



The Importance of Stretching-No Matter How Young.

by Steve Bender

When I first started coaching youth soccer in 1991, my oldest daughter had just turned 5. Maybe it was just habit from my playing days, but I made them "stretch" before every practice. They really didn't need to, these kids were flexible! Forget putting their palms flat on the ground-some of them could lean over and touch their heads to the ground without any effort at all.

Even so, we still went through the drills. My older two were turned off by co-ed, 7 v. 7 soccer at age 5 and turned in their boots. But my youngest chose to play when she was 9. These girls could easily lean over and at least put their hands flat on the ground-they didn't need to stretch either. But we did. As I told them, there are at least three good reasons to stretch out at the beginning of every practice. First, it's the best excuse for the coaches-who need to do it-to stretch out. Second, whether they really need it now or not, the day is coming when they will. Finally, regardless of age or flexibility, all players need to warm up. It gets their bodies ready for the activity, but it also gets their minds ready for the practice or game. So, what are the keys to a good warm-up period?

The first key is player leadership. It has been my custom to pick one of the girls who arrives early to lead her team. To help her, I list some calisthenics

on my practice schedule that she can use, but also allow them to add one or two of their own. Leading is something the girls like to do and they make a greater effort to arrive early enough to be selected as a leader.

Second, do it right. If you are old like me, you need to forget most of what you learned in high school gym class. No matter how cold, we went hard and fast and bounced muscles into shape. That can do more harm than good. Instead, these guidelines should be followed:

- General warm-ups using light aerobic activities such as a slow jog or jogging in place, followed by jumping jacks. ·*
- Soccer specific activities involving the ball. This may be as simple as putting one foot on top of the ball and then the other for 5 year olds to independent dribbling and passing for older youths to full juggling for older teens. Activities should not be speed oriented, but they should cause players to move. ·*
- Upper body warm-ups involving non-stretching movement in the neck (neck rolls), shoulder (shoulder rolls with arms at side), arms (making little circles to big circles with arms extended), and torso (rolling the entire upper body in a circle). ·*
- Stretching by slowly and evenly extending each muscle just to the point that it hurts. The movement should be steady and gentle-not bouncy. Bouncing activates an involuntary reflex that actually makes it harder to stretch out a muscle.*

Third, stretching should focus most on those parts of the body that are going to move the most--the legs, the back, and the neck. However, virtually all muscle groups are used in soccer, so any stretch is okay. Again, the way it was taught a generation ago needs to be forgotten. Any stretch motion that involves moving a joint in a direction it is not intended to move is not good. For example, facing straight ahead while alternately stretching the legs by moving to the right and left. The knees try to bend to the side, rather than straight ahead. All leg stretches should be "fore-and-aft," not side-to-side.

Several leg stretches are popular, effective, and easy to teach. In each of these, the muscles should be stretched to just before the pain threshold, and then held in that position for 10-15 seconds. Do not bounce. You may develop your own stretches that conform to similar guidelines.:

- *With feet side by side, take a giant step. Bend the front knee, slowly stretching the calf of the back leg. If the player is unable to keep the back heel on the ground, decrease the side of the step. After 15 seconds, stand with feet together again, and then alternate legs. Repeat this drill twice.*
- *While seated, place the soles of the feet together and lean forward. Grasp the ankles, and with the elbows, slowly push down on the knees to stretch groin muscles. Hold the pressure for 15 seconds, release, extend the legs, and repeat 2-4 times.*
- *Cross the right foot over the left. Lean over and reach for the toes. Young people like to bounce on this one. Make sure movement is steady. Hold for 10-15 seconds, then reverse feet and repeat.*
- *While lying flat on the back, extend the arms to the side. Raise one foot into the air and bring it down to the opposite hand. Hold for 10 seconds when leg is pointing into the air and for 15 seconds when reaching for the hand.*

Warming up other parts of the body is just as important. Sure, soccer players mainly use their legs, but it is just as easy to injure a tight back or neck muscle when slide tackling or heading. Keep the same principles in mind when working on other muscle groups: Slow and steady. Stretch in the direction of motion. Never stretch past the point of pain.

One additional word of caution regarding the spine. While it is possible to roll the head or waist in a circle, it is not a natural motion. When working on either, move side to side or front to back, never in a circle. This is particularly important with the neck, as there is a remote, yet very real, possibility that a player could injure his or her neck when rolling the head.

Finally, stretching should be used not only at the beginning of an activity, but at the end. Few coaches end a practice with stretches, and virtually none end a game that way. However, there are several good reasons to do so.

First, when muscles experience a sudden drop in activity, the efficiency of circulation drops too. This results in blood pooling in the extremities sooner than the heart and lungs are ready to cut back the flow of oxygen to the cells--particularly the brain. Sometimes athletes not in the best shape will experience lightheadedness--or even fainting. A cool down period keeps the

blood moving while the body gets caught up on its oxygen levels.

The second is that intense muscular exertion can cause slight tears in the muscular tissues. It is in repairing these tears that the body builds muscle tissue. But in so doing the body tenses these muscles to protect them from further injury. Post workout stretching prevents some of the tension that many feel the next day.

Finally, one of the by-products of strenuous muscle exertion is lactic acid. As carbohydrates stored in muscles are used up during workout, they are replaced by lactic acid. The acid results in a sense of fatigue and soreness. A light muscle workout following intense use helps to clear out some of that acid, leaving the muscles feeling less sore and tired later.

While proper warm-up and cool down periods won't eliminate injuries, they will go a long way toward reducing them. If you are a coach, it is your responsibility to help your players learn how to prevent those injuries and to help them build good physical fitness habits. If you are a player or parent, share this with your coach, and encourage them to make it a part of your practice and game routines.