

To Stretch or not to Stretch.....that is the question

When I was a young athlete, my coaches always told us to stretch and warm up properly before we exercised to help prevent injury. Our warm-ups also consisted of running a lap around the field and then sitting and doing some sort of static stretching for 15 minutes. At the time, this was believed to be the best way to prepare our bodies for vigorous exercise. Times have changed.

Over the last few years, research has shown that this type of static stretching for warm up is not the most effective way of preparing the athlete for a practice or game. In fact, standing still and stretching your muscles prior to a game or practice has not been shown to decrease the risk of injury. Actually, some researchers say that static stretching before exercise may increase the risk of injury.

The best way to warm up for a game or practice is to follow a dynamic warm up. A dynamic warm up consists of gradually warming your muscles and joints by performing a series of controlled movements and stretches. This allows your joints, muscles, tendons and ligaments to work through their full ranges of motion simulating the movements that your body will experience during your sporting activity. Below is a sample of dynamic warmup.

Injury Preventing Dynamic Warm Up

- 1) 5 minute easy jog or bike
- 2) High knee walks
- 3) Lunges
- 4) Butt kicks
- 5) High knee runs
- 6) Frankenstein kicks
- 7) Side to side shuffles (lateral slides) with arm swings
- 8) Cross overs (Carioca)
- 9) Backpedals
- 10) 5 X 50 yds run at 75% maximum speed

Static stretching is still recommended but at the end of your workout to maintain your flexibility and to help cool your body down.

Please note that it is still a good idea to use static stretches after
Perform 2 sets of each with each set being about 10 yards.

High Knee Walks

High Knee Walks are a great warm up and stretching exercise to help stretch the lower extremities. Maybe more importantly it helps to teach the joints and associated musculature to increase the range of motion. This will obviously help to improve stride length that in turn will help improve speed.

When performing the **high knee walk** it is important to keep your head up, back straight and slowly and intentionally pull your leg up to your chest as you walk. Lower the leg to the ground as you step forward and then pull the other leg up to your chest. Be sure to pull the leg up to your chest as high as possible and DO NOT lower your chest to your leg.

Long Strides

This is a great dynamic warm-up for the hips and more importantly the hip flexors. It is important to make sure the hip flexors are long and elastic to ensure your stride is long and powerful.

To perform the **long stride** start in a standing position and simply step out in an exaggerated stride and lower your hips to the floor. You should feel a stretch in the groin/hip flexor area. Make sure your knee does not pass the toes and make sure to keep your head up and back straight. Bring the back foot back to the front and return to the standing position and repeat as you step out with the other foot.

Butt Kicks

This is a great dynamic warm-up for the hips, quads and hip flexors. Simply begin running in a forward direction. Back straight, head up and upper extremities working as normal. With each step you will **kick your butt** with your heel. Perform this very quickly kicking your butt and then lowering it as quickly as possible. Perform in sets of 10-15 yards.

Straight Leg Toe Touches

Straight leg toe touches are a great way to stretch the hamstrings /

