

Pre-Season Training – A Load of Balls?

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The World Cup is over – what a tournament it was – and for most footballers, grassroots to professional, this signals the beginning of the end for the holidays, and the return to pre-season training. Any of us who have ever played with a team at any level have no doubt been there – the dreaded return to training when it is laid bare who has kept themselves fit and who’s had a few too many cakes/pints, age-appropriate! The dreaded sessions of run-till-you-drop slogging often see many-a-vomit and are incredibly tough.

However, many clubs and coaches across the game are realising that there could be a different, better way to do this. If the aim of this before-competition training is to regain fitness, increase sharpness and freshness and hone physical, tactical and mental skills, it seems that there are more effective ways of achieving these than hill-running (who’d have thought it?!)



Of course, we all know that a good pre-season preparation can set positive habits in motion and help lead to a successful season. Gary Gowers described attempting to play important competitive games without any (or even with poor) pre-season training [and expecting any sort of success] would be like “attempting the London Marathon based on two gentle jogs through Hyde Park.”

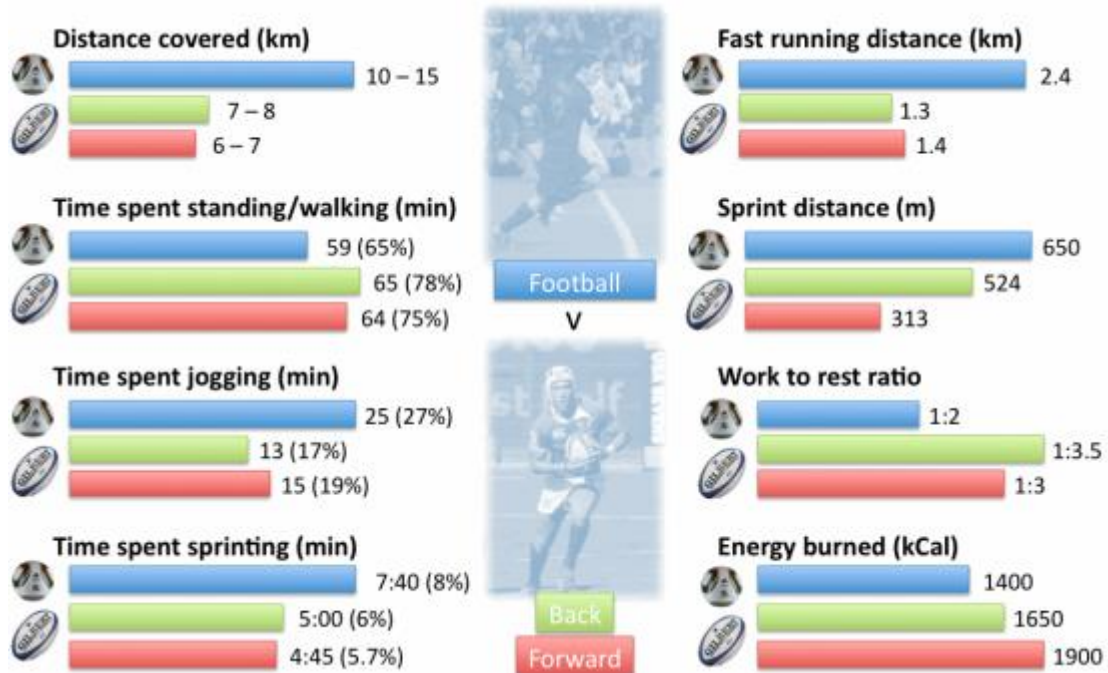
It would make sense, therefore, that to complete a marathon race, one would first do sufficient, relevant and training – ***which might even include running a marathon before the big day.*** It is therefore ridiculous that some coaches still believe that long, gruelling and mono-paced runs are the best preparation for an upcoming season of football matches. A game of football, regardless of position, is not played at the same pace for 90 minutes. Football is a game of explosive intervals and periods of recovery, with and without the ball. Surely the best way to prepare would be to attempt to replicate these conditions in your training? Small-sided Games (SSGs) and High-Intensity Interval Training (HIIT) are two ways this can be achieved. *[Note: SSGs are a form of high-intensity exercise.]* SSGs are advocated by National Governing Bodies (NGBs) across many sports for young players’ development, and the increased pace, movement and time engaging with the ball can also benefit older players to help regain their touch and fitness. A study in Sweden which featured in an issue of FourFourTwo magazine appeared to show that 3vs3 games are the best for a high-intensity and to remain ‘football-fit,’ both in pre-season and throughout the year.



HIIT replicates – to some extent – the principles of the conditions of a football match: working hard for, say, 30 seconds and then taking an active rest for recovery (still working but at a much lower intensity.) HIIT is often done on exercise spin bikes, where *Tabata* Training (20 seconds on, 10 off) originated, or using exercises such as high-knee raises. Despite this, it can easily be applied to a football setting using short passing in pairs, or Coerver-esque ball mastery exercises such as toe-taps and stopovers with a focus on both quality and high intensity.

It should be noted, however, that while HIIT has been proven to be excellent for fat-loss in obese patients despite some reservations, anyone who has not trained nor ate well over a holiday period should exercise some caution when attempting HIIT. Doing short and sharp bursts of exercise have been proven to help with aerobic and anaerobic endurance as well as replicating the stop-start nature of a game. Yes, players spend a long time jogging throughout the course of a match, but this is never done in one sitting. Players stand, walk,

jog and sprint repeatedly all across a game. (See graphic below- also interesting to have a comparison with our Rugby friends.)



