	Outswingers, deep balls beyond your zone, anything a defender is favourite for. Say it early so they attack the ball instead of hesitating.
"MINE"	A quieter, tighter version of "KEEPER" for a ball you will gather at or below head height.	Cut-backs, low driven balls at your feet, loose balls in the six. Short range and controlled — no need to clear the whole box out.
"SET!"	The cross is over — get your feet ready, the shot is coming.	The instant the first contact happens. Your second-phase call, and the most-forgotten one in youth football.

Organising before the ball is struck

- **"STEP!" / "SQUEEZE!"** — push the back line up, out of your working zone. You want space in front of you, not behind.
- **"DROP!"** — as the ball travels deeper or wider, bring the line back with it.
- **"BACK POST!"** or **"RUNNER!"** — name the space or the shirt. "Watch him" means nothing; "Sam — back post!" means everything.
- **"SECOND BALL!"** — the moment the first header or clearance happens. This is what stops the rebound goal.

The rules of a call: **early** — talk while the crosser still has their head up, because a call after the strike is noise. **Loud** — if it feels too loud to you, it is about right. **One word and a name** — short calls survive noise, and a name turns a suggestion into an instruction. **Committed** — repeat it as often as you like, but never change your mind. And **silence is a decision too**, almost always the wrong one.

THE SIX CROSS TYPES

Six deliveries. Six different problems. Each one below gives you what the attack wants, the clues that tell you it is coming, where to start, how to decide, and the specific trap that catches keepers.

1. THE LOFTED CROSS — your best chance to claim

What they want: height and hang-time delivered to an aerially dominant striker, so a big target can attack the ball with power. Teams use it when they have real presence in the air, late runners arriving at the back post, or when they are trying to get over the top of a low block. Because it is high, it is **slow** — and slow is your friend.



What the keeper should be reading here: the flight is high and long, which means **time** — a claim opportunity, not a panic. Two reads decide it. Judge the **drop point**, not the ball: where will it be at head height? Then look at the **circled cluster of runners** centrally and at the near post — that is your collision risk and your landing space. Attack through it and get two hands behind the ball and the attack is over; if those bodies own your landing space, punch it two-fisted, forward and wide. What you must never do with this much time is stand still and let it drop into the traffic.

- **Read it:** crosser has time and space, head up, body leaning back, standing foot planted well away from the ball. A big striker checking away to create a run-up. Bodies gathering rather than sprinting.
- **Start:** deeper and more central than your instinct says — **two to three yards off your line**. Height needs depth. Open your hips so you can drop-step and travel.
- **Decide:** judge **where the ball will be at head height**, not where it is now. Clear path plus two hands behind it means **CATCH**. Bodies in your landing space means **two-fisted PUNCH**, forward and wide.
- **Execute:** travel early with side-on steps, gather, one-footed take-off, **lead knee up as a shield**, take it at the top of the jump in front of the eyes.
- **Your trap: ball-watching.** The extra flight time makes keepers admire the ball, start late, and arrive underneath it. Also watch the elements — **wind and spin** move a lofted ball a full yard in the last moment. On a windy day, favour the punch.

2. THE INSWINGING CROSS — the no-man's-land trap

What they want: a ball that curls **toward your goal**, so that any touch from an attacker — or from one of your own defenders — sends it goalwards. It comes from a wide player cutting inside onto their stronger foot. They are specifically hunting three things: aggressive **near-post runs**, gaps between your defenders, and **your hesitation**.

