

Stretching

There are an endless number of players who seem perfectly able to squeeze in many hours of training every week but who just don't seem to have the time to stretch for five or ten minutes before and after. Find the time.

Sure, it's not as fun as hitting the pads and the benefits may not be as immediately obvious, but a good and consistent stretching program can save you a lot of trouble and keep you playing when you might otherwise become injured. Along with training, stretching is the most important thing you can do to protect your body from the rigors of the game. You'll also find that the benefits of stretching include reduced muscle soreness after games and even better athletic performance.

That said you should be careful about how you stretch. If not done properly, stretching can actually cause injury rather than prevent it. Rule number one in stretching: do not bounce. It's a common mistake, but bouncing risks pulling or tearing the muscle you're trying to stretch and relax. Muscles must be stretched gradually. If a stretch is applied too quickly, the muscle responds with a strong contraction, increasing tension. If the stretch is applied slowly, however, this contraction reflex is avoided, muscle tension falls, and you may stretch the muscle further. The lesson here: stretch slowly and hold the stretch for at least 30 seconds.

Do not stretch beyond the point where you begin to feel tightness in the muscle. Do not push through muscle resistance, and never stretch to the point of discomfort or pain.

Build stretching into your regular schedule both before and after your training - it's best to do your stretching after a gentle warm-up run of five or ten minutes, since "warm" muscles stretch more easily.

Repeat each stretch two or three times:

1. Wall Push up #1

Stand about three feet from a wall, feet at shoulder width and flat on the ground. Put your hands on the wall with your arms straight for support. Lean your hips forward and bend your knees slightly to stretch your calves.



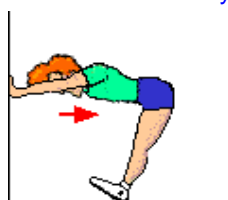
2. Wall Push up #2

From the previous position, bend forward to lower your body to waist height. Bring one foot forward with your knee slightly bent. Lift the toes of the front foot to stretch the muscle under the calf. Stretch both legs.



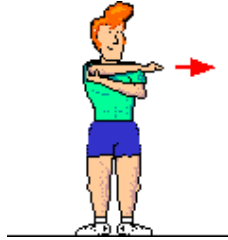
3. Wall Push up #3

Put your feet together, rocking back on your heels with your hands on the wall and your arms straight to form a jack knife with your body. This will stretch your hips, shoulders and lower back.



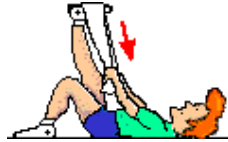
4. Back Scratch

Grab your elbow with the opposite hand and gently push the elbow up and across your body until your hand reaches down to "scratch" your back. Gently push on your elbow to guide your hand down your back as far as it will comfortably go, stretching your triceps and shoulders. Stretch both arms.



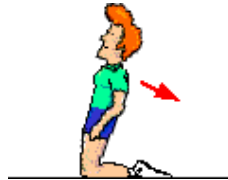
5. Hamstring Stretch

Lie down with one leg straight up in the air, the other bent with foot flat on the ground. Loop a towel over the arch of the lifted foot, and gently pull on the towel as you push against it with your foot. Push only to the point where your muscles start to contract. Stretch both legs.



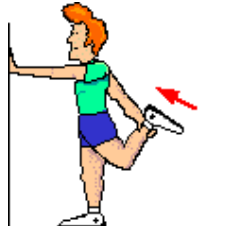
6. Quadriceps Stretch

Kneel on your knees (without resting back on your heels). Lean back with your body erect and your arms to the side, hold for 30 seconds.



7. Heel to Buttock

Stand on one foot, with one hand on a wall for balance. Hold the other foot with the opposite hand and raise the heel of the lifted foot to the buttocks (or as close as comfortably possible), stretching your quadriceps. Keep your body upright throughout. Change legs and repeat.



8. Hip & Lower Back Stretch

Sit on the ground with your legs crossed. Lift your right leg and cross it over the left, which should remain bent. Hug the right leg to your chest and twist the trunk of your body to look over your right shoulder. Change legs and repeat (i.e. looking over your left shoulder).



9. Iliotibial Band Stretch

Lie on your side with both legs bent in running position. Bring the bottom leg toward your chest and then bring the top one back toward your buttocks, so that the running position of your legs is exaggerated as possible. Hold for 30 seconds then flip sides and repeat.



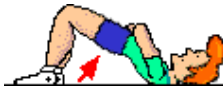
10. Hamstring & Back Stretch

Lie on your back with your knees bent. Hug your shins to your chest to stretch your hamstrings and lower back.



11. Bridge

Lie on your back and, with your feet flat on the ground, lift your hips up until your body forms a flat plane. Repeat this one ten times for 30 seconds each to stretch your quads and lower back.



12. Groin Stretch

Seated, put the soles of your feet together. With your elbows on the inside of your knees, gradually lean forward and gently press your knees toward the ground.



Before Training - Your muscles will be 'cold' and relatively inflexible before you start running and you are therefore more prone to injury. Warming up and gently stretching the muscles will increase flexibility and ultimately lead to a more comfortable and safer training session. Stop and re-stretch if you feel any muscular tightness whilst running.

After Training - Stretching after a training session is a way of increasing flexibility as well as flushing out the metabolic waste products that are left in your muscles as a result of your effort. These waste products are the cause of stiffness. Stretching will ensure that you are less stiff the next day. Stretching after training is also important to avoid muscle shortening.

A few simple rules to remember:

- Do not stretch cold muscles. It is far better to stretch after a run than before
- Do stretch lightly before speed work, after a 10 minute warm up
- Ease into each stretch: do not bounce or force it
- Before speed work, hold each stretch for 10 - 15 seconds