



“The Desire to Win is Useless Without the Desire to Prepare”

Designing a meaningful practice is the heart of coaching football. Football requires a great deal of organization and attention to detail. Not all teams will be undefeated, but they can be recognized and respected by opposing coaches as well-coached teams. Each grade level will have different goals and needs but all teams can be fundamentally sound, well-prepared and organized.

Your practice can start with a general warm-up consisting of form-running, various skips, carioca, lunges or tuck jumps and other movements. Next, many coaches have an individual skills period. During this time period players will do drills that will make them fundamentally sound on an offensive or defensive skill or skills. After an individual period, bring the skills together in small group work, middle [T-G-C-G-T-QB-RB] drill, or half line drill [TE-T-G-C-QB-RB], or other combination. Lastly, will be team 11 on 11 if you have the players, if not stay with group work, use cones to stand in for missing players, try to progress in an individual-group-team pattern.



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About Coach Bass

DESIGNING A MEANINGFUL PRACTICE

Sample Schedule and Drills

by: Coach Tom Bass

When planning a practice schedule, it is important to remember that you must decide beforehand:

1. What you are going to cover that day;
2. How much time you are allocating to each segment of the practice;
3. What method you are going to use in your instruction.

Coaching football and preparing your team for the season involves:

1. Getting your team in condition to play.
2. Teaching safe and proper techniques.
3. Coaching the assignments for the game.
4. Teaching the rules the players need to know.
5. Thinking about safety issues like fluid replacement constantly during practice.
6. Remembering what the players do not know about the game.
7. Understanding the difference between the player's idea of motivation and focus and yours.
8. Knowing the players want to play, learn, and have fun.
9. Making each practice an enjoyable learning situation so the players are eager to return for the next session.

Try to accomplish these objectives by dividing your practice into time blocks along the following lines:

1. Warm-up and stretching.
2. Introduction of new team offensive plays and/or defenses.
3. Individual technique period.
4. Special teams.
5. Group team work.
6. Full team work.
7. Conditioning and cool down.

Warm-Up and Stretching

One way to start each practice is to have one coach lead the team in a lap around the field to start the warm-up and stretching period of practice. If one coach has been designated as the conditioning coach, he can lead this segment of practice, or a rotation can be set up for the entire staff. Once the players have run their lap, they should line up in designated spots for their stretching exercises. Having the players line up in the same spot every practice, makes it easy for the staff to determine who is not present for practice. A chart can be made in advance with each player's name at his spot so that a written record can be kept for each practice. It is important to keep the stretching exercises consistent regardless of which coach is leading the team stretching. [10 minutes]

Introduction of New Team Offensive Plays and/or Defenses

The time following stretching is a good time for the introduction of any new team offensive plays and/or defenses.

- This period needs to feature a quick explanation of the new play or defense focusing on assignments.
- Once everyone has been given their assignment, each team should run through the play at half speed.
- Try to introduce one or, at the most, two plays at this time; one is better.
- Make the introduction of the material as quickly as possible and get the players moving as soon as you can.

If you have a number of players who are playing both ways, it is good to alternate this period, offense one day and defense the next. As the season progresses, you may be able to eliminate this period of practice altogether if there is no new material to present to the team. [10 minutes]

Individual Techniques

Now you should divide up the team by position into as many groups as possible based on the number of coaches on the staff. Focus on teaching the individual techniques needed to play each position. Each coach should take his group to a designated area of the field for individual practice. Try to have this location the same each day to prevent players from wandering around and wasting time. During this period, it is important to:

1. Feature many drills that each focus on teaching one technique.
2. Move from one drill to another with speed.
3. Limit talking and give the players as many repetitions with your coaching as you can.
4. Try to establish a routine that the players know and can execute with a minimum of coaching.
5. Make sure each drill does not last more than a few minutes.

Have some drills at every position, like getting into a stance and then firing off - the group can be lined up across the field and execute the drill at the same time. For other techniques the drill may only allow for one or two players to go at a time.

Keep your players moving as much as possible to prevent them from standing around and getting bored.

- Start by teaching the basics.
- Review the techniques at the start of the period each day.
- Introduce new techniques later in the period.
- Focus on the techniques that your players will need to have success in your system. [20 minutes]

Special Teams

During the next period, you can change the pace and take time to coach special teams. Individual time can be spent prior to warm-up, coaching the snappers, holders, kickers, and return people.

Plan to cover two phases of the kicking game during each practice session.

1. Punt and punt return on one day.
2. Kickoff and kickoff return on the next.
3. Field goal and field goal block on the next.

Practicing on a field without a goal post can be a challenge, but you can still cover the blocking and have the center, holder, and kicker get the ball for the kick. The coaching staff should be divided during this period so that every segment of the kicking game is coached properly.

