

Winning The Warm Up – Winning the Game
By Neil Hull - Director of Development Players Academy of Soccer Skills

Be concerned with your preparation, not theirs: Your execution, not theirs: Your effort and desire, not theirs. Don't worry about them, let them worry about you! (NSCAA Convention 2017).
Process or Journey, two metaphoric words in today's coaching vocabulary. On game day, or training nights, what dictates the start line, the beginning of the process?

My mission through this article is to stimulate or make you, as a coach, reinforce or adapt your actions: Winning the warm up is the key to defining a player centered environment of success in preparation for the game or training session.

According to Simon Sinek "It's not what we do, it's why we do it"; the purpose or reason. Why should we place so much emphasis on the warm up?

Maybe we need to change the narrative, classing the 'warm up' as the 'Pre game'

Control what you can control! Once the whistle blows the game becomes the players'.

How often have we left a game feeling like we played down, started slow, performed with a negative attitude, struggled in a competitive environment dictated by the opposition or just did not turn up ready to play? How can we change these psychological outcomes?

Return to the source, where we plan for the 'win', preparing the 'pre game mind' on game day, through the power of a positive warm up: Mind Body & Goal.

My idea, change the outcome of winning from a score line product to a process of 3 halves (I know math Jedi's out there, it just sounded better when writing!). Planning to implement a mindset of success, supported through environmentally structured activities, reducing a players' and or the teams' anxiety. Our ultimate objective should be to increasing performance and collective confidence. Creating an atmosphere of consistency, trust and the knowledge that you have prepared yourself and your team for the competition in what ever form it arrives – self & team belief. As Beswick states "Self belief is the knowledge that your preparation is complete".

Mind. – Make them feel valuable and of value

Writing this I understand some are going to accept, some are going to question; openly, I would like to think many will just 'take', after all sharing is caring!

What is our 'mind purpose' we wish to take from the warm up? Coaches are going to comment 'I want my team to be relaxed, stress free, not hyped up' that might be Coach B. Marley's philosophy, but through the youth game, I would like mine intrinsically fully prepared. All too often, any given game day we witness players going through different random routines, being taught technical or tactical adaptations for the first time in the warm up. Coaches utilize the warm up as an additional training session; *are you guilty of this?*

Instead of its true designation, preparation, mental game preparation. The team does not



get a second chance to make a first impression. Sun Tzu comments ‘..the battle should be won before the first bullet is fired’. *What thoughts do you process watching the opposition warm up, assessing their professionalism, leadership or readiness?*

The mind educates the body. Positive preparation going into the game provides a focus for both players and coaches. The direction of this focus supports the creation of positive self-confidence, leading, contagiously, to team confidence. As a coach, when you set an expectancy level from your players you gain a higher outcome (Dorrance). Question your players: *What will/does confidence feels like after a good warm up?* Once we take this direction, or other channels of direct focus, we can support preparation with a consistent, known, functional progressive process. A process where our players can work their way through, and beyond nervousness, breaking a mental sweat as well as a physical won. Research proves routines and predictability, pre game, help players build confidence and reduce **anxiety**. Knowing what to expect diminishes a lot of negative behaviors. (Dewazian).

These expectations can be as simple as:

Who is coaching the game?

Location of the game?

Playing Color?

Starting line up?

What to do if you arrive late?

Systems, responsibilities, set pieces, captains, weather, playing surface, etc.

All these can be taken care of pre game, thus controlling what we can control and reducing player’s nerves, stress and **anxiety** from the line up. Allowing the coach to focus on the task and not the distractions. Performance is driven by attitude; lets do our best for our players and make it a positive, planned and prepared attitude.

The Body. - The science behind the warm up

The physical purpose behind the warm up is well documented; I would like to take it a little deeper, down to its science, its sports specific science. In areas this might get a little hormonal! So be prepared!!

Going from simple to complex we all understand the warm up prepares our mind and muscles for the upcoming challenges of the game. The heart rate is raised; blood flow and oxygen transfer systems become stronger and more efficient. (We can go into training zones etc., but this is another topic, another day!)

During this initial ignition activity our plan would be for the body to increase the production of positive hormones (Testosterone: Speed, Power, Strength & Dopamine: Happiness, Pleasure & Motivation) and decreases secretion of the negative hormones (Cortisol: Anxiety, Stress, Nerves)

This is an area of our coaching craft we can improve with an understanding smile.

Understanding, the ‘Why’ will support in the ‘How’ and the ‘What’ in relation to our internal controls.

