

# A few thoughts on warming up

Coach Bernard shares his observations.

Many of us do the same warm up before every formal training session, to the extent that we could do it in our sleep (and some people do seem to have dozed off at times). The problem is that we might still do the same old stuff when in fact we could or indeed should be doing something a bit more specific. For example I've been surprised to see experienced athletes doing a typical pre-training warm up prior to a race. There have also been quite a few items on Ucoach recently about variations in warm up, and these two things together have prompted me to put down these few thoughts.

## Why do we warm up?

Most people will be familiar with the physical side of warming up – increasing heart and ventilation rates (blood flow goes up, breathing becoming deeper and faster), raising temperature and so loosening up muscles and joints (via improved elasticity). The mental side is however also important, getting ourselves ready for the hard work that is to come.

## What might we do and why?

Here I am thinking of my side of the business, ie endurance athletes. We start off with some gentle jogging and follow it with a series of dynamic mobility exercises, covering arms, shoulders and torso as well as hips and legs. We'd do something like this no matter what was to follow. It's what comes next where there might be a few variations.

Prior to an endurance running session we'd follow the mobility with a set of drills. Some people spend all night doing these, possibly working on the basis that the dafter they look the more good it must be doing them. My view is that any drill must have a specific purpose, relevant to the event or session you are about to do, and for an endurance running session in our group that means working mostly on hip mobility and strength in the ankles (via for example

high skips) and gluteal muscles (mainly via lunges). Lunges are especially important because we don't actually work our glutes that hard simply by running. These drills are pretty demanding and they are really a lead in to the hard bit of the session. It's because they are demanding that I don't recommend them as part of a prerace warm up.

We'd do this simple set of drills prior to pretty much any training session. However, there are times when it is well worth adding in something extra. If for example you are about to do a whole-body circuit-type session, involving waving med balls about, then some further specific drills are well worth it. Endurance athletes need to be able to run fast when tired, and so in many cases fast stuff comes at the end when we are already fully tuned up. However, sessions where we are going straight into short fast stuff need something different. Here I've borrowed an idea from Clyde Hart, former coach to Michael Johnson and a load of other sprinters in the USA. He always gets his guys to finish warming up with 3 or 4 very fast runs over 50m or so. The idea is that they are then mentally tuned in to run fast as soon as the hard bit of the session kicks off. It seemed to me that this was even more important for distance runners. We've tried it and it seems to work, so we're sticking with it.

The prerace warm up is something else, and here the mental aspect is especially important. So instead of a load of pretty demanding drills some simple strides (flats to start with, then into spikes) have been the order of the day for many years (it's a bit late to strengthen your glutes at this point). It's still my preferred option in most cases. Recently however an idea now known as high-intensity warm up (HIWU) has been gaining in popularity. It's an example of an idea that an athlete (Hicham El Gerrouj to be precise, and since he's a world record holder and multi-gold medallist you tend to take notice) came up with some years back and which since has been studied by sports scientists. The idea is that you do a fast run over 200 or 300m between 20 and 40 min or so before you race. It's rooted in the observation that when we do a session of fairly short reps we often feel better on the second run than the first, and the sports science indicates that this is because your oxygen

transport system is kick started by the fast run in warm up and is then operating more efficiently earlier in your race. That's important if you are racing over 800, 1500 or 3000, less so in longer events when the start is not so quick.

Since the effect works for 20 – 40 min, there are obvious attractions for athletes going through call rooms etc before getting out on the track just a few minutes before a major championship race. I've seen Hannah England do it (a seasoned athlete in her mid-20s), and it obviously works for her, and I've seen other athletes of the same level stick with the conventional strides over 60 – 70m. Georgia (in her mid-teens and with 3-4 years of training background) tried it at a minor race in the run-up to the English Schools and didn't notice any difference. We've therefore parked the idea for a while yet – just as well because there wasn't space to do it at the ESAA championships anyway. All this just shows that what works for one may not work for another, and also that it's not a good idea to be too hardwired into a routine because you may not be able to do it just before the biggest race of the year.

So no matter how often you've warmed up in the past, please don't just go on autopilot – if you do you risk not doing the mobility or drills properly in any case. Think about what you are about to do, and then keep what you do relevant to the job in hand.

**Bernard Wilkins**