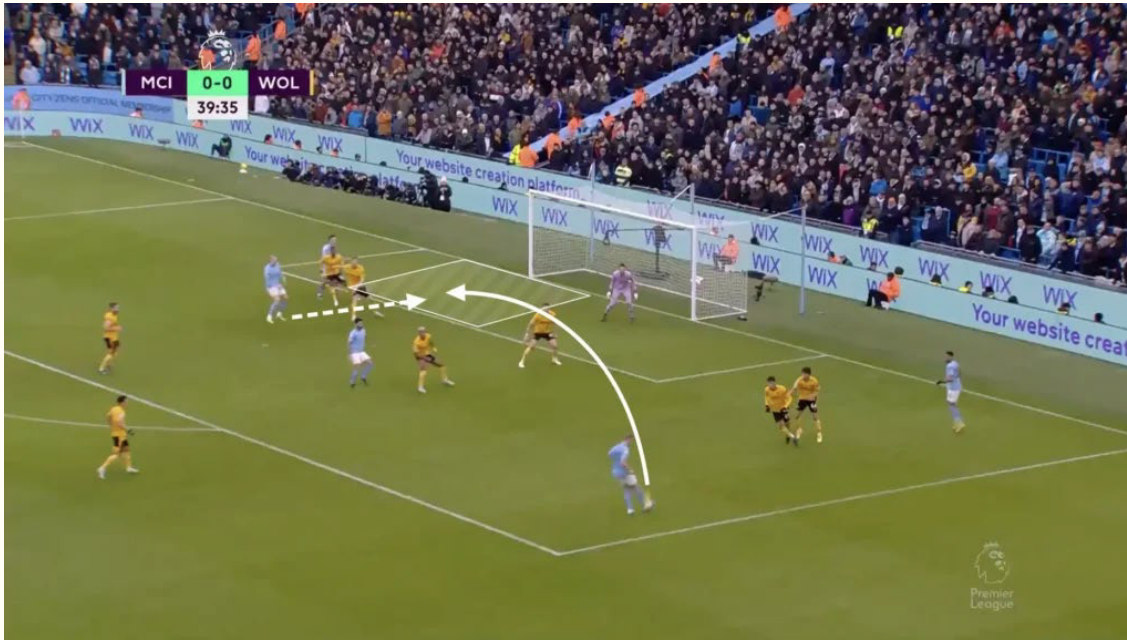


What the keeper should be reading here: the classic trap, drawn perfectly. The ball bends **in toward the goal** while a runner (circled) attacks **across the face** of it. Two things pull you forward at once — the flight and the fear of the near-post touch — and the keeper who half-answers that pull ends up two steps off the line with the ball behind them. That is **no-man's-land**. The read is the crosser's body: he has cut inside onto his stronger foot, so the curl is guaranteed before contact. Start deeper, hold your near-post line, and make *one* decision — attack it decisively at the highest point, or set your feet, trust your near-post marker, and be ready for the flick-on to the back post.

- **Read it:** a wide player **cutting inside** onto their stronger foot — right-footer on the left, left-footer on the right. Hips opening toward your goal. A striker starting wide and driving **hard at your near post**.
- **Start:** **deeper than for any other cross type** and holding your near-post line. Depth buys you the reach to attack a curling ball; standing flat means the curl beats you every time.
- **Decide:** honestly — **is it inside my reach zone or not?** Inside means **go early and go hard**, take it at the highest point, punch if there is contact. Outside means **STAY, SET**, trust your near-post marker and prepare for the deflection.
- **Execute:** if you go, go through the ball, not to it. An inswinger is still travelling toward your goal at contact, so a weak touch continues on its way in. Two fists, forward and wide, or a full catch.
- **Your trap: the half-step.** The curl and the near-post run both drag you forward, so you take two steps, doubt yourself, and stop. Now the ball is behind you and your goal is empty. Also expect the **flick-on** — an inswinger that is glanced at the near post accelerates toward the far post. Weight yourself to recover backwards.

3. THE OUTSWINGING CROSS — usually a stay-and-set

What they want: the opposite problem. The ball bends **away from your goal** so an attacker can run onto it and generate their own power — headers and volleys hit hard *into* the goal rather than glanced. Crucially, it is also designed to **drag your defenders forward** to meet the ball, which opens up the space behind them for a late runner. Very common from set pieces, and from teams with multiple runners or a tall striker hunting the second ball.



What the keeper should be reading here: follow the arc — the ball bends **away** from goal and the runner steps *out* to meet it. Everything is moving away from you, which is exactly why the right answer is the boring one: **stay, set, and let the ball come to the shooter**. Note how far the contact point is from the line — commit forward to a ball travelling away and you cannot reach it, then concede the tap-in behind you when it is knocked back across. Second read: this delivery is designed to drag the line out, so watch for the **late runner** arriving behind your defenders.

