

Goalkeepers: what kind of specifics?

Drs Raffaele Poli, Loïc Ravenel and Roger Besson

1. Introduction

Goalkeepers occupy a particular status in football teams. The qualities needed to play in this position are very different from those required from outfield footballers. Issue number 22 of the CIES Football Observatory Monthly Report compares goalkeeper characteristics with those of footballers playing in other positions. More particularly, the study examines the criteria of height, age, origin and mobility.

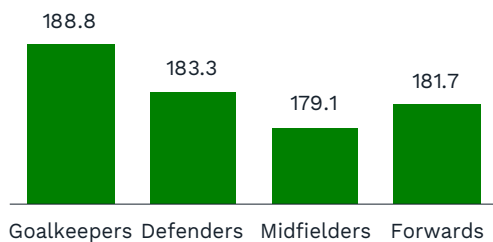
The sample used is composed of players included in the annual surveys carried out by the CIES Football Observatory since 2009 at the level of 31 top division leagues of UEFA member associations. In total, 3,762 goalkeepers and 28,199 outfield players make up the sample studied.

2. Height: taller and taller

The analysis of the height of footballers having played between 2009 and 2016 in the 31 top division championships surveyed shows considerable differences according to position. Goalkeepers have by far the greatest value in terms of height: 188.8cm. At the other extreme, midfielders “only” measure 179.1cm.

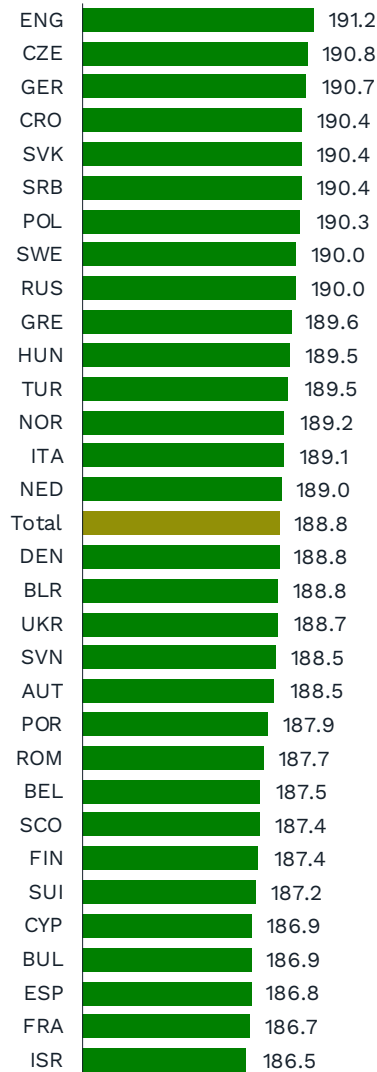
What is more, although the average height of defenders, midfielders and forwards remains stable, that of goalkeepers is on the increase: from 188.5cm in 2009 to 189.1cm in 2016. If this trend continues, we are likely to see less and less goalkeepers under 190 cm in elite football.

Figure 1: Average height of players by position, 31 top division European leagues (2009-2016)



Goalkeepers’ height varies notably according to league. Between 2009 and 2016, no other championship regrouped goalkeepers as tall as those of the English Premier League: 191.2 cm on average. At the other end of the scale, in the Israeli top division, the goalkeepers “only” measured 186.5cm. Similarly, the goalies of the Spanish Liga and the French Ligue 1 are on average 4 and 5 centimetres shorter than the keepers in the English Premier League and the German Bundesliga.

Figure 2: Average height of goalkeepers, 31 top division European leagues (2009-2016)

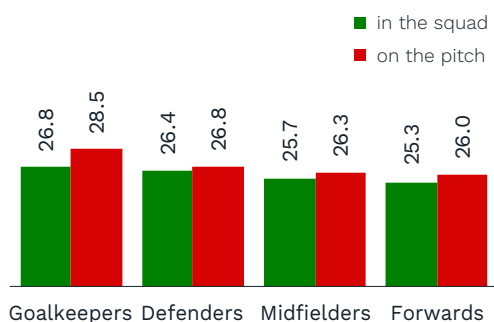


3. Age: the importance of experience

Age is also a criterion that allows us to differentiate goalkeepers from outfielders. Within teams, on average, the youngest players are most likely to be found among forwards. On the other hand, goalkeepers are the oldest. This gap is explained both by the different physical requirements for each position and the importance of the criterion of experience in order to be an excellent goalkeeper.

