

**THE WARM UP**  
**BY**  
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One area of rugby that is often overlooked is the pre-match and pre-session warm up. Rugby is a dynamic contact game requiring high levels of physical conditioning. It is important that athletes at all levels and ages undertake a thorough warm up prior to any activity on or off the field. Not only may this prevent injuries, it may also provide physiological and psychological benefit.

The warm up should be viewed as an integral part of the session and not an added extra if time permits. The use of rugby-related movements with and without a ball makes the warm up a vital part of rugby performance both pre-match and pre-session.

One area that receives conflicting advice is stretching as part of the warm up. There has been evidence to show that static stretching prior to dynamic activity may actually impair the performance. This could possibly have a negative impact upon rugby. Ballistic stretching has the potential to cause injury if undertaken without correct guidance (along with all other forms of flexibility conditioning to a degree). This leaves the athlete with dynamic flexibility to form the basis of the warm up routine.

*Dynamic flexibility* is simply warming up using movements similar to the intended future activity at a reduced intensity. This can be undertaken in both pitch and gym type sessions. For example, prior to a squatting session an athlete will almost certainly undertake lighter squats as a warm up. This 'programmes' the body to prepare for the movement required and recruits the muscles to do so. On a pitch, the use of various dynamic movements such as the squat, lunge, torso rotation etc provides dynamic warm up and flexibility.

These drills should be at a low intensity to begin with and gradually increase so that they are performed more dynamically. However, caution should be exercised when performing any dynamic flexibility. Overstretching the muscle, ligaments and tendons may impair performance and can easily cause injury.



The benefits of a dynamic warm up allow movement patterns to be rehearsed prior to an activity. It also increases the temperature of the muscles, something that static stretching does not achieve. Finally, a dynamic warm up can include rugby-specific movements both for individuals and a team whilst preparing the individual athlete for the rugby session or game.

### **Physiological warm ups.**

These form into three simple activities:

- Identical to performance.
- Directly related to performance.
- Indirectly related to performance.

Normally all three are used in a rugby warm up. For example light jogging is often used as the initial part of a warm up and may include ball handling and movement skills. This may progress into rucking practice at a reduced intensity and possibly running lines at full pace. All of the activities provide a gradual increase in muscle temperature, increase in core temperature (without fatigue) and increase in cardiac output; all of these may have a positive effect upon rugby performance.

### **Psychological warm ups.**

Another key area identified as potentially beneficial following a warm up is the psychological. A warm up allows the athlete to focus his/her attention on the game or practice. All rugby athletes can benefit from mentally and physically rehearsing skills before an activity. An obvious example is the hooker or place kicker. Both players have a psychologically demanding role within a team and a good warm up, including throwing and kicking skills, may enhance the performance during the game. Furthermore, running through team plays and calls for all players may get players at their correct arousal state prior to either the kick off or session.

### **Formulating a rugby warm up.**

Youth and junior athletes should always warm up prior to any dynamic activity. The benefits of a thorough rugby specific warm up should not be ignored and it will promote 'good practice' at the earliest possible age.

The basic points to consider are:

- Time frame.
- Equipment (the use of ladders, poles and shields etc).
- Age and fitness level - avoid excessive warm ups for less able players but ensure adequate preparation.
- Environmental conditions - young players may not regulate heat as well as adults. If it is cold, ensure that players are suitably dressed and remain hydrated.

The warm up should be intense enough to notably warm the players (e.g. removal of tracksuit and light sweating). Rugby warm ups should be dominated by dynamic flexibility and movement skills and should include ball handling. Players may break into groups for a short run-through of plays (lineouts etc) but not for too long. The most intense part should be no longer than fifteen minutes from the start of the match and should taper down in intensity at approximately five minutes before kick off. Players should remain well hydrated throughout with fluid available at all times.