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PEAKS COACHING GROUP

Name of Article: A Comprehensive Approach to Flexibility Training

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In the initial installment of this training column, we introduced the idea of a comprehensive approach to strength & conditioning. We went on to explain that this approach was made up of a specific periodization that analyzed the crucial components that need to be touched upon in the strength & conditioning program and addressed them accordingly. The motivation behind that article was to introduce a new way of thinking about strength & conditioning for the endurance athlete and get the reader interested in what to do and how to go about doing it. Well, that is exactly what this column will be devoted to from here forward, and this month we will be addressing the Flexibility aspect of the program.

Hopefully, you have taken a few weeks off to allow your body to rest and recover from the rigors of a long and demanding season. This period is necessary for the mind as well as the body and will serve as a crucial component to the foundation of your training program for next year. During this time, the muscles, tendons and ligaments as well as the nervous system get a chance to truly rest and get ready to be stressed again. Neglecting this part of the process will only lead to burn out, less than optimal results or even injury.

However, if you have taken some time off, then you are probably ready or have already started doing some cross training to start building your base and work on fundamentals. How much time you spend in each of these phases is ultimately up to your annual training plan and when you need to be ready to race again. The time frames that I will suggest throughout this series are optimal, but will allow some flexibility (pun intended) for you to accommodate your own schedule. Just be smart in shifting these time frames, making sure to spend at least the minimum time suggested in each phase to benefit maximally and prevent injury. Again, I highly recommend patience, as those who follow a truly periodized approach and give themselves the maximal time to adapt before moving on to the next phase tend to gain the most and peak the highest. Many of us want to move quickly, and in training, as in many things in life, speed is not always our friend. The point to intelligent training is to have a purpose for what you are doing. By matching the mode of training with the goal, and employing a variety of modalities in your training arsenal, you will achieve your objectives more effectively and succinctly than by doing the same thing all of the time without a purpose.

This being said, depending on the time the athlete has available in their annual plan and their specific needs (i.e. flexibility, injury rehabilitation, early races, etc.) I start them with 2-4 weeks of pure flexibility work. I have mentioned before, I believe in a comprehensive and holistic approach to training, and flexibility is no exception. This can be started while in transition and continue through the preparatory phase when they start doing some gym work. Flexibility training should

be included throughout the entire year, but a specific focus on flexibility should be incorporated for at least 4-8 weeks during the transition through the Flexibility & Stability Phase.

As with every thing I prescribe, I start my athletes with the simplest and easiest mode of flexibility training and work them up to the most challenging stuff later on the progression. For starters, I like to have them get a couple of massages in the transition time to help the muscles and nervous system recover. (Yes massage is a part of the recovery program and flexibility training. Aren't you glad?) We start by having them work in **Static Flexibility** exercises up to 5-7 x per week to start improving their specific isolated ranges of motion and loosening everything up. This involves taking a limb to it's end ROM and holding it there for 30-60 seconds while breathing deeply and consciously focusing on relaxing the musculature being stretched. Do not force your limbs into painful ranges of motion. If it hurts, back off slightly, and hold it where you start to feel a stretch. When muscles are forced into ranges of motion they are not ready for they contract, fighting the stretch, and thus defeating the purpose of stretching to begin with. Do not stretch when you aren't warmed up. Static stretching is best performed after a light 5-10 min cardio warm up of after easy cardio workouts of 3 hours or less. Do not stretch after workouts of 3 hours or more to avoid stretch injury that can happen due to the muscles being depleted or water and electrolytes. Wait until later in the day, once they have had time to return to homeostasis. Static flexibility can and should be incorporated throughout the entire season. Please see the accompanying diagrams for a few examples.



Next we start to add in some **Self Myofascial Release** Techniques. This is a technique used by Rolfers and massage therapists to loosen the fascia that surrounds our muscles. This fascia gets tight due to overuse patterns, injuries and poor posture over the years and causes stress, pain and faulty posture resulting in discomfort and impaired performance. Loosening this fascia helps the body (i.e. the bones, joints and muscles) to return to a normal, more optimal state, which reduces discomfort, pain and fatigue, improves performance and reduces the chances of injury. To do this yourself, simply get a foam roller from the gym or athletic supply store on the web (www.performbetter.com) or use a small, soft medicine ball. Lay gently, especially at first, on the areas of tightness and slowly roll along the lengthened musculature until some release or softening is felt (60 seconds minimum). Please work into this technique slowly as pain is the sign of areas that really need work and if they are not moved into gently and you can do more harm than good if you don't go slowly. Perform SMR 2-3 x per week after your static stretching routine or as a stand alone routine after easy cardio workouts. Some SMR examples include the following:



The next progression in the flexibility-training continuum is **Dynamic Flexibility**. Dynamic flexibility is a truly integrated approach to flexibility training in that it incorporates multiple muscles across multiple joints, in multiple ranges of motion. In laymen's terms, this means stretching the body in several ways at once in ways similar to how we move in sports and every day life. Some of these movements may look odd, and nothing like what you think you do on an every day basis, but due to the way in which they recruit and stretch many of the muscles in the lower back and hips, it is an extremely effective way to work on trouble areas for endurance athletes and teach proper movement techniques to help prevent injury and improve functional ROM. A good example of a dynamic flexibility exercise would be a moving Yoga posture. Others include a series of functional stretches designed specifically for sports movements. This can involve dynamic movements and postures similar to Yoga or moving through a series of movements designed to warm up the body for activity while working on active ranges of motion. Please see the following examples for a better idea of what we are talking about here.



Lastly, we then begin to incorporate the most advanced mode in our flexibility-training program, **Active Flexibility**. As we have all heard by now, research does not support the idea that static stretching improves performance or prevents injury. In fact, it has shown just the opposite, that static stretching prior to dynamic sports training actually slows muscular firing responses. Static stretching does help improve range of motion and incorporates myriad benefits, but performing an active or dynamic form of flexibility is much more effective in getting the body prepared for performance and injury prevention during activity. Active flexibility works by actively warming up the musculature responsible for the movement (agonists) while passively stretching the opposing musculature (antagonists). This is a great way to get prepared for a workout and can be included in the cardio warm up or immediately afterwards. I recommend only doing the area of the body that is to be worked out that day. For example, if you will be doing a core & upper body workout, then get in a light cardio warm up, and while warming up, take the upper body limbs through the active ranges of motion in a controlled tempo for 8-12 repetitions, holding the stretching for just a second before repeating each ROM. If doing legs, then perform some form running drills after a light cardio warm up to get the body loose and limber and get the nervous system activated and ready to work. The following are examples of dynamic warm up routines for get ready for strength and power work.



Well, I think I have given you enough grist for the mill this installment. Tune in two weeks when we will address the Stability component of the training program where we will cover stability exercises for the legs, core, & upper body and tell you how to put it all together! Until then, train smart, stay safe, and GO FOR IT!!!

*For sample exercises or a complete strength training program for endurance athletes, please check out Jeb's DVD, *The Next Level*, at www.endurofit.com. For strength training plans for triathletes, please visit www.trainingpeaks.com/jeb. And for all of your coaching needs, please visit Jeb and the coaches at *The Peaks Coaching Group* at www.peakscoachinggroup.com.*



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