As an example, during the punt period the staff could be divided:

- One coaching the punter;
- One the snapper;
- One the outside cover men;
- One the right side blockers;
- One the left side blockers;
- One or two coaches making certain the punt return team is set correctly.

In your coaching during this period, focus on only one phase of the game at a time, then on the other phase during the second half of the period. [15 minutes]

Group Team Work

The next period in your practice schedule can be devoted to working segments of the offense versus segments of the defense, in small group team work.

- During this period, one day you might schedule a passing drill featuring QB, RBs, TE, and WRs working against the LBs and DBs. At the same time, in another part of the field, the OL and DL can work against one another on run blocking and pass blocking.
- For another practice, this period might be just the QB, TE, and WRs running one-on-one pass routes versus the DBs, while the RBs, QB, and OL practicing inside running plays versus the DL and LBers in another area.
- For a third practice, the staff might divide the offensive and defensive teams in half and work on right side offense on one side versus left side defense, while the left side offense versus the right side defense on a separate practice area.
- Practice during this time should be run at a good tempo without tackling.
- Try to get as many repetitions in as possible during this practice time.
- Both the offense and defense can work on their own plays and techniques during this period. [20 minutes]

Full-Team Work

The next practice period is devoted to full team work. During this period, an entire offensive team will work against an entire defensive

team. As a staff, you may decide to work half the period focusing on offense and half on defense, or it may work better for you to work one practice day on all offense and the next practice featuring defense.

Once the season begins, if it is an offensive period, the defense should try to give the offense a look at the alignment of the opponent's defense. If it is a defensive period, the offense should run the opponent's plays.

This period should be used to:

1. Coordinate and tune-up the timing of your offensive plays and defenses.
2. Make certain that each player knows his assignments.
3. Have each player demonstrate the correct techniques needed to execute his assignment.
4. Run plays at full speed to get everything ready for game speed.

Plan for all down and distance and field position situations during this period. Try to sit down prior to coming to the field and write up a script for the offensive plays and the defenses that you will cover each day during this period. Circle or highlight any play or defense that needs more work and include it at the beginning of the next practice.

Make individual corrections when the player is not involved in the drill. Let the other players continue to practice as you take one player aside and correct what he has done wrong.

This would also be the period when, early in the year, you might have a scrimmage. A scrimmage should be the only time when tackling is needed for the drill. [25 minutes]

Conditioning and Cooling Down

At the end of practice, have a short conditioning and cooling down period. Rather than just running sprints at half or 3/4 speed, this is a good time to:

- Run offensive plays against no one, moving the ball 20 yards downfield each play.
- Run a defensive team interception drill, catching the ball and the running 20 yards into the end zone.
- Cover punts and kickoffs for 20 yards.

The idea is to get the team to run while still working on some part of football. The entire team should then stretch their large muscle groups after the running is finished. [10 minutes]

The more organized you can be, the more advanced thought and planning you can give to each practice, the more success you will have in accomplishing your goals and the more your players will learn.

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When and Whom to Stretch?

Gauging the Benefits and Drawbacks for Individual Patients

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For CME accreditation information, instructions and learning objectives, [click here](#).

In Brief: Since the early 1980s, stretching has been promoted as a method to prevent injury and improve athletic performance. Although research suggests that this may be true for regular stretching performed every day, an isolated act of stretching immediately before exercise likely has no effect on injury prevention and actually impairs performance in strength and power sports. This article highlights our current understanding of the effects of stretching both immediately before exercise and as a regular daily routine, and then illustrates how to apply these principles in a practice setting, using brief clinical vignettes.

Although sports medicine professionals have promoted stretching as a way to improve performance and decrease the risk of injury,¹⁻³ several papers reviewing the literature include a substantial body of evidence suggesting this may not always be appropriate.⁴⁻⁶

The first objective of this article is to briefly discuss the basic and applied science of stretching. Although a consensus among researchers is developing in some areas, nuances among individuals can make it difficult for the practicing clinician to apply results from research studies that use strict inclusion criteria and outcome definitions. Therefore, the second objective of this article is to use clinical vignettes to demonstrate how to apply the knowledge obtained from research to a particular patient within a specific context.

Because the immediate effects of stretching are generally opposite to the effects of stretching every day (described in detail in the following section),⁵ the basic and applied sciences for each are separated in this article, and the reader should conceptualize them as different interventions. Since both acute stretching and regular stretching improve range of motion (ROM),⁷ the effects on ROM are not discussed in detail here.

