

The Ultimate Dynamic Warmup

By Bruce Kelley

I have to preface this article by mentioning what prompted me to write this article. I was listening to an interview with Martin Rooney. He is one of the best performance enhancement coaches in the world and works at the Parisi Performance Centers. In any event, he was talking about what his latest ideas on training were and one of the subjects was barefoot training. Specifically, how he incorporates it into his warmup routines.

This brought to mind how I used barefoot training with some of my athletes in the past and had gotten away from it. But now I am using it with as many clients as is feasible.

The thinking behind barefoot training is that it will help strengthen the muscles, tendons, and other connective tissues of the foot. The shoes we wear currently tend to inhibit the proper use of the foot in the guise of protection. But are we really protecting ourselves or setting ourselves up for biomechanical issues that start with the feet and create problems with our knees, hips, and lower legs? And what do you think is behind Nike's Free line of shoes? The promotions even mention run barefoot, so why not?

What are the benefits of barefoot training? I would suggest decreased chance of injury, increased performance, and it's fun. We train all other parts and movements of our bodies but we neglect what is perhaps the most fundamental and crucial: our foundation---the foot. High level track coaches do barefoot training, frequently in drills done in the sand. Martial artists do virtually all of their training barefoot. The kettlebell community advocates strongly doing their movements in barefeet. Physical therapists use barefoot exercises in rehabbing lower extremity injuries. I don't need a long-term research paper to tell me that it makes sense from a biomechanical and an injury prevention perspective.

I'm suggesting that you use barefoot training, at least in the beginning, in your dynamic warmup. It's a good way to integrate this training into an overall program without adding any more elements and time to your training program---i.e. it's efficient.

With my clients/athletes, I start very gradually in volume and intensity and build up both of those factors as they demonstrate they can tolerate the load. Initially, there may be a lot of DOMS in the lower extremities but that should diminish quickly. If it doesn't then you have to back off a bit or perhaps barefoot training is contraindicated for that particular client/athlete.

First, here are some caveats/guidelines for barefoot training. Make sure the surface is a "safe" one: clear of sharp objects, relatively even, and relatively flat. For this reason, grass surfaces are sometimes problematic. If you can find a good, clean, even grass surface you have found the ideal training surface. Also, concrete is not good because of the obvious impact issues. All weather tracks, basketball courts, tennis courts, and indoor racquet courts(squash/racquetball) make good surfaces. Also, remember to use progressions; don't start your athlete out with a 30 min. dynamic warmup and not expect them to be sore for a week. Start out with 5-10 minutes, see how they handle it, and go from there. You may want to have your athlete wear socks depending on the surface. I have found some surfaces can create blisters if socks aren't worn. Experience and experimentation will dictate how you handle the sock or no sock issue.

Following is a sample warmup routine I have used with my athletes but this is merely a guideline. It also isn't revolutionary but incorporates movements that many of you have used hundreds of times. The programming is limited only by your own imagination and creativity though common goals should be kept in mind: start with lower intensity movements, insist on proper mechanics and positions and increase intensity of movements as you go to more fully "warmup" the body and activate the CNS.

Sample barefoot warmup routine:

Toe walks- 2 x 20 yds.
Heel walks-2 x 20 yds.
March w/ knee hug- 2 x 20 yds.
Russian March-2 x 20 yds.
March w/ leg cradle- 2 x 20 yds.
Inchworm- 1 x 6-8
Lateral lunge- 1 x 8 ea.
Lunge w/ elbow to instep-1 x 6-8 ea.
Side shuffle w/ arm circles-1 x 20 yds. Ea.
Carioca-1 x 20 yds. Ea.
High knees-2 x 20 yds.
Butt kickers-2 x 20 yds.
"A" skips-2 x 20 yds.
Backwards skip-2 x 20 yds.
"B" skips-2 x 20 yds.
Power skips for distance-1 x 20 yds.
Power skips for height-1 x 20 yds.

This is a warmup that I have used with my athletes with good results: no injuries (at least not yet!), improved lower leg/foot strength, and the athletes enjoy. Keep in mind the training age and condition of your athletes and add or subtract from this basic template as you deem necessary. Start out trying such a barefoot warmup several times per week and if it's successful then you can increase the number of times you use it per week. Also, you may want to add more frontal plane and transverse plane movements depending on the demands of the sport of your athlete(s).

Good luck and let me know what you think. I hope you have as much success with this type of warmup as I have had using it with my athletes.