



FITNESS TRAINING: How much and how hard?

By Jeremy Boone &
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Here are answers to frequent questions concerning fitness training for soccer.

Q When is it appropriate to begin formal speed training?

A A common mistake many coaches make when beginning formal speed training is to prepare their players for a track meet and not for the game of soccer. Speed training for soccer should always have a game-like emphasis. Typically, younger players between the ages of 7-9 should focus on free play. Variations of games such as tag are a wonderful way to work on speed and improve gross motor skills. Coaching considerations prior to implementing any type of formal training include the ability of the player to handle formal instruction and the player's physical maturity level. Starting at an early age, soccer technique should be developed concurrent with speed training. Once these skills have been mastered, players need to learn to distribute their efforts relative to the technical and tactical demands of the game, incorporating short explosive bursts with varied changes of direction.

Q Should I include distance running in training sessions to improve my team's endurance?

A Practical experience and research have shown that slow steady distance running detracts from speed and explosiveness. It's the 88th minute of the game and the score is 1 to 1. Your players should not only be able to run, but continue to run fast. This is accomplished by incorporating fartleks and interval runs into your training. For example, have your players perform a 30/30 run. This is a 30-second jog followed by a 30-second run at 70% of maximal effort. Start with a 10-minute run and work up to 18 minutes. Carefully

consider the conditioning that also occurs in small-sided games. This can be manipulated by changing variables such as the number of players, size of field, duration of play, ball supply and touch restriction. Unfortunately having only two or three practices per week is insufficient to get your players fit. Additional fitness work that is relative to the demands of soccer and properly planned into the overall training cycle will help to ensure a fitter and faster team.

Q When is it appropriate to begin formal strength training for a young player?

A Strength is one of the biggest deficiencies in players we work with at all levels of soccer. As with speed training, the athlete's emotional development and level of physical maturity are important in determining if the athlete can learn the routines and handle formal training. Although research has shown that pre-pubescent athletes may benefit from weight training, heavy loading of the spine is not recommended until after puberty. A key principle to strength training found in the Lower Extremity Prevention Program* is the player has to be able to handle his or her own body weight before adding external resistance. This can be accomplished by incorporating pushups, pull-ups, body weight lunges, and body weight squats into your program. Various medicine ball exercises as well as hopping and jumping games will also help to strengthen the tendons and ligaments further helping to prevent injury and establishing a solid strength base.

Q How can I include all of the soccer fitness activities within a normal practice?

A Integrate each component throughout the entire practice. It all starts with a proper warm-up. This is the time to work on balance, coordination, speed work and high quality touches on the ball. The

objective is to work up to game effort speed, therefore, warm-up to play, don't play to warm-up. From this point on the entire practice should mimic the game. This requires a well thought out training plan that flows from one component to the next with a smooth transition. For example, when performing team drills, the length of the lines affects the work to rest ratio. Players should never stand around for more than 30-40 seconds at a time. Transition right into a small-sided game after finishing the last team drill. We look at the whole practice as a water break. Have your players bring their own water bottle so that whenever they need a break, they quickly take it and get immediately back into practice.

Q What can I do to help prevent fatigue when my team plays two games in one day?

A Your players are only as good as their ability to recover. Factors such as hydration and a pre- and post-game nutrition plan are important. Be aware of environmental conditions such as altitude changes, time zone changes and the weather. The warm-up before the first game will be more extensive, while the warm-up before the second game should be much shorter in duration. Many teams will go through a long warm-up before their second game and end up coming out flat. This may be attributed to the players becoming fatigued from the long second warm-up. Include a cool down after each game lasting around 10-15 minutes, incorporating light jogging and dynamic flexibility. End the cool down with a short static stretching routine to help the muscles return to resting length. ⚽

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