- **Read it:** the crosser is on their **natural side** — right-footer on the right, left-footer on the left — and whips the ball with the outside of the boot. Attackers **stepping away** from goal to build a run-up.
- **Start: hold your ground.** Slightly more central than for an inswinger, roughly a yard off your line, feet already set. Do not drift toward the flight.
- **Decide:** the default is **STAY AND SET**. Ball moving away from goal is almost never your ball — chasing it means arriving late, off-balance, and behind the play. Call **“AWAY!”** and let your defender attack it.
- **Execute:** re-set your feet, hands to shot-stopping height, and win the **shot**, not the cross. This is a shot-stopping moment dressed up as an aerial one.
- **Your trap: over-committing to a ball you cannot reach.** The bend looks catchable and it is not. Two steps forward here concedes the tap-in behind you. The second danger is the space this cross is designed to create — as your line steps out, a late runner arrives behind them. **Call the runner before you worry about the ball.**

4. THE DRIVEN CROSS — the most dangerous ball in the game

What they want: speed. A flat, hard delivery fired low across the face of goal, usually across the six-yard box, so that **any** touch from anyone scores and no one has time to react. It comes from fullbacks and wingers with a big strike, and it is the go-to ball on a fast counter or into a striker's feet inside the box. Be honest about this one: it is the single hardest cross for a goalkeeper to deal with.



What the keeper should be reading here: flat, fast, skimming across the face of goal into the highlighted zone. There is almost no flight time, which means **there is no travelling on this ball** — step forward and you are beaten in front of your own goal by a ball moving faster than you can. The answer is entirely about being **ready**: feet set and alive before contact, hands **low**, and a flat starting depth so nothing gets in behind you. Then expect the deflection — the likeliest outcome in that zone is not a clean strike but a touch, a shin, or a block that changes direction. Take what you can reach; otherwise get a strong hand on it, put it out of the zone, and reset instantly.

- **Read it:** the crosser **opens their body low** and strikes through the ball with pace and no lean-back. A striker attacking the **front post**, and a second attacker filling the space behind them.
- **Start: flatter and tighter to your line** — half a yard to a yard — with your **front foot protecting the near post**. Depth is no help when there is no flight time; being set is.
- **Decide: set your feet before contact** and get your **hands low** — this ball arrives between knee and chest height. Anything inside your reach, take it. Anything you can only touch, put it **out of the zone** — wide, or behind for a corner. A corner is a good outcome here.
- **Execute:** stay big and stay tall through it. Do not go to ground early — going down commits you and a driven ball skimming across the six often needs a second, higher reaction. Strong hands, firm wrists, no soft palms.
- **Your trap: travelling.** Any forward step and the ball beats you in front of your own goal. Also expect **deflections** — off an attacker, a defender, a shin, a stud. The direction will change. Assume it will, and **never assume the first contact ends the moment**. This cross type produces more scrambled second-phase goals than any other.

5. THE CUT-BACK — not a claim, a shot to save

What they want: to beat a compact defence by taking the ball to the byline and then rolling it **backwards**, away from goal, to a teammate arriving at the edge of the box. It deliberately removes any height advantage you and your defenders have and turns the moment into a clean, unhurried shot. Precision over power — and it targets the **edge of the penalty area**.



What the keeper should be reading here: the ball is rolled **backwards** along the ground from near the byline into the highlighted area at the edge of the box. Read that arrow honestly: **this is not a claim**. A ball travelling away from goal, on the floor, into a shooter's stride is not gatherable — and the keeper who reaches for it dives away from where the shot is coming from. The answer is footwork, not hands. The byline run forced you to the near post, so now **recover depth immediately**: rapid drop-step back onto your near-post line, get square to the new ball position, feet set before contact. Then it is pure shot-stopping — often blocking, because you are close and the shot is fast.

- **Read it:** the attacker takes the ball **past** your defender toward the byline and their body opens **backwards**. The moment you see them stop the ball rather than lift it, the cut-back is on. Watch for a runner **slowing down** at the edge of the box — that is the target.
- **Start:** as they reach the byline you will be pulled to your **near post**, tight and low, protecting the front post. Correct — but understand you are now in the worst possible place for the pull-back.
- **Decide: do not reach for it.** The instant you see it roll backwards, **recover depth**: rapid drop-step back onto your near-post line, get square to the ball, feet set before contact. Call **"SET!"** to bring a body across in front of the shooter.
- **Execute:** shot-stopping, and often **blocking** — you are close and the ball comes fast. Stay tall and big as long as you can, then spread and make yourself as large as possible. Strong hands to the near post; the far post is a longer, more saveable shot.
- **Your trap: trying to claim it.** Reaching for a ball moving away from you means you are diving away from the shot. Second trap: **staying at the near post** after the ball has gone backwards. The near post is no longer the danger — the whole goal is. Move your feet, get square, get set.