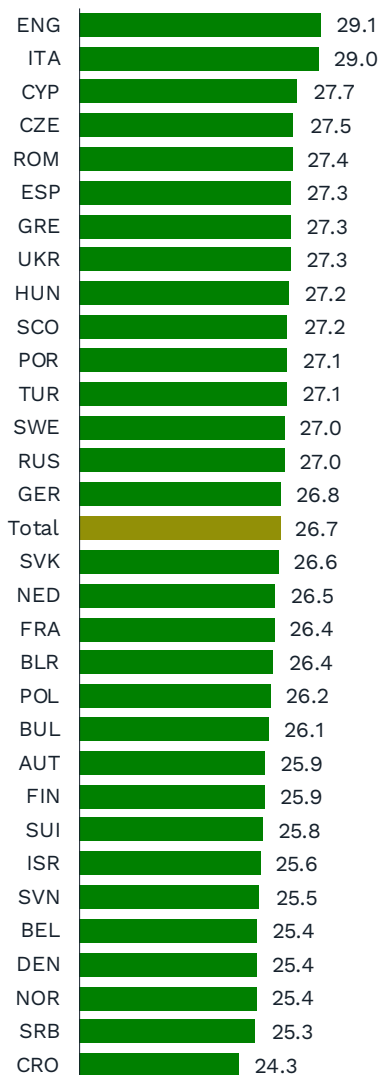
The differences are even more marked if we take into account the time spent on the pitch. For all positions, the average age on the pitch is greater than that measured at squad level. However, the greatest gap was recorded for goalkeepers. This finding harks back to the biggest differential in terms of playing time in favour of the older footballers among goalkeepers than for outfield positions.

Figure 3: Average age of players by position, 31 top division European leagues (1st July - 31st December 2016)



Goalkeepers' age varies considerably according to league. Between 2009 and 2016, the championship that comprised the youngest goalkeepers is the Croatian top division with an average age of 24.3 years. The values measured in England (29.1 years) and in Italy (29.0 years) are clearly higher. Though Croatian clubs do not hesitate to place their trust in young goalkeepers, the wealthier English and Italian teams are much more reticent in doing so.

Figure 4: Average age of goalkeepers, 31 top division European leagues (2009-2016)

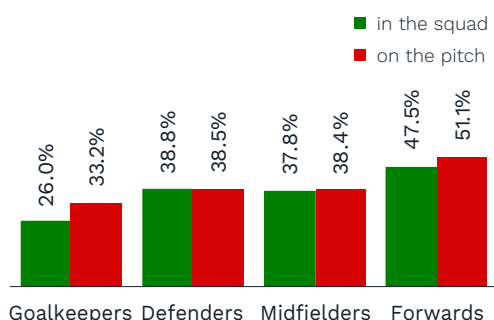


4. Origin: a less international market

Goalkeepers also differentiate themselves from outfield footballers by their origin. For example, while the percentage of expatriates among forwards is close to 50 %, this value is only 26% for goalkeepers. The percentage of expatriate players is also much higher among defenders and midfielders than among goalies.

The differences in the percentage of expatriates diminish when playing time is taken into account. Between the 1st of July and the 31st of December 2016, expatriates played 33.2% of minutes among goalkeepers. This value is only about 5% below the level observed for defenders and midfielders. Less numerous, expatriate goalkeepers generally enjoy a greater amount of time on the pitch than expatriates playing in other positions.

Figure 5: % of expatriate players by position, 31 top division European leagues (1st July - 31st December 2016)



The temporal analysis confirms the particularity of the labour market for goalkeepers from the point of view of internationality. Between 2009 and 2016, the percentage of expatriate goalkeepers has remained stable. Inversely, the proportion of expatriates has risen for all the other positions: from +3.2% among midfielders to +6.6% for forwards.

The percentage of expatriate goalkeepers in squads varies greatly according to league. In two championships, the value measured between 2009 and 2016 is over 50%: England (62.1%) and Cyprus (56.1%). At the other end of the scale, less than 10% of goalkeepers in the squads of top division teams from Croatia and Ukraine were imported from abroad.

Figure 6: Evolution of the % of expatriate players by position (2009 to 2016)

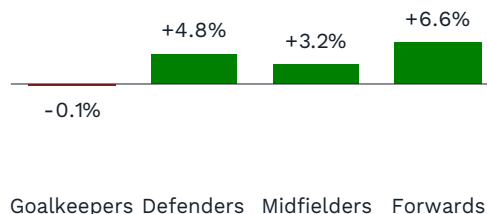
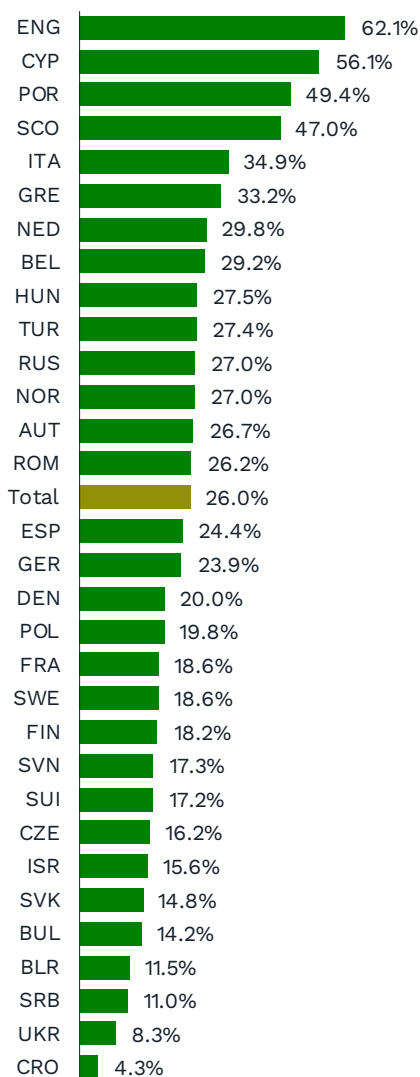


