

Dynamic Warm-up Sets the Tone for a Productive Practice

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Regardless of the sport or activity you coach, preparing your young athletes' bodies physically is essential. A proper warm-up will not only get them ready to play, it may also prevent injuries such as muscle pulls or sprains. Every coach wants to prepare his or her athletes for practices and games and wants to do everything in their power to avoid injuries, but often the warm-up is overlooked when planning practices. The kids may be asked to warm-up on their own to enable the coach to make the most of practice time or, when a coach does include a warm-up in practice, it often consists of the kids doing a lap or two as a team, followed by stationary stretches. In either case, the benefits of these warm-ups are minimal.

When kids are asked to warm-up on their own, unless they are given specific instructions, they generally won't do anything. Doing a few laps and then standing still to stretch means the "warming" part of the warm-up is lost; the laps get the blood pumping and the body temperature is raised, but the stationary stretching will decrease the heart rate and the body temperature will quickly return to normal. In addition, the muscles and joints will not benefit from the rushed stretching. The benefit of stretching is to improve flexibility and maintain range of motion. Doing stretching without sustaining the core body temperature, and thus the temperature of the muscle fibers, will not result in flexibility gains.

The dynamic warm-up is the way to warm up the body and perform joint preparation/stretching in a short period of time. This warm-up includes drills to put every major muscle group and joint through a full range of motion to prepare the body for activity. It raises core body temperature, increases blood flow to the muscles and improves flexibility, balance and coordination — all in a matter of 5-10 minutes. This type of warm-up can be performed before practices or games, and if the kids are old enough, this warm-up could be performed on their own prior to the start of practice after you have demonstrated it to them.

The following are some recommended dynamic exercises, which should be performed across the width of a court or field and repeated. If you are doing these exercises outside, you will need a quality surface to reduce the possibility of injuries.

1) Toe Walk (prepares/stretching the ankles, shins and calves) - Athletes walk up on their toes with straight, but not stiff, legs. The knees may bend so movement is a more natural walking motion, but the heel of the foot should not touch the ground.

2) Heel Walk (prepares/stretching the ankles, shins and calves) - Athletes walk on their heels with straight, but not stiff, legs. The knees may bend so movement is a more natural walking motion, but their toes should not touch the ground.

3) Straight Leg March (prepares/stretching the hamstrings, quadriceps, hip flexors and lower back) - Athlete should walk with both legs straight. Alternate bringing up each leg as high as

possible without allowing the knees to bend or leaning backward. The entire body should remain tall and facing forward. Swing straight arms in opposition.

4) Hand Walk (prepares/stretches the hamstrings, lower back, shoulders and wrists) -Athletes will bend at the waist and place the palm of their hands on the ground. Keeping the legs and back straight, walk across the court using hands and feet. Keep the legs shoulder width apart.

5) Forward Lunge (prepares/stretches the hamstrings, quadriceps, hip flexors and core trunk muscles) - The athlete stands with feet shoulder width apart. Keeping the entire body facing forward, step out with one leg as far as possible. Bending the knees, lower the back leg toward the ground, stopping just before the knee touches. The front knee should not extend past the front of the toe. Lift back up: step forward with the back leg and bring both feet back to a starting position. Repeat with the opposite leg.

6) Backward Lunge (prepares/stretches the hamstrings, quadriceps, hip flexors and core trunk muscles) - This is the same basic movement as the forward lunge except the athlete travels backwards. Make sure that the initial backward step is wide and long. Keep the body upright and centered over the hips.

7) Dog and Bush Walk (prepares/stretches the inner thigh, hip flexors, hip rotators and core trunk) - The athletes pretend that there is an obstacle directly in front of them. Remain facing forward keeping the shoulders and hips square. With one leg, rotate out at the hip, bring the leg up and over the “obstacle,” placing it back on the ground. Repeat with the other leg.

8) Square Drill - The athletes start at a corner of the court/field. Traveling around the outside of the court, jog toward the centerline. Facing the centerline, lateral slide across the court/field. Backpedal down the sideline to the corner, and lateral slide, facing the field, across the back line to the starting corner. Repeat in the other direction starting with the lateral slide.

Once the team has completed this general warm-up, you may opt to add drills or activities that are specific to your sport. For example, in soccer you may have the kids get their ball and do a dribbling or passing drill; for in-line hockey the kids would do this warm-up on land, and instead of the box drill would do skating drills in every direction before getting their sticks.

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