



Game Day Soccer Team Warm-ups

[sites](#)
[manage](#)
[tournaments](#)
[vendors](#)
[home](#)
[technical](#)
[tactical](#)
[fitness](#)
[mental](#)
[the match](#)


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Warm-ups before the soccer match present a wonderful opportunity for you to coach and improve your soccer team. Much of the soccer coaching on game day is mental preparation, rather than soccer skills, soccer tactics, or fitness. Successful soccer coaching depends on managing the time carefully, creating a positive, confident, and fun state of mind for each of the soccer players, and giving the players a chance to get their pulse rates up and get their touch on the ball under control.

Extra Technical Training Time

Many teams are limited by field space or league restrictions to a small number of training sessions per week. If you would be willing to have your kids show up and begin work 45 to 60 minutes prior to each match, you can have a very nice additional technical training session with your team each week. Your kids have a lot of energy at U11, and winning at U11 is not as important as becoming much more skillful at U11 so you can win at U16 and beyond. If you take care of the details, the big stuff comes right along.

Extra Touches Before the Match

Most kids who have average trapping, settling, dribbling, and shooting technique at U11 do not get a good touch on their first 30 to 50 balls. During the match, some players may not even receive this many balls during the entire match, so that they don't get a good touch in the entire match. So, your warm-ups should provide lots of ball touches per player. This requires one ball per player or one ball between two players. This latter arrangement works very well in practice. Partners with a ball can work through all kinds of touches, traps, settles, kills, and headers with one player serving and one playing, taking turns. With these extra touches, your players will be better prepared to play immediately.

Long Stretches Reduce Injuries

Get an ATC to teach you how to stretch your players properly. It is not properly shown in any of the coaching courses, and the little 8-second stretches you see teams doing at matches are not very effective. The players must be warm before stretching, and the quad and hamstring stretches need to last 60 seconds minimum to be effective. Try it out yourself. You will find that, even when warmed up, your hamstring will give you a lot of resistance and not much stretching for the first 60 seconds or so.

At U11, this is not going to be a major problem. However, increasing strength and flexibility up through U14 will reduce the potential injuries that you will start to see starting at about U14. Common injuries in girls, which come as a surprise your first time through, include MCL, ACL, tendonitis and inflammation behind the knee cap, pulled quads, and ankle ligament damage. (Broken bones, particularly wrist and ankle, are not uncommon, but start from U11 and do not seem to dramatically increase at U14.) The number and severity of ligament, tendon, and muscle problems you encounter at U14 to U16 can come as a great surprise, but they seem to arrive during this time frame because of growth and muscle mass changes. Getting into serious stretching and strength development earlier might help.

Higher Pulse Rates

Kids like games and action. Don't talk. Smile, reassure, praise, and encourage, but do it with short phrases while the kids are working on the ball in the warm-up. When your kids finish the warm-up with a good work rate, their pulse rate should be elevated from the work. You'd like the kids to already have worked their way past nervousness, broken a sweat, and be really warmed up. If you have trouble getting going early in matches, you might want to pick up the work rate during warm-ups.

Variety Please

If you coach a competitive team, you may play 50 matches or more per year. This means 50

warm-ups. How boring if they are always the same. Add some variety to increase interest so it's fun for you and the kids. Don't always use the same exercises.

Player Centered Experience - The Coach as a Tour Guide

As the coach, circulate in the exercises and knock a few balls around, but don't be the center of attention or the bottleneck in the exercises your kids use to prepare for the match. Assuming that the kids have come rested and nourished, and assuming that kids did not get the third degree on do's and don'ts all the way to the match, most of the kids should have their "real self" in good shape as they arrive at the field.

So, after warming and stretching, the players are working to get into their best "performance self" through a familiar technical ritual that helps them move visualization, to rehearsal, and finally to an aroused but confident "ready for challenge" state where the kids are alert and ready. The coach moving the team's players to this stage is a friendly tour guide looking to knock down distractions and to help kids focus on positive thoughts and banish negative thoughts as the preparatory ritual moves forward.

Distractions to knock down include lack of warm-up space, coaches from the opposing team who want to come over and socialize before the match, excessive referee check-in procedure, bad weather, a serious injury in the previous match on the same field during your team's warm-up, players arriving late, players arriving without proper equipment, and a wide variety of other problems and injuries all the way up to just short of nuclear war breaking out.

Anyway, all this is about the kids getting into their best performance zone. When the coach gets into the middle of the warm-up exercise on a consistent basis, the coach becomes a distraction, because the kids are not watching the coach receiving and dropping balls for players to shoot as much as the kids are focusing on their own positive thoughts and their technical performance. As the team learns the warm-up organized by the coach, the coach needs to slide out of a technical participation role and get into the tour guide role. In this role, mental preparation is as important as technical preparation, so the coach has to learn the words, timing of words, and body language that send a positive message to the team and its individual players.

