**A New Twist on Warm-ups and Stretching.**

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You and your squad have heard it many times, “*stretching is important and prevents injuries*”. So I don’t even need to mention that, right? Let’s think about a whole new outlook on your warm up, pre-practice activities, and a way to stretch that will help improve skills (and yes, prevent injuries as well) As I travel from state to state and team to team, I observe most squads starting their practices by sitting in a disorganized mass on mats doing some stretching, mostly of mouth muscles. The coach gathers up some loose ends until the chatter gets so loud the coach knows he/she better start something productive. Two cheerleaders walk in late, plop down on a mat and begin their own stretching. Is this how **you** start practice? Be honest…

Now don’t get me wrong, there can be some very good stretching of muscles going on with that style. Some very mature teams can handle that lack of an organized routine. But let’s take a look at a new way you might start your practice. One that has worked very well for me.

Think: Trained Athletes start with some type of warm up, such as a mile run. Yes, I said it, a **MILE** run. Go out to your track and have your team run four laps. You can start the year off with less than the mile and work up to the four laps. Start with 2 laps the first week and add a lap each week after. If cheerleaders want to be treated and gain the respect of athletes they need to train as such. The benefits of the mile run are huge. Not only will your cheerleaders be in far better shape but the other sports teams and administration will quickly take note of their athletic practices. Your team’s reputation is guaranteed to change. Yes, your team will complain at first, however, after your first year of this routine they will come back and thank you. I highly encourage you to run or even just walk some laps with them. They have no room to complain if you are out there working up a sweat right next to them.

After your run, allow some time to get a drink, cool down and catch your breath. While doing so, assign each squad member a partner. There are dozens of ways to do this. (Another About.com article to come) The is that each day they stretch with someone new. I recommend stretching with a partner in a formation with a pair of cheerleaders leading stretching. We all need to be pushed at times to increase skills. Stretching is no different. By increasing flexibility your team’s jumps will be far better, tumbling will be cleaner and flyers’ body positions will score more points. Oh yah and there will be fewer injuries.

Partner stretching can be as simple as one cheerleader sitting down in a straddle with their partner applying a safe but firm amount of downward pressure on their partner’s shoulders. The “helper” partner encourages the stretching partner to maintain form and push their limits. Create a list of the stretches you want your team to perform each day. The team will do these stretches twice, one time for each cheerleader. You might think this will take twice as long but once your system is set in place it will go very quickly.

I would also like to introduce to you PNF stretching. PNF stands for Proprioceptive Neuromuscular Facilitation. PNF is a more advanced form of flexibility training that involves both the stretching and contracting of the muscle group being targeted. A great starter PNF stretch can be the traditional “butterfly” stretch with a partner. The stretching cheerleader performs a traditional butterfly stretch. The partner, stationed behind him or her, will place their Have the stretching partner push back up and the helper resists this force. Hold this for a count of ten. Then relax and allow the helper to push back down. Repeat for a total of three times. PNF stretching is a way to increase muscle strength and flexibility. More information on PNF stretching can be found on the web. PNF stretching can be used in all of your typical stretches. Try it, it works!

Now let’s address those two girls who came in late and just plopped down and started stretching. If you create a definite start to your practices it will very obvious to anyone arriving tardy that they are in fact, late. Having a more organized start to your practices will help reduce tardy cheerleaders. When I coached high school cheerleading this change in my practices was very effective. Try it and let me know how it works for you. This is also very helpful for those youth programs that practice outside. Mom or Dad drops off their son or daughter late. If they look out onto the practice field and just see the squad sitting there it does not look like practice has started. But if the squad is in a formation and all stretching in sync then it is very obvious they are late.

I encourage you to take a look at the first 15 minutes of your practice. How much are those 15 minutes adding to your skill sets? Often coaches will come to me and tell me they don’t have time to run a mile and do these things. My response is you don’t have time not to. Having a good start to a practice sets the tone for not only that day but for the season. Also, having more athletic cheerleaders will make a major difference on both the sideline and the competition floor.

So remember: start with a good athletic warm up, I recommend a mile run. Follow your warm up with partner stretching in formation lead be team members. And lastly try PNF stretching, it is very effective and can be a great new thing addition to your already successful program. Best of luck coaches, and remember we coaches expect our cheerleader’s skills to go up, but we need ours to go up too.