

Considerations for Warming Up and Stretching

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There are several things to consider as you prepare your youth team for a training session or game. What should the warm-up include? Should we stretch, and if so, how should we stretch? How can we prevent injury? How can we improve performance? There is a great deal of information out there, and unfortunately, some of it seems contradictory. Here are some tips for youth coaches to design an appropriate warm-up for their players:

Do Your Homework

Because there is conflicting information, especially on the value of stretching, do some research on occasion. Read up on the subject, look for video clips and demonstrations, and take a coaching course oriented toward the age group with which you work.

Warm up Before Stretching

Most coaches and exercise scientists agree that an appropriate warm-up prevents injury, and prepares a player physically (and mentally) for the upcoming demands of practice or the game. Still, there are occasionally times we see players stretching "cold" or without any kind of warm-up. Warming up makes the muscles more pliable and is conducive to getting a quality stretch and improving range of motion. Many studies indicate the warm-up is of greater importance in injury prevention than stretching. For younger children, we sometimes see coaches skip the warm-up, arguing "they don't even have muscles yet." I would argue that a warm-up gets young players active right away, engaged, excited, and on task, in addition to the potential physical and health-related benefits.

How to Stretch

Traditionally, the belief has been that stretching prevents injury and improves flexibility. My generation grew up with static stretching, such as bending at the waist, straight-legged, to touch your toes and stretch the hamstrings. Many more recent studies suggest that static stretching pre-participation is detrimental to performance; specifically, it reduces speed, power and endurance. The modern school of thought is that dynamic stretching is the way to go, both for injury prevention and performance. Dynamic stretching involves momentum and active muscular exertion where the end position of the stretch is not held. Dynamic stretching puts the athlete through more sport-specific tasks and through a greater range of motion in an active but controlled way. Because it is somewhat difficult to describe a long list of dynamic stretches, I recommend referring to one of the following links for a suggested warm-up and stretching routine:

The FIFA 11+:

<http://www.fifa.com/aboutfifa/footballdevelopment/medical/playershealth/the11/index.html>

The PEP program, designed and researched by the Santa Monica Sports Medicine Foundation that primarily focuses on ACL injury prevention:

<http://smsmf.org/pep-program>

Summary

Over time, schools of thought, terminology, and philosophies change. When it comes to appropriate warm-ups and stretching, this is certainly the case. Always consider your athletes' age, ability, development and needs when designing a program. Always keep the safety and well-being of your athletes paramount. Never stop learning; use the many resources available to learn about this and similar subject matter.