

Stretching with Michele Smith

Two-time USA Softball Olympic Gold-Medalist

Children are naturally flexible, with young muscles still growing and developing, so your coaches may not think stretching is very important. But take it from two-time USA Softball Olympic Gold-Medalist Michele Smith, a proper pre- and post-workout routine can help care for the muscles that allow the players to take the field.

Dynamic Warm-Up

"I encourage coaches to begin any practice or game with a dynamic warm-up," Michele stated. For younger players, 10 minutes total of blood-pumping, body-moving activity can help raise the body's core temperature and loosen up muscles for the practice or game. Older players may need 15 minutes of warm-up. These are not static stretching exercises, but active dynamic warm-ups.

Start by having players run from foul pole to foul pole, then do some agility exercises:

- High knees (short jog, lift knees high),
- Butt kicks (short jog, try to kick feet backwards up toward bottom),
- Karaoke run (crossover steps laterally),

- Jumping jacks (standard),
- Arm windmills (forward and reverse),
- Neck circles (left & right, full rotation).

"The goal is to work on all the body parts: trunk, arms, legs and neck," Michele said. "Muscles stretch more easily if the body is warmed up properly before you stretch."



If muscles are still tight after the dynamic warm-up, then do some specific stretching for the area. Pitchers especially, but all players need to really work on their shoulder muscles, to make sure they are loose before throwing. And coaches should be reminded to have their players do stretching and warm-up exercises any time they have been idle for a period.

Michele pointed out that planning can help reduce the amount of stretching needed. Some coaches have players warm up their arms, do a few defensive drills, stand around waiting to hit and then start back throwing. Instead, start players hitting, then go to throwing drills, making sure they stretch out their arms before throwing. It saves

time stretching and saves injuries to arms. But warm up and stretch the trunk before hitting, too, or players risk injuries like groin pulls. Ask Mike Piazza of the New York Mets how easy it is to overcome a pulled groin.

Then Cool Down

After a practice or game, don't just send your kids home. Michele noted that muscles need to be worked a little to get new oxygen in, to remove the waste by-products of exercising. "Have players run a lap around the field, then sit in a circle and stretch muscles to get fresh blood in them, and help strengthen them."

She suggests arm windmills, neck circles and hurdler's stretches for the quads and glutes (thighs and bottom). Twisting exercises that stretch the side muscles and back are also good. Here's one: Sit on the ground, placing the foot of a bent leg on the opposite side of an outstretched leg's knee, and twist your torso across the upright knee. Then switch legs and twist the other way.

"A good cool down will help cool the muscles and slow the heart rate," Michele said. "It's important not to over-stretch in the cool down phase," she noted, since the muscles are being relaxed. If any sore spots are found during stretching, apply ice.

Michele said warm ups are a good time for players to visualize what they will be doing: hitting, pitching, throwing out base runners, etc. Cool downs are a time to reflect on the practice on what went well, and what may need improvement. But above all, these tips can keep players playing, and not sidelined with muscle injuries.

"If you're injured, you can't play the sport you love," Michele pointed out. "We need to warm up and cool down to prevent injuries. Young kids are so flexible, they don't realize they can pull muscles. So for younger players, this is as much about instilling good routines for the players for later life."