Figure 7: % of expatriate players among goalkeepers, 31 top division European leagues (2009-2016)

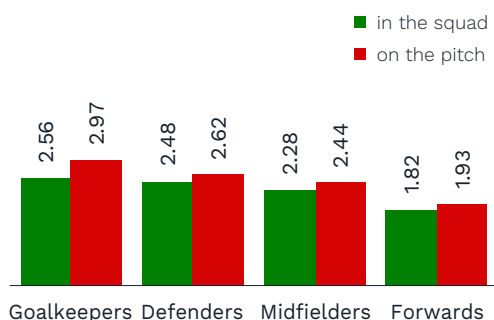


5. Mobility: a more stable position

In comparison to outfield footballers, goalkeepers are less mobile. The average length of their stay in the employer club is 2.63 years. Though the value recorded for defenders is similar to the goalies' one, that observed for midfielders, and even more so, forwards, is significantly lower.

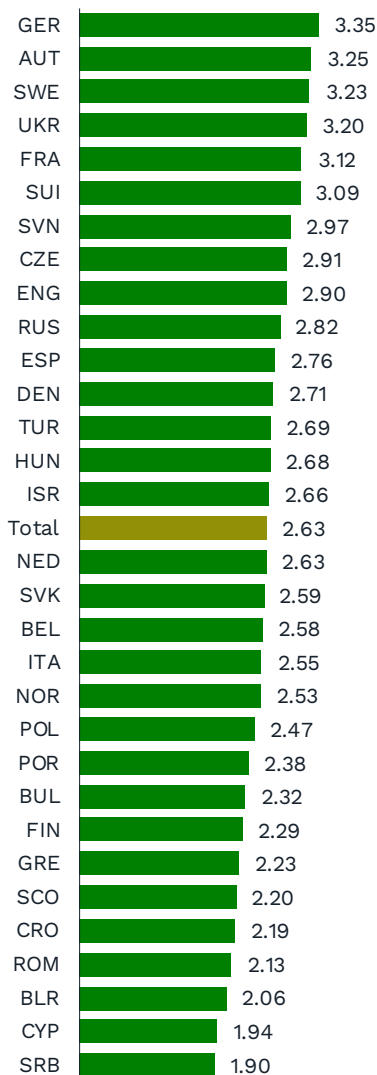
The biggest stability gap between first-choice and reserve players was measured for goalkeepers. As rotation for goalies is not so frequent, reserve keepers are often obliged to go elsewhere to accumulate experience. The necessity for substitutes to change team in order to play more is much stronger among goalkeepers than for footballers playing in other positions.

Figure 8: Average length of stay of players by position, 31 top division European leagues (1st July - 31st December 2016)



The least mobile goalies are those employed by German top division teams. At the other extreme, we find the keepers of Serbian and Cypriot clubs. The same differences in mobility according to league exist for outfield footballers. They are linked to the general instability that reigns over teams in many Eastern and Southern European countries¹.

Figure 9: Average length of stay of goalkeepers, 31 top division European leagues (2006-2016)



¹ Regarding this, see notably the **Monthly Report number 19**, Demographic study of football in Europe.

6. Conclusion

The study confirms the specificity of the position of goalkeeper based upon criteria taken into account. From the point of view of height, clubs are more and more reticent to promote goalkeepers under 190cm. This observation holds particularly in England and Germany, where the average height of goalkeepers is already over 190cm.

Regarding age, our analysis confirms the greater longevity of goalkeepers. The importance given to experience is particularly striking in England and Italy. In both cases, keepers are on average aged over 29 years. In all leagues surveyed, regular goalkeepers are older than reserve ones. The age gap among first choice and substitute goalkeepers is even stronger than those measured for other positions.

The third observation is that the labour market for goalkeepers is much less international than that of outfield players. The difference is particularly noteworthy with respect to forwards. The percentage of expatriates for the latter position is almost twice as high as that recorded among goalkeepers. Our study also shows that the gap in the percentage of expatriates between goalies and outfielders tends to increase.

Finally, the analysis highlights the greater stability of goalkeepers. Their average length of stay in their current club is much longer than for outfielders. In this case too, the biggest difference was observed in comparison to forwards. Our study fully confirms the particular status of goalkeepers in the football players' labour market.