

"Stretching The Truth"

As a young runner growing up in the 7th grade, I can remember the 1st days of track practice each spring.

The track team.....(which was really just the football team and coach and a few skinny kids they allowed to stick around to run the events that none of them wanted to) would form a giant circle before every practice to stretch. "Makes you faster!!" our football-carrying track coach would scream as we bounced to the count to "feeling the burn" more intensely on each digit closer to 10.

I can even remember one of our sprinters pulling a groin-muscle injuring himself *before* practice.....**during** the stretch....one day. "See what happens when you're inflexible?!" our Lombardi barked.

All the way through high-school and college I continued to stretch before all workouts.

Then I learned better.

The "truth" about stretching actually runs contrary to what many of us were brought up to believe in our glory days. Good thing we were younger (& more pliable) then, huh?

Consider these points:

- **It's actually far more beneficial (& safer) to stretch AFTER your workouts than before them.** Warm muscles are more flexible than cold one's. So a stretch can be more complete and done more patiently. The words 'hurry' and 'stretch' never belong together. A good, patient warm-up should gradually stretch you enough PRIOR to any session.

Furthermore, Dr. Ed Burke (formerly of the US Cycling Federation Center for Science, Medicine and Technology) states that stretching in the post-exercise period also "helps to circulate nutrients to muscle tissues and to carry waste product away from the muscles".

- **Stretching should feel good.** If you're stretching 'til you feel the burn'.....you're on thin ice and are an injury waiting to happen. View your stretching as a reward to a workout completed.

I'm often asked "How long should I hold a particular stretch?" My reply is usually....."DON'T time it. Don't count. And don't have any predetermined length of time for which you stretch any muscle." Instead, practice *listening* to the body & it's muscles for them to tell **YOU** when enough is enough. That period of time should vary depending on the muscle you're stretching and the workout that the stretching proceeds. But the key is to treat it as a 'feel-good' practice where you **develop a sense of intuition** about what your body needs to facilitate recovery.

- **Never bounce.** I realize that most of us know this one by now so I may be 'preaching to the choir'. Bouncing is termed 'ballistic stretching' and can actually induce a muscular response that causes muscles to contract (shorten) and become even more tight. Sorry to

include the 'now-obvious', but no recommendation on stretching is complete without a word on this.

- **Stretch the muscles you've used.** I find that stretching the back, shoulders, chest and triceps **FEELS** the best after a swim session because I've just used those same muscles. Likewise, stretching the glutes, thighs, hamstrings, and calf muscles **FEELS** best after a run or bike workout.

You can develop your own stretch sequence & routine. Again, how you move from one to another is totally up to you **based on what feels best**. Just slow down and listen.

One of the best times to stretch is in the midst of a weight-training session. We'll have athletes stretch a muscle right after they've done a lift that fatigued that muscle. For instance, after a bench press lift..... you can stretch your chest, shoulders, and triceps. After a leg-press lift.....you should stretch your glutes and thighs.

- **Stretch alone.** Recently I read an article (by a very popular coach) who suggested that an athlete should stretch (while assisted by another) to a point of maximal stretch and then contract the muscle pushing back against the "helper".....sequencing this way several times.

As a coach, I cringe when I hear of partner-assisted stretching.

The **primary purpose of stretching** is: **to increase a range of motion for sport-specific movements (like swimming, cycling, and running) that allow the muscles to optimally function within that range.....thereby reducing the likelihood of injury in the process.**

I've had as many people injured due to 'partner-assisted stretching' as I have because they were inflexible in the first place. Stretching, by nature, has a very high "return" on the 5-6 minutes you 'invest' in it after each workout. Adding a mate to the process means always having to have a partner available to stretch with (which will lead to inconsistency) and adding an element of risk to our 'return-on-investment' equation.

- **Use the 5 to 6 minute rule.** If a stretching session begins to last longer than 6minutes, it's less likely to be viewed as a 'reward'..... and more likely to be seen as, yet, another workout.

Keep it short and to the point. Stretch muscles **groups** (rather than individual muscles) as often as possible. After a run or ride, you should have about 4 basic stretches that you sequence through. After a swim, you should have a separate 4 stretches. **When a sequence goes longer than 5 to 6 minutes.....it's not very likely that you'll repeat it after every workout.** And consistency is the key to it all.

- **Stretch shallow.** Once I had an athlete e-mail me distressed because she couldn't touch her toes.....like her training partners (of course). I asked her, "How often do you touch your toes in a race?"

Remember that our goal with stretching is to increase flexibility **WITHIN** the range-of-motion for the event we're preparing for. Now a gymnast should be able to touch their toes.



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But how many gymnast-coaches suggest that *their* athletes do 10mile runs off the bike? Zero. The run to the pommel-horse just isn't *THAT* long. It's not 'sport specific', right?

Well, neither is the need to be hyper-flexible for a triathlete.

Once you can stretch past the point of the range-of-motion that approaches what you'll actually use in an event, the benefits cease while the risk begins to climb.

So how far do you go? Again, use/develop an 'intuition' for what **FEELS** good.....**and then stop**. With time, you'll find that what 'feels good' IS a deeper range that you can safely stretch.

One final note: Does stretching actually INCREASE speed, strength, or endurance? In my opinion, the answer is "NO".

But it **DOES** increase the economy and consistency (through greater '**ease of movement**' and '**injury prevention**') of all 3 of those aspects of your training and racing.

Besides, it feels good.