6. THE EARLY CROSS — the one that arrives before you are ready

What they want: to deliver from a **deeper position** than you expect, before your defence has had a chance to organise. It is a timing weapon rather than a technique weapon. It suits a striker with pace attacking space, and it works because defenders instinctively watch the ball rather than the runner behind them. The giveaway is not the flight — it is **when** the ball is struck.



What the keeper should be reading here: the ball is struck from **deep** — the delivery comes from outside the penalty area, well before the defence is set — and it loops in behind the line toward the two circled runners attacking the space. Look at *where* the danger is: not the traditional cross zone, but the space **in front of and across the keeper**, between his retreating defenders and his goal. Those defenders are facing the wrong way and cannot help him — he is the only player on the field facing the ball. So the cue has to come earlier than the flight: it is the **crosser's body shape from deep**. Recognise it and adjust your depth immediately. This is a decision made *before* contact — commit to claiming that space, or hold your line and set for the runner. What concedes the goal is getting caught mid-thought.

- **Read it:** a player looking up **30 to 40 yards out**, before they have reached the flank. A fullback or midfielder **whipping it first-time** instead of taking a touch. And the clearest clue of all — **a striker already running** before the crosser has struck it.
- **Start:** the moment you see that deep head-up, **adjust your depth immediately** — two to four yards off your line, central, square to the ball. The space you must protect is the space **behind your defensive line**, and only you can see it filling up.
- **Decide:** if the ball is dropping into the space between your line and your six-yard box, that is **your** ball — go and get it, and go early. If it clears your line and drops beyond your reach zone, **hold, set**, and prepare to face a striker running in.
- **Execute:** talk before you move. **“DROP! DROP!”** as the ball is struck — your defenders are facing the wrong way and cannot see the runner. Then commit hard, and take it at the highest point.
- **Your trap: getting caught flat.** The early cross punishes a keeper standing on their line while the defence steps up. If your line is high and you are flat, the space between you is an open invitation. **Depth and voice are the whole answer here** — you cannot fix an early cross once the ball is in the air.

A NOTE ON VARIETY

- Good attacking teams deliberately **mix** these six types, because a predictable cross is an intercepted cross. That is exactly why you read the **crosser's body** rather than guessing from memory. Body shape, standing

foot, and which foot the ball is on will tell you the truth every time — the last cross they hit will not.

SIX ATTACKING PRINCIPLES — AND YOUR COUNTER TO EACH

Coaches teach crossing using the six principles below. Every one of them is a message sent to you before the ball moves. Learn to hear them.

What they are coached to do	What it tells you	Your counter
1. Timing of delivery The crosser reads the runners and releases in sync with them.	Timing is visible . A crosser who lifts their head and waits is holding the ball for a runner.	Watch the crosser's head, not the ball. A held ball means an unseen runner. Scan the box while they wait, find the run, and call it before the delivery .
2. Movement in the box Varied near-post, far-post and late runs, plus decoy runs to free the real target.	The most obvious runner is often not the target. The first run is frequently a decoy meant to move you.	Track the second and third runner. Trust your near-post marker and keep your eyes on the arriving player. Name shirts, not spaces: "Sam — back post!"
3. Numerical presence Multiple attackers in different zones. A lone forward converts far less than three arriving.	Count the bodies. Numbers change your decision — numbers mean contact, and contact makes catching unrealistic.	Count before the strike — it decides catch versus punch. One attacker, back yourself to claim. Three in your landing space, punch .
4. Targeted areas The Golden Zone — six-yard box out to the penalty spot — is where goal probability peaks.	That zone is your zone. The most dangerous area on the field is the one you are best equipped to dominate.	Own it or defend it — never share it. Anything dropping inside is yours: claim it, loudly. Beyond it, stay and set. Decide where your zone ends <i>before</i> the game.
5. Fullback and winger combinations Overlaps and underlaps to pull defenders out of position.	An overlap or underlap is a warning . It usually produces a wider, deeper crosser — or a cutback.	Talk early and organise the line, not yourself. "STEP!" or "DROP!" as the second runner goes. An underlap to the byline means prepare for the cut-back .
6. Variability in delivery Mix the cross types, because a predictable cross is an intercepted cross.	You cannot pattern-match from the last cross. You have to read this one.	Read the body, every time. Standing foot, hip angle, which foot the ball is on, how far they lean back. Those four clues never lie.