Finally, this article focuses on stretching as an intervention, rather than highlighting studies of the association between flexibility and injury or performance.⁸⁻¹⁰ There are several reasons for this approach. Most important, stretching affects more than simply flexibility (eg, it decreases force⁵ and alters neural function¹¹), and the overall effect of stretching is the focus of this article. In addition, previous reviews have shown opposite effects when stretching is performed immediately before exercise compared with other times.^{5,12}

Because articles on the association between flexibility and injury or performance do not

take into account *when* subjects stretch, one would expect discordant findings. Research on groin injuries by Emery et al⁹ and Witvrouw et al¹⁰ contradicts that of Arnason et al,⁸ and study findings on hamstring injuries by Witvrouw et al¹⁰ contradict those of Arnason et al.⁸ Furthermore, many subjects are naturally flexible, and any effects observed would be due to genetics. Finally, some studies on flexibility measure capsular mobility rather than joint limitation related to muscle ROM. For example, hyperextension of the knees and elbows or multidirectional shoulder instability is not a property of muscle, but rather a property of the capsule and ligaments.

Effects of Acute Stretching

Studies that evaluate the acute effects of stretching typically test subjects immediately after the stretch. The results below occur in subjects who never stretch, and in those who stretch regularly.

Similar to weight training, both force and power decrease immediately after stretching.⁵ This is true for interventions of both static and proprioceptive neuromuscular facilitation (PNF) stretching. It is also true for muscular isometric maximal voluntary contraction, isokinetic torque, static jump height, countermovement jump height, and drop jump height. The decreases are mild and range from 2% to 5%. This difference is clinically relevant for an elite athlete (ie, the difference between winning a gold medal and not making the podium) and may be relevant for the recreational athlete who has a strong competitive drive, but it is irrelevant for the person who simply wants to lead an active lifestyle.

In addition to affecting force and power, stretching improves economy of motion (ie, the amount of oxygen required to run a given distance). Because running speed depends on both force (decreased with stretching) and running economy (improved with stretching), the overall effect of stretching needs to be carefully determined.

Few current studies have been published on this topic, and the results appear to conflict.¹³⁻¹⁵ In fact, one would expect some individuals to improve and some to do worse, depending on their baseline contributions of force and economy of motion. For example, someone who already has a great economy of motion is unlikely to improve much with stretching, and the effects of a decrease in force would predominate. The opposite would be expected for someone who experiences large improvements in running economy.

No decrease in injury risk. Many people stretch regularly, but always just before activity (with or without warming up). The evidence for and against stretching before exercise has been recently reviewed by several authors, and all have concluded that stretching immediately before exercise does not prevent injury.^{6,16,17} This is true for the general population and members of the military, and young as well as older people.

Finally, clinical evidence aside, some clinicians continue to promote stretching for elite athletes based on theoretical arguments. A discussion of these arguments is beyond the scope of this article, which focuses on the current experimental evidence. However, these theories have been discussed in a previous publication⁴ and are mostly inconsistent with our current basic and clinical science knowledge.

Effects of Regular Stretching

This analysis refers to regular stretching that is not performed immediately before exercise.

Increases in force, power, and running speed. These effects are opposite of those seen immediately after a person stretches. Similar to weight training, stretching increases both force and power when done regularly for several weeks.⁵ The improvements are mild and range from 2% to 5%, which, again, is the difference between winning a gold medal and

not making the podium. This applies to both static and PNF stretching, and improvements are seen for isometric maximal voluntary contraction, isokinetic torque, static jump height, countermovement jump height, and drop jump height.

Running economy is unchanged, which is consistent with the finding that muscle stiffness does not change despite the increased ROM produced by regular stretching. Because running speed depends on both force (increased with regular stretching) and running economy (no change with regular stretching), the overall effect should be to increase running speed. In the only study addressing this question, a clinically relevant improvement in running speed was observed, but the results were not statistically significant.⁵ When compared with sprint training alone, sprint and stretch training improved 50-yd running speed by 0.06 second. When compared with sprint and weight training, sprint, weight, and stretch training improved 50-yd running speed by 0.06 second. These are large differences at the elite level. Therefore, more studies are needed with either a larger sample size or decreased interindividual variability (eg, a more homogeneous sprinter population) before the question is definitively answered. Again, the differences in force, power, and running speed may be relevant for the recreational athlete with a strong competitive drive but are irrelevant for the person who simply wants to lead an active lifestyle.

Possible reduction in injury risk. Only three studies have isolated the effects of regular stretching on injury prevention.¹⁸⁻²⁰ In all three studies, regular stretching produced a clinically relevant decrease in injury risk (RR = 0.82 [95% confidence interval (CI): 0.57, 1.14], 0.57 [95% CI: 0.37, 0.88], 0.77 [95% CI: 0.54, 1.08]), but the results were significant in only one of the studies.¹⁹ In that study, all subjects stretched before exercise, and the intervention group added stretches during the rest of the day. In another study,¹⁸ subjects stretched both before and after exercise. In the third study,²⁰ firefighters stretched regularly every day, but they obviously did not have the time to stretch before "activity."

