



Game preparation

While spending 3 days with the National Team Development Program in Ann Arbor, Michigan, this past March, I learned many things that I will be sharing with the program I work with in Minnesota. But the one that had the greatest influence on me was how the NTDP team prepared for a game – their pre-game warm up routine. Understanding that the primary goal of any warm up is to raise the body core’s temperature and subsequently the muscles’ temperature in order to improve the elasticity of the muscles, tendons and ligaments and to prepare the body for the physical activity to follow (OK, I had to do some research to come up with that) – but I wondered why the NTDP’s warm up looked so different from the typical warm ups I see for youth teams.

I spoke with Carrie Kell, the NTDP skating coach, who works with the players on their skating, but spends more time on their off ice conditioning. She works closely with the players on all aspects of preparation and performance. During our conversation she asked me what a typical pre-game routine is for a youth team.

I explained that of course every team and every coach is going to do it a little bit different, but what I have seen others do throughout my years of experience – and have done myself - goes something like this: the team arrives about an hour before game time, and once in the locker room the kids are allowed about 10-15 minutes for taping sticks, etc. The kids then proceed to do their off-ice warm ups. The intention is to get them moving and get their hearts pumping. Often the kids will jog around the rink, run stairs, do lunges and the like. Then the kids will do their stretches. After all of this, they retreat to the locker room and get dressed which can take anywhere from 10 to 20 minutes. Once the players are dressed the coaches deliver their pre-game speech and when finished, the kids go out for their 5-minute on-ice warm up and are “ready” to play hockey.

Kell dissected the typical pre-game warm up and provided great insight and education on why the NTDP is doing it different. First, she said that the activities such as jogging, stairs, lunges, etc. are great. These activities are all forms of dynamic stretching. “You want your players to do dynamic stretching and sport specific stretching. Dynamic stretching is a form of particular movements and sequences stretching. It involves moving parts of your body and gradually increasing reach, speed of movement, or both. [The kids] should be using any kind of physical activity in order to “break a sweat” - to wake up their brains and get those quick twitch muscles going.” These movements can be as basic as kicking a soccer ball in a circle like the Europeans- or throwing a tennis ball against wall with a partner.

Kell said where we go wrong is when we introduce static stretching into the pre-game warm up. Static stretching actually puts your muscles to sleep, Kell said. Static stretching is performed where the player slowly and cautiously positions their body so that it will increase the tension of the muscle or group of muscles to be stretched. When reaching that point, the position or posture is held in order to allow the muscles and tendons to lengthen. Kell states that this type of

stretching is important; it improves flexibility and will help prevent injuries, but it should be performed after an activity and not before.

In further reviewing the typical youth warm up, Kell pointed out additional problem areas. She noted that by the time the players hit the ice, they have been sitting for 20-30 minutes and all of the earlier activity that occurred is now useless. Kell recommends that the coaches' pre-game speech should be before the off-ice warm up (dynamic stretching exercises) and that 10 minutes or less should be given to the players getting dressed. It is important that the neurons are firing and those quick twitch muscles are ready to go.

The opportunity to spend time at the NTDP was invaluable and I really learned a lot. This great information and education, together with having seen the NTDP teams perform was a great experience for me. I am looking forward to incorporating these ideas this season and sharing what I learned with association I work with. I will definitely change my approach to pre-game warm up routines. Other coaches who are already incorporating this routine can probably attest to its success. Those that aren't - consider the possibilities. Whether you change is up to you - but think of the kids - do their muscles - and their game a favor.

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EXAMPLES OF DYNAMIC WARM-UPS (all drills should be done at 20 yards)

-Forward Jog

-Skips with arm circles

-Carioca with high knee Cross-overs

-Forward lunges

-Side lunges

-Backward lunges

-High Knees

-Butt kicks

-Power Skips for height

- Side shuffle with arm crossovers
- Build up sprint 85 of maximum speed
- Backpedal
- Tuck jumps
- Ankle jumps
- Single and double leg hops (forward,backward, lateral)
- Zig-zag transitions
- Speed skaters/stride push off