



Too Busy for Warm-ups and Exercises? Don't Be.

To avoid player injuries, make sure coaches have a game plan to prepare their players to play.

Are your coaches so busy working their players on skills development that even stretching gets “left for later?” Your players may be suffering for it. Proper warm-ups and conditioning activities can help to protect your players from injury.

Research has shown that players who are less physically fit – whether in aerobic fitness, flexibility or core strength areas – are at a much greater risk of being injured doing the same things as their peers who are in better condition.

Fitness Shows Injury Potential

A study of US Army recruits going through basic training found less-fit recruits were injured at twice the rate of their more fit companions, and 2.5 times as likely to be so seriously injured that they missed training. The less-fit recruits were more often women, but when the initial fitness levels were used to classify all the recruits by ability, rather than gender, the injury rates became consistent for both males and females, based on their fitness.

In ball playing, the injuries may be slight, a simple muscle strain or joint sprain, such as a pulled thigh muscle or sprained ankle, or they could be acute, from a fall due to poor motor control or weak muscles unable to stabilize the athlete during a fielding attempt. In either situation, stronger muscles are at lower risk of injury.

The good news is that during the study, for all recruits, the less-fit saw

bigger gains than their more-fit peers, as a percentage of gain. So the gap in physical fitness can be closed to make all the athletes safer.

Warm Up Before Playing

Numerous experts and studies continue to assert the benefit of pre-event warm-ups and post-event cool-down exercises. In addition, players and coaches can't expect playing the sport will do enough to prepare the less-fit players for play. Conditioning is just that, and players need to do conditioning exercises to prepare their bodies for the stops, starts, quick turns and full runs ball playing requires.

The benefit of warm-up exercises is not just for the increased muscle flexibility and tone that protects muscles from strains and ligaments from sprains but the increase in oxygen flow to the body, preparing it for the demands of the game.

Make the exercises match the demands of the sport: sprints should be worked on above distance running. Provide shoulder stretches and arm limbering as well as core and lower body warm-ups. Speed, quickness and coordination count for more than endurance; balance drills promoting foot and hand speed and coordination with more traditional exercises.

Start early with conditioning and build gradually to increased conditioning demands. Players' bodies need time to adjust to the

physical stresses and build muscle mass and tone to be able to handle the loads of throwing long strikes from center field or sliding into home plate. The muscles that move the body also support and protect it, so the stronger those muscles, the less likely a serious injury will occur from a “normal” baseball or softball play.

Finally, Keep it Fun

Find ways to keep your practices fun like making sprints be base-stealing attempts. Alternate trips around the bases for warm-ups with “the home run trot,” and for speed or endurance with “you're going for an inside the park home run!” Have throwing races between different groups of players for short distances, to work on muscle tone, accuracy and technique.

The players will enjoy it more with just a little time spent working on making the *why* they need to do it a fun activity, instead of saying “it's good for you” or “because I told you to!”

Because a fit player is less likely to be injured, it's worth the extra time and effort to improve everyone's physical fitness.