Summary of Effects of Stretching

Stretching immediately before exercise will not prevent injuries. It reduces force and power by about 2% to 5%, with conflicting study results about its effect on running speed. Regular stretching over weeks increases force and power by about 2% to 5% and improves 50-yd running speed by about 0.06 second.

The following vignettes are designed to help clinicians apply these principles to real-life situations. For brevity, these cases suggest that ROM is either good or poor in each subject. In fact, anyone may have a large ROM for some muscles and a small ROM for other muscles. Furthermore, the duration of stretching required to increase ROM varies between individuals and among muscles within an individual.² Designing stretching programs with these principles in mind may help increase the efficiency and effectiveness of a stretching program when it is prescribed, but discussion of such programs is beyond the scope of this article.

Vignette 1

Patient. Meryl is a 19-year-old striker for a National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Division 1 soccer team and hopes to attend the national trials for the 2008 Olympics. She is able to place her hands flat on the floor with her knees straight when she bends at the waist.

Stretch? Meryl should not stretch before activity. Doing so will not reduce her risk of injury and is likely to decrease the force of her kick. Moreover, stretching is unlikely to improve her sprint speed because it will decrease her force and is unlikely to improve her running economy because she is already flexible.

Meryl could improve her running speed with regular stretching. However, in general, the

time available for training is limited, and adding stretching could necessitate removing some other aspect of her training regimen. Therefore, the benefits of stretching would have to be weighed against the benefits of other types of training, such as strength training, soccer skill training, visualization, relaxation, and studying.

Vignette 2

Patient. Eric is a 30-year-old tae kwon do athlete who has always considered himself inflexible. He currently competes in regional events. Eric finds that if he does not stretch before an event, he has trouble with high kicks. If he stretches beforehand, he finds that this is much less of a problem.

Stretch? Eric should stretch before activity. Because Eric cannot kick high if he does not stretch, stretching will improve his performance. Although he is only competing in regional events, Eric wants to do his best. Furthermore, stretching will not affect his injury risk and is likely to improve his competition results.

If Eric stretches regularly, his flexibility should improve enough that he no longer needs to stretch immediately before competition. At this point, the advantages of pre-event stretching decrease, and it may or may not be advisable to stretch, depending on the balance of factors at that time.

Vignette 3

Patient. Joni is a 45-year-old professional modern dancer with an old knee injury. Without warming up, Joni can only bend her knee 90°. However, if she warms up and then stretches for 30 to 60 minutes, she can regain her full ROM, which lasts for at least 3 hours.

Stretch? Joni should stretch before her event. The decrease in force and power that might occur are of minimal consequence compared with an inability to bend the knee fully, which is required for her activity. Joni should also seek professional advice about her injury to determine why her knee remains stiff despite regular stretching.

Vignette 4

Patient. Lyn is a 22-year-old professional ballet dancer. She stretches every day and is very flexible. However, she finds that it is easier to maintain the extreme body positions required during jumps if she stretches immediately before a performance. This is most likely related to decreased energy requirements associated with decreased tissue stiffness.

Stretch? Lyn should continue her current stretching program. Although her jump height is likely to decrease by 2% to 5%, this might represent a 24-in. vertical jump compared with a 25-in. vertical jump—a difference that will not be recognized by the audience. However, an inability to maintain strict body position during a jump is often apparent to the discerning audience member.

Vignette 5

Patient. Robert is a forward for a NCAA Division 1 hockey team. He has always stretched before practice and games and *knows* that this prevents injuries and improves his performance.

Stretch? The recommendation of stretching to an individual patient should follow the same principles as recommendations for any other intervention. Robert has strong beliefs about stretching, and suggesting that he discontinue stretching before activity is likely to have significant counterproductive effects on his confidence in the clinician and his willingness to comply with the recommendation. Although there is no magic approach, a clinician in this

situation may wish to begin by planting the idea briefly. At a later date, the clinician might propose an n=1 crossover trial with the athlete to determine the effects of stretching on him.

•o Stretch or Not to Stretch

In all walks of life, a clear objective helps to determine the appropriate path. If the objective is to increase force or power in athletic performance, stretching should not be performed before activity. If the objective is to increase speed, it may or may not be beneficial to stretch immediately before activity.

If time constraints are not a concern, stretching should be performed every day. However, most people have a limited amount of time available for training, and the increase in force, power, and speed that might occur as a result of regular stretching must be weighed against the success of (and desire to participate in) other interventions designed to achieve the same objectives.

Finally, in addition to force, power, and speed, performance sometimes depends on an athlete's ROM and always depends on his or her psychological approach (eg, prior beliefs, use of relaxation). These other factors should be taken into account when prescribing or not prescribing stretching as an intervention for athletic patients.

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