One possible question arising from this would be that if SSGs are more intense than full 11-a-side matches, then perhaps going straight into smaller games may actually increase the risk of injury? Perhaps it is best to begin with light session before soon going into 11v11 friendlies in pre-season and then including SSGs matches into sessions?

I began to realise I was near the end of my tether with my own playing 'career' when I had a 'coach' who said:

"No, no friendlies. Your first match of the season will be your first league game. Before that, you have to run and you have to be fit."

Safe to say we have a poor year. The earlier quote above from Rui Faria (long-term assistant to Jose Mourinho) highlights the importance of doing a football-specific programme of work. This also applies to playing games. It is a frequent occurrence that during the regular season a player will get injured, return to training but still be a few weeks from playing again due to a "lack of match sharpness." Why not help all your players build a pre-season base of match sharpness by arranging some friendlies? Matches can still work your players hard but it is much easier, mentally, to persevere through the last 10 minutes of a match as opposed to a final few hill sprints or such like. Different opposition can benefit your team in different ways, for example playing a better team who maintain possession well can help your players as they will have to work very hard to maintain defensive shape. On the other hand, playing a side of equal ability can create an open and fast-paced match. Friendlies can also help your players build up tactical awareness, understanding and familiarity – another thing which cannot be achieved through running, running and more running.



Perhaps this kid's coach has just sent the team for another 6 laps, now that they've finished their press-ups?)

One very important part of achieving a smooth pre-season is encouraging players to take some responsibility in the off-season break and keep themselves in shape. If a player is serious about their football, it is important that they are disciplined in terms of their exercise **and** their nutrition. It is IMPOSSIBLE to out-train a bad diet (believe me, I've tried!) Players, especially grassroots players around the age of 16, cannot necessarily be expected to give up their social life during the holidays but regular exercise and a sensible diet (protein to help retain muscle mass, lower carbohydrates if not exercising, weight training to maintain strength, plenty of water if exercising on a hot day, for example) along with enough sleep can make a huge difference when it comes to returning to regular training.

Of course, none of this is to say that strength and conditioning/fitness exercises don't have their place in modern football coaching. However, professional teams with improved staff, facilities and more time on their hands will see more of a benefit by applying this in an elite

sports setting as opposed to a grassroots or youth team. The images below are taken from Ajax's academy, where players are encouraged to enjoy building their physical literacy through fun challenges.



But remember, professionals and academies have much more contact time than most coaches across the world get with their players. If you have 3 hours of training per week then your players spend just **0.59%** of their time at training – do you really want to spend this doing incessant running, or can you think of something better with which to fill that time?

[Hint: it's round and is (literally) the name of the game.]



Many elite clubs are also turning to the benefits of multi-sports sessions for fitness and skills – just this week Everton posted an advert for a coach to deliver a variety of different and non-football activities at their academy.

A point to note is that at no point would I ever say that fitness work is totally be completely eradicated and discouraged from sessions. As discussed in Matt Whitehouse's recent TWA podcast with Tony Taylor, coaches seen even simply sending their players on a lap of the pitch can be quickly labelled as 'old-school' or 'dinosaurs.' Many coaches at grassroots level (and above) have other teams training right up until their own let starts – perhaps the 30 seconds of time a lap takes gives them a vitally important small window to get cones quickly in places for the session. With physical literacy levels decreasing and obesity on the rise – particularly in the UK – it is an absolute necessity that coaches take some responsibility for the physical well-being of their players.

6 Top Tips for a Successful Pre-Season:

1. **Do plenty of ball work** – players are less likely to become as fatigued when a ball is present to (effectively) distract them. First touch and technique also needed to be zoned in again after a possible period of inactivity.
2. **Ditch the long runs.** Sessions which replicate the game environment (short,sharp, stop-start, chaotic, physical) will prove best and most effective.
3. **Encourage players to take the initiative on their own.** With effective nutrition, rest and exercise in the off-season then pre-season training can be much less of a struggle than before.
4. **Play friendlies.** Match practice can be vitally important for relative fitness as well as helping with other factors which may otherwise have only become apparent after the start of the league season.
5. **Try to challenge every player as an individual.** No two persons will have the exact same requirements or demands in terms of fitness and their training. If a player is super-fit then don't waste time working on something which is so obviously a strength – give him extra individual conditions to improve his areas that need developed. Similarly, if a player returns from summer in a poor condition – break him in gently. Don't unrealistically expect him to cope with the same work that our aforementioned hyper-athlete can do. Vary intensity, time and rest demands to tailor to the needs of different players. It is better to take the time to get this right than risk long-term injury.
6. **Get on Twitter!** Ask questions, expand your knowledge, read more articles and view session plans. Help your players become the best they can be by trying to become that best that you can be. Follow @CoachingFamily and then go from there.

Thank you for reading. Feel free to get in touch with me, either through Twitter (@coachchrismcl,) my blog (www.coachchrismclaughlin.wordpress.com) or through e-mail (chrismclaughlin1@live.co.uk)

Reference list below.

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[1v1 to 4v4 - Small Sided Game](#)

[3 Most common mistakes first time soccer coaches make and how to avoid them](#)

[PRE-SEASON TRAINING FOR YOUNG PLAYERS | KEEP THE BALL](#)

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