

Warm up and Warm down?

Sunday afternoon, 30 mins until kick off and the gaffer asks the captain to get the lads together and get ready for the game. As a player you have most likely experienced a vast array of warm up exercises. As for warm down exercises some teams may do this, whereas others may well just head to the bar for a beer.

So what is the evidence?

There have been several studies looking at the effect of warm up and warm down programmes to prevent injury and have players either game ready by warming up; or to aid recovery by warming down. The results can be varied but the basic summary is:

- There is not clinically significant evidence to support the role of warm up in preventing injury. That said most studies anecdotally tend to favour a decrease in injury risk.
- Static stretching before or after sport does not reduce the risk or incidence of injury nor does it improve performance with regards to force production and jump height. This is fairly well supported. However over a period of time repetitive stretching does improve your flexibility and hence should be used throughout your season as an adjunct to training. Stretching is more beneficial once the muscles are warmed up.
- Warming up has been found to mildly reduce DOMS (Delayed Onset Muscle Soreness) – this is the pain you get in your muscles for a few days after unaccustomed exercise – think preseason!
- Warm down has little advantage in preventing DOMS or injury.

Based on this it would seem sensible to warm up prior to a match or training. There is certainly no harm in it. It seems feasible to have the body in a state of readiness before participation in football, and that injury may be prevented by having the muscles warmed and in a more extensible state allowing for more movement before damage can occur. Warm up readies nerve to muscle pathways; prepares your heart for an increase in activity; and also allows you to mentally prepare for a game. All of these are a good thing. In some cases it may even allow you to sweat out the previous night's 4am finish!

So what should I do for a warm up?

Going out and belting a ball at your keeper is not the answer! Warm up for match day football should be about 20 minutes and include some general activity such as running; followed by some gentle dynamic stretching and calisthenics; to conclude with some football specific movements, drills and ball work. As to the intensity it should gradually increase and you should be raising a light sweat by the end of it.

So given the above is a beer the best way to warm down?

Yes, if the aim of warm down is to prevent injury or DOMS as the evidence doesn't support this! It is argued however that warming down can help reduce the heart rate and possibly flush lactic acid and other waste products out to aid recovery. The jury remains out and 5-10 minutes of jogging and stretching is probably enough. In terms of post match recovery, 5 minutes in the ice bath and a 4:1 carb to protein ratio recovery drink is probably a better option.

What about exercises to prevent injury?

An injury prevention routine currently being advocated within football is the “FIFA 11.” This is a series of 10 exercises focussing on strength, agility and balance reactions designed to prevent injury. It has been found to notably reduce the rates of injury and would be a good adjunct to any football player’s season 2-3 times per week. It is probably not advisable before a game however and is more an ongoing injury prevention method you could use with training. For more information refer to: <http://f-marc.com/11plus/manual/>