THE GOLDEN ZONE — DECIDE YOUR BOUNDARY BEFORE KICK-OFF

- The area from your **six-yard box out to the penalty spot** is where crosses become goals. It is also, conveniently, the area where you have hands and everyone else has only a head.
- **Before every game, decide how far out you will go.** Draw that line in your head and tell your centre-backs where it is: "Anything inside the six is mine. Past the spot is yours."
- Keepers hesitate because they are making that decision **during** the cross. Make it before kick-off and you buy yourself half a second — which, on a cross, is everything.

BY AGE GROUP: WHAT TO EMPHASISE

Aerial work is the last part of goalkeeping to mature, because it depends on timing, spatial judgement, and physical confidence in the air — none of which can be rushed. What follows is how we progress it through the Just4GK age bands.

Age band	What we emphasise	What good looks like	Safety and coaching note
8–10	Position and voice before bravery. Ready position, the drop-step, split vision, and saying “KEEPER!” and “AWAY!” out loud. Catching served balls at head height.	Feet alive before the ball is struck. Body half-open, not square. The keeper makes a call every single time , even when it is the wrong one.	Hold position more, claim less. A keeper this age who stays home and sets is doing the right thing. Crowded aerial claims come later — there is nothing gained from jumping into traffic before they can judge a drop point. Balls are served, never driven at them.
11–14	Judgement. Reading the crosser's body, judging drop points, the honest catch-versus-punch call. Introducing traffic — one passive body, then two.	The keeper can say <i>why</i> they came or stayed. Two-fisted punch goes forward and wide , not sideways. No-man's-land is disappearing.	This is when hesitation habits form , so praise the committed wrong decision over the timid right one. Add contact gradually, always with a coach controlling the traffic. Protect the lead knee up habit — it is a safety technique, not a style point.
15–19	Command and consistency under pressure. Live crosses, real numbers, fatigue, second phase every repetition. Organising the line, not just themselves.	The keeper runs the box — line height, marking, names, second-ball calls. Decisions hold up when tired. Punch distance clears the zone entirely.	Now it is about repeatability , not highlights: one brilliant claim and three poor decisions is a worse game than four correct, boring ones. Train wet-weather and floodlight conditions deliberately.

THE LAWS YOU ACTUALLY NEED ON A CROSS

Only a handful of the Laws of the Game come up on crossing situations, but they come up often. Know these four and you will never lose a needless free kick.

- **Once you have control, you may not hold the ball indefinitely.** Under the current Laws, a goalkeeper controlling the ball with the hands for **more than eight seconds** concedes a **corner kick**; the referee raises a hand and visibly counts down the last five seconds. (This replaced the older six-second guideline and its indirect free kick.) Practical version: **claim it, look up, release it.**
- **You may not handle a ball deliberately kicked to you by a teammate** — including a clearance played back. The punishment is an **indirect free kick** to the opposition inside your own penalty area. On a cleared cross this matters: a defender under pressure passing back to you is a ball you must play with your **feet**. The same restriction applies to a ball received directly from a teammate's **throw-in**.
- **Once you release the ball into play, you may not handle it again** until it has touched another player — an **indirect free kick** otherwise. On a scrambled second phase: **if you let go, it is gone.**

One more thing worth knowing: you are entitled to be protected while you have the ball under control in your hands. An opponent who pushes, holds, or barges you in that moment is committing a normal foul and referees will penalise it. Claim the ball with confidence — but do not *rely* on the whistle, and never stop playing while you wait for it.

Laws references above reflect the 2025/26 IFAB Laws of the Game. Local youth competitions sometimes apply modified rules, so always confirm with your competition's rules and your referee.

