

Static Stretching for Your Soccer Team

Flexibility is an important physical quality for soccer players, and it has traditionally been developed through the use of static stretching exercises. Until relatively recently, static stretching was considered to be an important part of any athlete's pre-training and pre-competition routine. Relatively recently, it has been shown that "dynamic" warm-up exercises are better tools to prepare athletes to train and compete. We will discuss the difference between static stretching and dynamic flexibility exercises in our discussion of warm up activities and exercises.

When should static stretching be used?

With static stretching no longer favored as an important part of warming up for training or competition the best time to employ it is after training or competition while the muscles remain warm. Stretching after activity avoids the problems associated with static stretching and competition while still providing the benefit of adding length to the muscle(s) being stretched.

Can static stretching be used when muscles are cold?

Yes, it can. The best practice is to "roll" muscles with a massage tool like a foam roller or ball (golf ball, tennis ball, hockey/lacrosse ball) in order to work out knots and tight bundles in the muscle. After working out the kinks, so to speak, the muscle can be stretched.

If muscles are stretched while "cold" prior to competition, a dynamic warm-up *must follow the stretching* in order to properly prepare the muscles for competition.

What do we want to get from stretching?

The answer, in a word, is "balance." We want muscles on opposite sides of the same joints to be in balance in terms of their flexibility (or lack of it). For instance, an athlete with equally tight hamstrings and quadriceps (opposite sides of knee joint) should be less likely to sustain injury than a teammate with tight hamstrings and very flexible quadriceps.

If a player has tightness on one side of a joint and is significantly more flexible on the other side, the player should focus stretching on the tighter side of the joint in order to increase the level of balance between the muscles prior to stretching the more flexible side. In other words, our player with tight hamstrings should focus on increasing flexibility in those muscles before increasing flexibility in the opposing muscles.

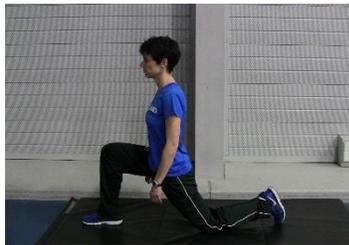
How long should our players hold their stretches?

Generally speaking, stretches should be relatively long, lasting 30-40 seconds. Stretching each muscle properly for this duration will, over time, increase flexibility.

The six stretches shown below offer a relatively simple and effective routine for you to employ with your players after both practices and games. If you follow this simple routine, you will take between 6-8 minutes (assuming you hold each stretch for 30 sec) to get your team thoroughly stretched at the end of your games or sessions. Over the course of a season, you will provide a huge benefit to your players.

“90-90”

Start out by having each player stand on his or her knees. From there, one foot can be put out in front of the body so that one knee is down, one is up, and both are bent at 90 degrees as shown. We will refer to this position as “90-90.”

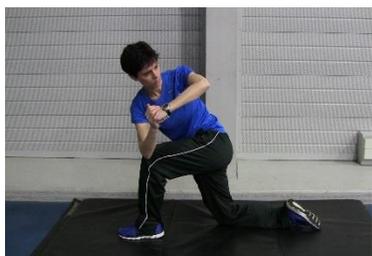
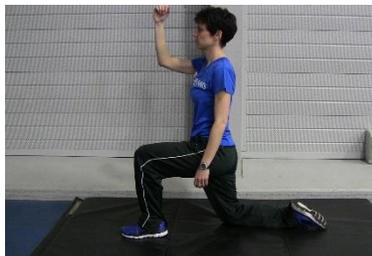


Front of Hip/Top of Thigh

In order to stretch the front of the hip of the back leg, one must simply lunge forward by bending the front knee (pictured). A gentle stretch should be felt at the front of the hip. In order to intensify the stretch, the player may reach both arms overhead and back with a slight back bend (not pictured).

Hamstrings

For the hamstrings (back of the thigh), the front leg can be straightened from the 90-90 position so that the heel of the front foot is on the ground and the toe of the front foot is pointing skyward. With the front leg straight, the player now “folds” forward over the leg reaching to touch the toe if possible. Note that stretching with the leg straight and stretching with the leg slightly bent will focus the stretch to different parts of the muscle.



Trunk/Hip

The sides of the torso and the hips can be stretched by twisting from the 90-90 position. With the left leg forward, we will use the right arm to stretch. If the right leg is forward we use the left arm.

Bring the right arm to the outside of the left knee. The palm of the right hand should be open and facing skyward. From that position, make a fist with the left hand, and place the fist made by the left hand into the open palm of the right. With palm inside of fist, push gently down on the palm with the fist until you feel a tension/stretching in the outside of the left hip and lower torso. Most likely the stretch will predominantly be felt in the hip.

Stretching the Quadriceps

The quadriceps can be stretched from the 90-90 position; however, depending on the beginning level of flexibility of your players and/or their coordination level, it can be a bit difficult.



From the 90-90 position with the right leg forward (pictured), reach back and take the back (left) foot with the right hand. Place the left hand on the ground for added stability. The stretch can be intensified by gently pressing the left hip toward the ground.

Alternate Quadriceps Stretches

If the flexibility or coordination isn't quite there to allow your players to stretch their quads from the "90-90" posture, the same muscles can be stretched from either a lying or standing position.

Lying Quadriceps Stretch

If lying on the ground, the player should be on his or her side as shown, and take the top foot with the top hand. Care should be taken to bend only at the knee, keeping the hip in natural alignment as shown.

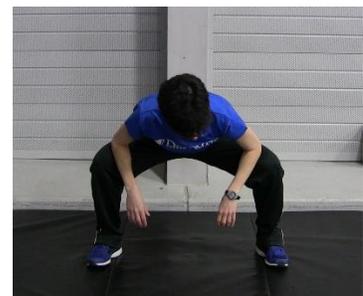


Standing Quadriceps Stretch

When the quadriceps are stretched from standing position, the stretch is essentially the same as it was while lying; however, care should be taken to make sure that the player's posture remains "natural" while executing the stretch. In other words, the back should be vertical rather than tilting to one side, and the hip should be positioned so that the leg comes straight down out of the joint parallel to the standing leg and not coming out on an angle.

Groin Stretch

In order to easily stretch the inside of the thigh, or groin, players should stand with their feet slightly wider than hip width distance with their toes pointing forward. From this position, they should fold forward, placing the forearms on the inside of the thighs just above the knees. After placing the forearms, lower the hips to a squatting position while gently pressing outward against the inner thigh with the forearms.





Seated Hip Stretch

Stretching the outside of the thighs and hips is incredibly important because of the role that the hips play in proper knee function. Because of the nature of the structures connecting the hip and knee, tightness or dysfunction in the hip muscles is a key cause of knee pain in athletes of all types.

In order to stretch the hip easily and effectively, have your players sit with their legs in front of them. Once seated, the players should bring leg toward their chest using both hands as shown. In order to stretch the left leg, the right hand must grip the outside of the left ankle while the left hand takes hold of the outside of the left knee. The left hand should gently pull the knee toward the chest while the right hand (holding the ankle) keeps the lower leg steady and the shin a close to parallel to the ground as possible. Stretching should be felt in the outside of the thigh. No pain should be felt in the knee, and the back should remain upright in a natural posture with the lower back straight.

