

Some Thoughts about Warming Up, Stretching and Cooling Down

For seven-year-olds:

- Warm up should be fun – light activities like tag or knockout.
- Get a ball to each player as soon as possible.
- Stretching is not important at this age and there is no need to introduce it as “something for the future.” Perhaps some “body parts” for balance and coordination, but no formal stretching.
- Cooling down is important. This brings kids down from their ‘heightened state’ and gives everyone a chance to help collect gear, review and talk – parents are more likely to listen now. A good time for a little parent education by the coach. The cooling down period is also a time to give homework.

For ten-year-olds:

- With slightly older kids the warm up sets the tone and pace of training; mental challenges can be introduced too.
- Starting in pairs is a good idea for kids at this age – for balance, teamwork and communication. The players ‘start as a team.’
- Coaches can bring brief, simple coaching points into warm up; the implicit message is that this is a learning environment, an instructional activity – as well as pure fun.
- Playing various forms of keep away in the beginning of practice is a good, consistent way to begin. It puts together the four elements of soccer right away.
- Cooling down is short; review, look ahead, praise them, go home.

For thirteen-year-olds:

- Warm up is very important now to set tone, rhythm and climate at training sessions. Coaches should pay close attention to body language, attitude, alertness, posture and getting the heads up.
- Fun is still really important, but coaches can adopt an instructional approach from the beginning: easy tactical ideas (like body shape, footwork, changes of direction), isolated technical activities or keep away. As an example of a way to put together the technical and tactical early on, in the warm up play keep away with the constant reminder: don’t stop the ball. This is now physical and mental preparation.
- These are adolescents, growing fast with changing bodies, so stretching is important. Rhythmic, integrated stretching is good – interjected into warm-up activities – individually or in pairs, as opposed to bringing everyone together or getting into a circle, etc. Stretching is quiet time, no group chants or anything like that.
- Cooling down for these players is easy movements and light running, some talk and more stretching. At the very end it could be lying down, breathing deeply, relaxing – that’s also time for the coach, with a lowered voice, to ask about injuries, talk tactics, give homework and reflect on the training session.
- This cooling down period is also time to reinforce habits such as drinking plenty of water. The players should be encouraged to drink water before, during and after training sessions, so while they are cooling down they should be replenishing water.