CHECKLISTS

Pre-game — do this in your warm-up, every game

- **Walk your goal.** Touch both posts. Find your near-post reference points and pick out a marker behind each goal so you always know where you are without looking.
- **Read the surface and the weather.** Wet grass means a **greasy ball** — favour the punch. Wind means a lofted ball will move late. Sun or floodlights mean you already know which end is the problem.
- **Check your gloves.** Damp palms grip better than dry ones — wet them properly. Cold, stiff gloves do not catch.
- **Set your Golden Zone boundary** and tell your centre-backs out loud: “Inside the six is mine, past the spot is yours.”
- **Take crosses in the warm-up.** At least six — from both sides, and at least two with a body in front of you. Never let the first cross of the day be a live one.
- **Use your voice before kick-off.** The first loud call of the game should not be the first cross.

The pre-cross scan — five things, two seconds

	Look at	Ask yourself
1	The crosser's foot and body	Which foot is the ball on? Are they cutting inside or staying wide? How far back are they leaning? → <i>This tells me the cross type.</i>
2	My depth	Am I deep enough for this ball, or am I flat? → <i>Adjust now, not later.</i>
3	The bodies in my zone	How many, and where? → <i>This decides catch versus punch.</i>
4	The runners — especially the late one	Who is arriving that my defenders cannot see? → <i>Call the name now.</i>
5	My line	Do they need to step or drop? → <i>Say it loudly before the strike.</i>

Then the ball is struck, and it is **ball only**. Decide once. Commit. Reset for the second phase.

FIVE DRILLS, WITH PROGRESSIONS

Every drill below runs **static serve** → **live cross** → **traffic** → **full scenario**. Do not move to the next stage until the current one is clean and the keeper can explain their decision.

Drill 1 — Depth Ladder (position and reference points)

- **Set-up:** cones marking three crossing origins — wide-and-deep near the byline, wide-and-level with the box edge, and deep-and-central 35 yards out.
- **Action:** coach stands at a cone with the ball at their feet, head up, but **does not serve**. The keeper takes up the correct depth and position, then holds and says it out loud: “Near post, half a yard off.” Coach moves to the next cone; keeper re-adjusts.
- **Progressions:** (1) coach walks between cones, keeper travels continuously → (2) serve from a random cone after three seconds → (3) two servers, keeper adjusts to whoever gets the ball → (4) live 2v2 in wide areas.
- **Look for:** feet alive, hips half-open, no crossed feet, depth changing **with** the ball rather than after it.

Drill 2 — Six Serves, Six Names (reading the cross type)

- **Set-up:** one server on each flank, balls at both. Keeper in a normal starting position.
- **Action:** server delivers one of the six cross types. Before the keeper acts, they must **name it out loud** — “inswinger!”, “driven!”, “cut-back!” — then deal with it. Naming it correctly is scored, not just handling it.

- **Progressions:** (1) server announces the type, keeper rehearses the response → (2) type hidden, keeper calls it during flight → (3) keeper calls it **before contact**, from body shape alone → (4) two servers, random side and type.
- **Look for:** at the top level, the call happens **before** the ball is struck. That is the whole skill.

Drill 3 — Traffic Jam (catch versus punch under contact)

- **Set-up:** lofted and inswinging serves into the Golden Zone. Start with zero outfield players.
- **Action:** the keeper attacks the ball and must announce their decision as they go — “KEEPER!” and then catch, or punch forward and wide. Coach adds bodies one at a time.
- **Progressions:** (1) no traffic, clean catch, land with the knee up → (2) one passive mannequin in the landing zone → (3) one **live** attacker competing → (4) two attackers plus a defender, keeper chooses and commits → (5) same with a **wet ball**.
- **Look for:** honest decisions. Traffic in the landing space should produce a punch — **forward and wide, never square across goal**. Reward the correct choice, not the spectacular one. Always control the traffic yourself: this drill *trains* bravery, it does not test it.

Drill 4 — Flat and Fast (driven balls and deflections)

- **Set-up:** server wide, level with the six. Keeper flat, half a yard off the line, front foot on the near post line.
- **Action:** hard, flat serves skimming across the face of goal. Keeper must be **set before contact**, hands low, and either take it cleanly or push it out of the zone. Every repetition ends with a **reset and a “SET!” call**.
- **Progressions:** (1) driven ball, no bodies → (2) add a mannequin at the near post so the ball deflects → (3) add a live attacker at the front post → (4) add a second attacker at the back post finishing anything through → (5) all of it, plus a follow-up shot every time.
- **Look for:** no forward steps, low hands, strong wrists, keeper staying tall rather than going to ground early.

