

Injury prevention - the pre-match warm up

What form should a warm up routine take? What needs to be included and why? This guide aims to help you find out.

Sudden exertion of a cold soft tissue structure increases the risk of injury - especially straining injuries to muscles, tendons and ligaments. A warm up routine helps to prevent this firstly by stretching and gently exercising the muscles that are about to be heavily worked.

At the same time, the more general cardiovascular exercise element of the routine serves to raise body temperature, quicken the heartbeat and increase blood flow to those muscles.

Getting in the right mindset

Matchday carries the risk of performance pressure, more commonly known as choking. Sports psychologists point to the value of the warm up or 'pre-performance routine' as a useful coping strategy for this. In short, the routine has a ritual aspect that gives a player something to focus on, to avoid getting caught up with distractions and reducing the amount of mind-space available for anxiety.

Optimum performance

Whereas some games start in a slightly jittery fashion, in others there is little or no scope for players to ease themselves into the match. A half-cocked team is at a disadvantage from the outset. A warm up consisting of on and off-ball elements while allowing players to get a 'feel' for the pitch makes it more likely that they will hit the ground running from the moment the whistle blows.

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Should your routine be the same every matchday?

The routine should be familiar to your squad, which means half an hour before kick-off isn't the right time to unveil a new set of drills. First and foremost, your aim is to ensure the players are still 'warm' at the time the whistle blows, so timing is important. Bear in mind that a standard routine takes about 30 minutes, and be prepared to put back the start of the warm up if kick off has been delayed to avoid cooldown.

However, you may need to tweak the emphasis of the routine depending on the conditions. In unusually cold weather, for instance, more time should be given over to the initial jogging element before any stretches are attempted. This is to ensure core and muscle temperatures reach a suitable working level.

What should the routine consist of?

The initial warm up

The first 5-10 minutes should be given over to light cardiovascular work to gradually increase core and muscle temperatures. Typically, this will start with spurts of very light jogging in 20-yard sections. After a couple of minutes of this, you would typically move

seamlessly into a sequence of jogging, sprinting and sidestepping - again in 20 yard chunks.

Stretching

The body temperature has now been suitably raised and players' heart rate has been increased to an appropriate working rate of around 160 bpm. It's now time to devote at least 5 minutes to stretching the muscles that are about to be worked, with a particular emphasis on the hamstrings and gluteal muscles. There's a teamwork element here as players will need to hold onto a team mate's shoulders to stretch out each calf in turn.

Further muscle and core work (without the ball)

The body's muscles and the body core are now suitably warmed. It's now time to 'remind' the body of the type of activities it will be required to carry out during the game. This is done by giving over several minutes to mimicking these activities without the ball. It includes side foot passing, high kicking, squatting and jumping.

Ball drills

Short and long passes to and from both feet, heading, weaving, running backwards, sprinting, turning: these are all essential elements of a 10-minute ball routine. These are the finishing touches to ensure your players are physically primed and mentally focused for the game ahead.

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