Two hormones, ‘Cortisol’ and ‘Testosterone’, are often used as indicators to staleness or fitness, anxiety or performance, flight or fight. These hormones support either anabolic (Testosterone; building) or catabolic (Cortisol; breaking down)



properties. Their production can quantitatively affect both the physical and mental performance of athletes. Short-term elevations in testosterone have proven very advantageous in the preparation of team sport athletes, especially where teammates coordinate their individual efforts towards a shared goal of defeating the opposition. (Castol, Elliot, Edwards).

When warm ups mirror the intensity of the first ten minutes of the game, research has proven, there is a direct correlation in the reduction of cortisol (stress) and the production of testosterone (performance). Short term concentrated elevations in testosterone are likely to be advantageous for mental and physical performance when under pressure. Thus, supporting the importance and implementation of a planned, competitively progressive physical and mental warm up. Science proves testosterone and cortisol are produced against each other on a sliding scale: T up - C down. Testosterone levels are also increased through positive social interaction with coaches, teammates and parents (the power of the positive drive to the game!) The raise in these levels lead towards high dominance, motivation and power. (ICCC, effects of warm ups).

How many of our teams start slow, strive for intrinsic motivation or struggle with being competitive in the first ten minutes of a game? Ever thought it might be your problem, your warm up. No it can't be me, I am a great coach!

Goal. – Create the future in advance.

Physical preparation supports speed, agility, power, balance and coordination, culminating in mobility, movement and motivation. A lot to fit in, with out planning your game day in advance! The choice of interjecting dynamic flexibility over static stretching could also be position specific, as could the style of physical warm up, GK vs. Field players? By developing the warm up through a progressive timeline, transferring from coach ownership to the team, delegating leadership. Incrementally elevating intensity focuses on injury prevention during the warm up and through the initial stages of the game. Gradually raising the body temperature and blood flow to the major muscle groups, we increase the core and specific muscle temperature, elevating their efficiency. Understandably an increase in blood flow releases oxygen more readily at a higher temperature; more blood flow and oxygen leads to a better performance. If we can support and develop these physiological actions, building the intensity, we can create a performance optimization level of ultimate impact, at the whistle.

“When a player does not know what to expect they show signs of anxiety and stress. Knowing what to expect diminishes a lot of negative reaction behaviors” Karl Dewazian DoC Calif. YSA

Experts state routines and predictability, pre game, helps players with confidence and self-belief supporting a reduction in stress levels. Modern day coaches strive for players to perform for the full period of the game, even to the point of “Fergy” time. By planning for the warm up to be part of the game plan, it supports all the players; starters and game changers.

As the coach steps back, he or she creates an observation effect, watching his players’ actions and body language, selecting those whom are physically, mentally and emotionally ready to play.



Research supports when your warm up is focused and progressive you will set an expectancy from your players, gaining a higher outcome. (Cook)

Creates an image of positive self-confidence in preparation for the whistle.

As players turn up to the game, welcome them positively. This small action of kindness can release oxytocin, the chemical of enjoyment, confidence and relationships. Allow players to talk with their team mates as they are entering the initial stages low intensity stages of their warm up, the warm up to the warm up! Plan and allow them this time. (Anson Dorrance)

Communication. – Affirmation and information

Our language and its use has an influence on the player's confidence and their positive climb to be 'whistle ready'. Train your team to respond to your positive body language, and not your voice. It is not how it is said; it's how it's heard! (Sinek): Men and women hear differently. If we are harsh or we blame players for issues out of their control, *how can we ever lead or inspire? By our own example? All performance is driven by attitude, do you sell the example for a positive or negative performance?*

Good: "I have noticed that you don't get upset so easily when things go wrong. Your team mates see this, it's really helping out the team a lot."

Trouble: "We are counting on you to give us your best- we're depending on you today- you have to do it, there's no one else, your playing time depends on it"

Good: "Thanks for playing so competitively in the second half of last weeks game, it really changed the outcome, let's build on that through today's game"

Trouble: "You have to stick in harder, stop giving up, don't be weak – you are not as aggressive as you should be, try playing more like"

Preparing, professionally, teaches the skills to outperform the opposition at the first whistle blast. To days preparation will lead to tomorrow's performance. After all, if you play stupid games you will win a stupid prize. The responsibility is on you as a coach, don't complain or blame after a game:

You were not ready!

You were soft from the start!

We did not come to play.

The opposition was faster in the first ten minutes etc. etc.

If this is your analysis of your game, The prize is yours!!

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