Drill 5 — Cut-Back Recovery (footwork, then shot-stopping)

- **Set-up:** attacker takes the ball toward the byline. A target player waits at the edge of the box. Keeper starts at the near post, tight and low, as the situation demands.
- **Action:** the attacker rolls the ball backwards. The keeper must **not reach for it** — they drop-step back onto the near-post line, get square, and set before the shot. Call **“SET!”** every time.
- **Progressions:** (1) walk the footwork with no ball, then a rolled ball and no shot → (2) live cut-back, shot from a static target → (3) attacker chooses: cut-back, driven cross, or shoot → (4) add a recovering defender so the keeper blocks through a body → (5) full scenario, live 3v2 from a wide area.
- **Look for:** hands staying down, feet doing the work. Any reach toward the pull-back is a fail, even if they get it.

HOW TO SCORE ANY OF THESE

- Do not score “saves”. Score **decisions**. For every repetition, mark three things: was the **starting position** right, was the **call** early and loud, and was the **chosen action** the correct one for that ball?
- A keeper who reaches three out of three on twelve straight repetitions is a keeper who has learned to read crosses — whether or not any of them looked spectacular.

QUICK REFERENCE — ALL SIX CROSS TYPES

Your pre-game cheat sheet. Read down the left column to find the ball, then read across.

Cross type	Ball behaviour	Starting position	GK first read	Likely correct action	Common mistake
LOFTED	High, slow, long hang-time. Wind and spin move it late.	Deep — 2–3 yds off line, central, hips open.	Where is the drop point , and how many bodies are in it?	CATCH if the path is clear. Two-fisted punch forward and wide if there is traffic.	Ball-watching, starting late, arriving underneath it. Misjudging wind.
INSWINGING	Curls toward goal. Any touch goes goalwards.	Deepest of all — hold your near-post line.	Is it inside my reach zone , honestly — yes or no?	Go hard, or stay and set. Nothing in between. Punch through it if contested.	The half-step — two steps out, then doubt. No-man's-land. Missing the flick-on to the back post.
OUTSWINGING	Bends away from goal. Attacker generates their own power.	Hold — about a yard off, slightly central, feet already set.	Where is the late runner arriving behind my line?	STAY & SET. Call "AWAY!" and win the shot, not the cross.	Over-committing to a ball you cannot reach — conceding the tap-in behind you.
DRIVEN	Flat, fast, low across the six. No flight time. Deflects.	Flat and tight — ½–1 yd off, front foot on the near post.	Am I set , and are my hands low ?	Take it or divert it out of the zone. A corner is a good outcome.	Travelling. Any forward step and it beats you. Assuming the first contact ended the moment.
CUT-BACK	Rolled backwards on the ground to the edge of the box.	Pulled to the near post — then immediately recover depth.	It is going backwards — where is the shooter ?	Not a claim. Drop-step back to the near-post line, get square, set, shot-stop or block.	Reaching for the pull-back. Staying stuck at the near post once the ball has gone back.
EARLY	Struck from 30–40 yds, before the defence is set.	Adjust depth now — 2–4 yds off, central, square to the ball.	Is it dropping in front of or behind my line?	In front of the line: come and claim it. Beyond it: hold, set, face the runner.	Getting caught flat while the line steps up — leaving open space behind them.

IF YOU REMEMBER ONLY FIVE THINGS

- **1. Read the crosser's body, not the ball.** Standing foot, hips, lean, and which foot the ball is on tell you the cross type before contact.
- **2. Depth first.** Almost every cross is lost before it is struck. Deep for inswinging, lofted and early. Flat and tight for driven.
- **3. Decide once and commit.** No-man's-land concedes more goals than any wrong decision made properly.
- **4. Early, loud, committed calls.** "KEEPER!" only if you are going. "AWAY!" if you are not. "SET!" every single time it ends.
- **5. The cross is not over.** Land ready, re-set your feet, find the ball, and win the second phase.

Questions about anything in this guide, or want it built into your sessions? Bring it to training or reach out to Coach Jeremy directly — jerimy@just4gk.net or **(817) 646-5445**. Crossing is a skill that rewards repetition more than talent, and it is one of the fastest areas to see real improvement. Let's get to work.

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