So, what do you really have to do, assuming that the team has learned the warm-up and the captains have the lead ? Easy, do and say less, not more.

- Intercept distractions.
- Collect warm-up clothing thrown down as the team warms up.
- Smile, be confident, be composed, laugh, and have fun.
- Listen to the players - don't be in such a panic to get started that you can't greet each player and help each player by listening.
- Compliment, in a brief but natural way, good technical performance during the warm-up "nice shot", "good trap", "your touch is really good today".
- Provide positive support for each player's confidence and competitive spirit - for example.

Good: "I have noticed that you don't get upset so easily when things go wrong. This is really helping out the team a lot".

Trouble: "We are all counting on you to give us your best - we're depending on you today - you have to do it" .

Good: "Thanks for playing so aggressively in the second half of last week's match" .

Trouble: "You have to stick in harder - you are not as aggressive as you should be".

- Manage warm-up time carefully (see next section).

Manage the Time

Managing warm-up time carefully is one of the coach's most important roles as tour guide. The technical ritual that we use as a warm-up provides excellent physical and mental preparation for the match if the players have a good understanding and expectation of what will happen. If, however, the coach tries to insert too many activities so that only a few moments are spent on each, or if the warm-up is only half complete when the referee decides to start the match, a lot of the mental preparation can be destroyed because the ritual does not go to completion as expected.

So, think it through before game day. Have in mind which exercises are essential for physical preparation, which for technical, and which for mental. Be prepared to cut out exercises to shorten up the warm-up to match the game day conditions. If you are warming up a couple of fields away from the game field, send your team manager or a parent over to find out the exact score and time remaining. For tournaments, be prepared to split for a water break and to extend your warm-up to accommodate overtime and penalty kicks.

Once you really know how much time remains, set your count down timer and keep checking it to manage your time. To avoid destroying your team's mental state with a last minute rush to the field, wind down your last exercise and move the kids and your bags from the warm-up area to the field 5 minutes before the previous match ends. If you have time for shooting before you play on the game field, while the kids are sorting out bags and getting a drink, line up your balls to get on the field at the final whistle.

Warm-up Components

There are a lot of good warm-ups, so let me just ask you to think about including these elements:

- greeting to the players - Thank each player for coming and acknowledge each one. Present your goal to team. You have the lesser of 3 sentences or 30 seconds.
- warm-up running - playing a relay or tag game might be more fun
- stretching - Good chance to pat a couple of players on the back and offer encouragement, but let your team captains run the stretching.
- fun warm-up games - These should be fun and provide movement. Ultimate Frisbee, relays, juggling in small groups, ball tag and other games.
- more stretching - Repeating stretches for the large muscle groups.
- touches on the ball - Partners with a ball, working all surfaces, settling, trapping, kills, volleying, heading.
- passing with partner - Many different sequences possible, Karrie Miller 1-2-3 touch sequence very fun for kids and effective. 1 touch passing is at 10 feet, 2 touch allows player to receive and clean up with first touch, pass with second, and 3 touch allows receive, push forward to attack, then pass. At 3 touch, both players move together back and forth, as the passer has to back up quickly after passing. Work toward getting ball off line of play quickly when received as this is needed in the match.
- small group passing exercises - Like lines facing with one touch passing, sometimes with a bending run to the back of a line opposite, takeovers, wall passes. Passing groups of 3 and 4 moving and passing and communicating. Full team passing exercises with 3 or 4 balls, players checking away and then to the ball, again with communication, receiving and turning ball or taking ball off line of play.
- possession games - Pass across the circle and chase your pass, defender in middle of circle keepaway, or 7 v 7 possession. You don't have to have bibs, just start two circles each playing keepaway with a defender in the middle, ask kids in one circle to pull their shirts out and go take the ball away from the other circle.
- small sided games - Play a small match to target players or cones. Play three teams

(need bibs) first time shooting in front of goal.

- shooting exercises - Oh.... the usual shooting lines going to goal. Don't have the coach distributing. Make sure that the emphasis is on shooting technique. It's OK if the ball is rolling very slowly, you are not focusing on receiving, so keep the services slow. Exercises can include even 1v1 and 2v2 to goal.
- composure time - Give the kids a moment to collect their thoughts and get a drink. Get them over early enough to see you smiling and to get organized before the match begins. You have time to give a lineup and to talk for about 15 seconds, no more.

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