

THE WARM-UP

Improving performance and decreasing injury

I cannot over emphasize the importance of a proper warm-up. A proper warm-up can not only help to prevent injury, but can improve performance, avoid starting a practice or game “flat”, and improve the quality of your practice sessions. I remember playing high school soccer and the warm-up generally consisted of 1-2 laps around the field, some light ball work, and 10-15 minutes of prolonged static stretching. This is far from what is necessary to prepare for the rigorous demands of soccer. First of all, 1-2 laps and some light ball work is just enough to barely break a sweat, you are definitely not ready to start sprinting and changing directions at this point. Second, instead of building on this start of the warm-up, we cool back down and spend 10 or 15 minutes doing static flexibility. Current research has not been able to prove that static stretching prior to rigorous exercise prevents injury. It has shown decreased reaction time and reduced explosive power immediately following static stretching. This is because static flexibility is extremely taxing on the central nervous system. This explains why after extended static flexibility your legs feel tired and heavy for 5 minutes or so until the nervous system recovers and you get warmed back up.

The warm-up needs to prepare you to step out and play at 100%, therefore it should be much more strenuous and extensive. One or two laps are fine to get started, now try one more while changing pace throughout. Start out slow, build up to a stride, then to a 90% sprint, and then work your way back down over the course of the last lap. After this, the athletes should be breathing heavy and starting to sweat. Now you can perform some static flexibility as a group, but limit this to only a few minutes, we don't want to overly fatigue the nervous system. Now instead of starting practice, we will continue with our warm-up. At this point start some dynamic flexibility, this can be walking lunges, side lunges, reach and touch the ground while standing on one foot, hold onto a partner's shoulder and do leg swings back and forth and side to side. These types of drills and other similar drills work the body dynamically through a full range of motion while working on balance, coordination and actually help to fire up the nervous system. Now

do some rhythmic type activities, these can include skipping, side shuffling, high knee running, butt kicks, straight leg running, power skips for height or distance, carioca, etc.. At this point the athletes should have a good sweat going and be really loose. These activities have several benefits, they serve as a warm-up, they get the nervous system fired up and they work the body through a variety of motions that could occur in a game. Finally, the athletes should perform a series of 10 yard sprints. Start with 3 sprints to the 10 yard marker and back at about 80%, then 3 at 90%, and finally 3 at 100%. Now you are ready to practice! This warm up will take about 20-25 minutes to complete, and I know that practice time is limited, but the benefits will outweigh the time factor. By doing your warm-up in this fashion, your players will have decreased injuries, have more productive practices and start their games ready to go (not flat). Finally, if you still need selling on this type of warm-up, the conditioning benefit of this over the course of a season is tremendous! Best of Luck, and Train Hard!

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