Learning From Each Other: Warming Up

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Warm-up exercises involve multidirectional movements, as well as straight ahead activities. Exercise selection may vary daily, depending on what we are about to emphasize in the training session to follow. For example, if we will be working heavily on change of direction and lateral speed, our warm-up will place a greater emphasis on lateral movements, although some straight ahead movements will still be performed.

A similar, slightly shorter, warm-up is used prior to weight training. Once the general warm-up is completed, the athletes engage in 2–3 more specific exercises in the weight room before jumping into the full workout. These exercises vary daily and typically will reflect the nature of the exercises that are the focus in that day’s workout, as well as speak to injury prevention.

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Warm-ups in our program can take on many different schemes. I try to take into consideration many different factors when designing a warm-up routine. Some of these factors include, but are not limited to, the type of workout the warm-up precedes, how much time has passed since our last workout, how much time we have to spend in a workout that day, and whether we will be utilizing a team workout versus smaller groups.

If we have the team together as a group, chances are it is for a high-volume running workout. That workout would consist of some fairly general warm-up activities, such as form runs, high knees, heel kicks, carioca, lunge walks, toe touches, skips, and power skips. This warm-up is not intended to mimic any specific type of activity. Its intention is to raise core temperature and wake the body up in preparation for an active and static stretch.

When our athletes come into the weight room for a position-specific
workout, the groups are considerably smaller. I like to tailor these warm-ups to fit what we have planned for the workout that day. We have 35 yards of turf in our weight room, so we have the ability to do many things. Most of our workouts will start with very general warm-up exercises, such as the ones already mentioned, to get a light sweat going. We will then move into more specific exercises to fit the workout for the day.

If we have a predominantly lower-body workout scheduled, we may progress into some moving squat lunges, some active skips that externally rotate the hips, overhead or lateral squats with an empty bar, over and under hurdle drills, or body-weight squats. Our main goal is to stretch the hip and leg complex with an active movement in an attempt to keep our first repetitions on a specific exercise from feeling foreign. If we have squats planned, we will do squat-type activities. If we have explosive movements planned, we may do some box jumps or hurdle jumps to wake up the nervous system, overhead squats to stretch out the shoulder complex, and kneeling wrist stretches to stretch the forearms, if we have cleans planned for that day.

If our workout has an upper-body emphasis, such as bench press, shoulder press, and their variations, we will do arm and shoulder warm-ups after our general warm-up activities. This warm-up may include arm circles, empty bar activities, bear crawls, or Swiss ball shoulder stretches. On the days we do a bench press, we do a warm-up using the bar × 10, 95 lbs × 10, 135 lbs or 50% × 10, 50% × 10, in an effort to get our joints tuned in for a bench workout. Some days we may do 2–3 sets of Javorek’s dumbbell complexes. I highly recommend these for athletes with a poor work capacity.

Not only do we use these types of activities as a warm-up, but we will also use speed ladders, dot drills, jump ropes, keg walks, and other types of dynamic activities, depending on where we are in our training year. If we have had an early morning run, I may use a lower-body circuit combined with hip rotation drills with our skill position players when they come back to train 8 hours later. On occasion I will use some tumbling exercises that I learned from Ethan Reeve as a total body warm-up. In my opinion, the key to a good warm-up is, first, actually performing a warm-up; more importantly, though, you want your warm-up to mirror or mimic the activities you will be doing in your workout.

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Warm-up is a critical component of the training and conditioning process in my philosophy as a coach. Warm-up will set the tone, tempo, and attitude of the individual, group, or team for the entire workout. If the warm-up is slow, methodical, sloppy, half-hearted, mechanical, or nonexistent, then the workout, practice, or competition will reflect that type of warm-up. However, if the warm-up is up-tempo and crisp and possesses variety, then the following session will reflect those same attributes.

I try to accomplish several things during warm-up. I want to warm the athletes up, but I also want to create suppleness throughout the body, turn the neuromuscular system on, properly prepare the athletes for the workout to follow, and progress the warm-up to the point where the athlete is ready to handle the stressors of the upcoming workout. I call this sequence warm up, loosen up, turn on, build up, and work out.

Out is more like a track warm-up, with lots of sprint technique drills. If the workout is a lateral speed and agility session, the warm-up is designed to prepare the athlete for hip, knee, and ankle flexion, rotation, and extension at the proper speed and depth. If the workout is a strength, plyometric, conditioning, or work capacity session, then the warm-up will again reflect those differences.

During warm-up I prescribe lots of prehab drills in order to foster injury prevention. For the football athlete I include things such as neck, multiplaner balance single-leg squats, and single-leg good mornings, as well as rubber band walks for anterior cruciate ligament protection, slide board drills for groin development and protection, hamstring slow-speed strengtheners on glute hams, physioballs, and work with partners to name a few. Loosening up consists of dynamic movements to prepare the joints and the body for the full
range-of-motion demands of the workout. I do not do a lot of stretching prior to a training session. Old-time stretching and flexibility activities are saved for postworkout time.

Turn on is a reference to incorporating the neural component of the neuromuscular system. Many of my athletes have been in bed sleeping or sitting in class just prior to the training session. Many of the muscles have been somewhat dormant and need to be awakened or jazzed up for the workout. The core needs to be addressed, the glutes need to be made to function, and, on some specific athletes, the abductors and adductors of the hip need remedial work. I assign specific drills and exercises in order to get these areas fired up and functioning as they were designed to.

Build up refers to the athlete’s continuing the warm-up to the point at which they are prepared to move at the speed needed for the session and in the manner required for the drills assigned. If the athlete is doing an agility workout, he needs to be prepared to bend, rotate, extend, and explode in and out of cuts. If the training session is a horizontal conditioning session, then the athlete needs to be prepared to run at the tempo required for the sprints assigned. If the athlete is going from warm-up to the platform, then he needs to be ready to pull and rack quality weight with posture, power, and technique.

My warm-ups are generally 10–20 minutes in length and consist of a variety of drills, modalities, techniques, planes, tempos, and ranges of motion. It is imperative that the athlete be prepared for the upcoming session. I look at it this way: if the upcoming training session were a competition, would I want my athletes prepared to start fast, with great focus, function, and fundamentals? I think we all would respond with a resounding “Yes!” ♦