

Who's Watching Warmups?

Injuries don't only occur when the game clock is running, which is why every athletic department must have a plan for supervising its teams' warmups.

By Dr. Richard P. Borkowski

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Last fall, I watched two local high school football teams warming up for a game. The position coaches instructed their players to begin the normal pregame drills, then walked over to their counterparts on the opposing team to talk.

A receiver crossed his side of the 50-yard line in an attempt to catch a long pass and ran into an opposing player. Their helmets collided and one player was paralyzed.

Would this incident not have happened if the warmup drill was supervised? If the coach was watching, would he have seen the potential problem and had the quarterback throw toward the goal line rather than midfield? We will never know, but it is certain the chance of injury would have been appreciably lowered if a coach had supervised the drill.

Coaches have a duty to lower the potential for injury. But they tend to neglect this duty during the pregame warmup, which may seem like a low-risk, routine event. They may be doing their own pregame warmup of communicating with opposing coaches and officials. Those excuses don't hold much weight, however, when an athlete is injured.

A coach lowers the chance of injury by being a good risk manager. This includes identifying risk, developing strategies to lower the potential of injuries, and monitoring the method.

IDENTIFY RISK

Each sport's warmup routine has its own protocols and traditions, which we tend not to think much about. That's why it's imperative for coaches to carefully consider their team's warmup and identify any risks.

For example, does the blaring music now commonplace during basketball warmups increase risk? Is the buffer space between players sufficient? When at an away contest (especially a new venue), will the team's usual home-court warmup still be safe? Do you need to communicate any potential hazards to the teams visiting your facility?

MAKE A PLAN

The goal of a warmup is to prepare athletes to be physically and mentally ready to play. Warmups increase body temperature, which permits muscles to both contract and relax faster, preventing injuries.

Warmup also give athletes a short period to practice their skills in order to perform well in a competitive environment.

Warmups should not try to do more than that. The mistake some coaches make is to construct a warmup routine that is too complicated, or one in which there are too many things going on at once.

In northern Pennsylvania, an assistant baseball coach wanted to give as many chances as he could to his outfielders. While the head coach hit grounders to the infield, the assistant hit flies to the outfielders from the third base coaching box. It's not surprising that the third baseman was struck in the head by a line drive off the bat of the assistant coach.

The key to keeping athletes safe during warmup is to have a plan that is organized to minimize the many risks in sports. It must be simple to implement and easily followed by athletes.

In ball sports, coaches need to keep balls going the same way and avoid sending them into the other team's area. For example, in lacrosse and soccer, make sure practice throws and kicks go from sideline to sideline. In volleyball and tennis, avoid having too many balls on the court at any one time.

Coaches should also have a plan for warming up athletes who are not competing when the initial whistle blows. Whether it's the third-string linebacker who won't enter the game until the last quarter or the heavyweight wrestler who will watch all of his teammates compete before he gets his turn, coaches need to make space for them to warm up on the sidelines.

SUPERVISE THE WARMUP

The easiest part of being a good risk manager is also the easiest to forget: supervising your athletes throughout the entire warmup. The football coaches in the initial example probably supervised the passing drill some of the time. Supervision, however, is not a "sometimes" event. Too often the absence of injuries during a particular activity leads to complacency. And complacency leads to increased risk.

When I coached wrestling, I would sometimes get strange looks from opposing coaches when I suggested we talk before warmups. If you have to communicate with others during the warmup, make sure you continue to observe your athletes by positioning yourself correctly.

By supervising, you will see risks. Even if you are a new coach, common sense will prevail. For example, during my evaluation of a baseball field and game as part of my consulting work, I watched the visiting team warm up on the infield while the home team was busy clearing wet spots near second and third base since it had rained that morning. The visiting team was soon asked to move after several home team players were almost hit by errant throws.

On bigger teams, assign your assistant coaches to specific tasks. In football, a coach should oversee each position warmup. For track and field, event coaches should supervise their groups. Coaches without assistants need to place themselves in the best position to scan the entire area.

Making sure no one gets hit by a ball, pierced by a javelin, or knocked down by a charging lineman during warmups is not rocket science. It is just common sense coaching. But it takes a commitment to identify risks, plan thoroughly, and supervise the squad throughout.

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