The Effect of Different Warm up Stretch Protocols on 20m-Sprint Performance in Trained Rugby Union Players

By

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(The numbers in brackets in the text refer to the list of references at the end of the paper – Ed.)

Abstract

The purpose of this study was to determine the effect of different static and dynamic stretch protocols on 20m sprint performance. Ninety-seven male rugby union players were randomly assigned to four groups; (i) passive static stretch (PSS) (n=28), (ii) active dynamic stretch (ADS) (n=22), (iii) active static stretch (ASS) (n=24) and (iv) static dynamic stretch (SDS) (n=23). All groups performed a standard 10min. jog warm-up, followed by two 20m sprints. The 20m sprints were then repeated after subjects performed different stretch protocols. The PSS and ASS groups had a significant increase in sprint time ($p \leq 0.05$), while the ADS group had a significant decrease in sprint time ($p \leq 0.05$). The decrease in sprint time, observed in the SDS group, was found to be non-significant ($p \geq 0.05$). The decrease in performance for the two static stretch groups was attributed to an increase in the musculotendinous units' (MTU) compliance, leading to a decrease in the MTU ability to store elastic energy in its eccentric phase. The reason why the ADS group improved performance is less clear, but could be linked to the rehearsal of specific movement patterns, which may help increase co-ordination of subsequent movement. It was concluded that static stretching as part of a warm up may decrease short sprint performance, while active dynamic stretching seems to increase 20m sprints performance.

Introduction

Traditionally, athletes have achieved peak performance goals through long-term structured training schedules. Investigations have observed a variety of methods for optimising training protocols, from increasing strength to improving aerobic endurance. However, until recently, little work has been done on one of the most fundamental parts of training, the stretch component of warm up.

The 'active' component of a warm-up, designed to increase core temperature, blood flow and prepare the body for exercise, has long been shown to benefit performance (10, 3, 4, 20). However, less is known about the traditional western warm-up model, and particularly the passive stretches used as part of the warm-up process. Recent research has highlighted that, far from helping athletes, passive stretching may inhibit performance by reducing power output (19, 22, 12, 1, 7, 2, 5, 24). The most widely held rationale for this decrement in performance is that passive stretching causes the musculotendinous unit (MTU) to become more compliant, reducing force development by decreasing MTU stiffness (7, 1). This reduction in MTU stiffness leads to acute neural inhibition and a decrease in the neural drive to muscles, resulting in a reduction in power output (19, 1, 11, 13).

These results have lead, not surprisingly, to a great deal of interest from coaches, athletes and sport scientists. However, there appear to be some issues with much of this research when its ecological validity, in terms of practical sports application, is examined. The length that stretches are held for, (ranging from 90 sec per muscle (12, 17) up to 1 hr (1), are unlikely to be used by athletes in preparation for competition (where typical stretch routines last no more than 10-15 sec. per muscle group).

The methods of determining power output in studies investigating this area have usually involved maximum voluntary contraction of isolated muscle groups, including maximum knee flexion/extension (12, 2, 17), or plantar flexion (7, 1). However, the ability of tests of muscular function to reflect changes in performance are severely limited (16). It is recommended that the effect of interventions or training should be based on changes in performance rather than changes in test scores of muscle function (16). Therefore, is the apparent decrease in power output reported in these studies applicable to the multi-joint, co-ordinated actions that many athletes perform as part of their sports?

Despite the obvious difficulties of applying much of the research on passive stretching and its effect on sport preparation strategies, many athletes have moved away from the static passive approach to stretching in the warm up in favour of dynamic stretching, (defined by this author as a controlled movement through the active range of motion for each joint). This should not be confused with ballistic stretching (repeated small bounces at the end range of movement), which is linked to muscle damage and shortening (18). However, despite its increasing popularity, very little research has been done on the effects of dynamic stretching as part of a warm-up prior to performance.

The aim of this study was to investigate the effect of static and dynamic stretch protocols on the performance of a sport specific action (20m sprint running performance) in amateur rugby union players.

Methods

Experimental Approach to the Problem

Four different stretch protocols, passive static, active dynamic, active static and static dynamic, were performed in an independent groups' design. Times over 20m were recorded in pre- and post-stretch interventions.

Each group performed a standard pulse-raising activity followed by two 20m sprints. A set stretch protocol was carried out, followed by a repeat of the two 20m sprints. Reliability of the 20m-sprint measure was assessed using a coefficient of variation and intraclass correlation coefficient, on pre-test measures. A good level of reliability was observed, with a mean coefficient of variation of 1.7 % and an intraclass correlation coefficient of 0.94 between the two sprint times.

Subjects

Ninety-seven male rugby union players were recruited from local amateur clubs. Subjects had participated in regular training programs and had been playing rugby union for at least one year. Subjects' age, height and body mass were 23 $\pm$ 8.4 years, 181 $\pm$ 8cm and 86.5 $\pm$ 14.4kg (mean and $\pm$ SD). The procedures used were approved by a Departmental Committee for Ethics. Subjects were required to read and complete a health questionnaire and sign an informed consent document.
Sample size was estimated by Eq. 1 (8)

(1) $n=8s^2/d^2$

Where s = typical error and d = confidence limits.
Sample size estimate was 23.
Subjects were randomly assigned to four groups; (i) Passive Static Stretch (PSS) (n=28),(ii) Active Dynamic Stretch (ADS) (n=22), (iii) Active Static Stretch (ASS) (n=24) and (iv) Static Dynamic Stretch (SDS) (n=23).

Testing

All groups performed a standard 10min jog warm up (2000m around a rugby pitch). This was followed by two sprints over 20m through Omoron portable electronic timing gates. A timed recovery between sprints was set at two minutes. 20m was chosen as this is the mean sprint distance rugby union players perform in match situations (6). The gates were set up at a height of 1m, 1m apart and 1m from a pre-marked start point. All sprints were performed from a standing start, in rugby boots, with the dominant foot to the front. No feedback was provided to subjects. This procedure was repeated after the stretch intervention, with the same starting technique employed.

Stretch Interventions

Stretch interventions were carried out immediately on completion of the 20m sprints. Supervision of stretch protocols was provided by a qualified Sports Therapist. The PSS group carried out passive stretches (slowly applied stretch torque to a muscle maintaining the muscle in a lengthened position) (15) of the lower body (gluteals, hamstrings, quadriceps, adductors, hip flexors, gastrocnemius and soleus). Stretches were held at a point of mild discomfort for 20sec. per muscle group.
The ADS group carried out a series of lower-body dynamic stretches (controlled movement through the active range of motion for each joint) at a jogging pace. Exercises were designed to stretch the same muscles as those in the PSS group, namely high knees (gluteals and hamstrings), flick backs (quadriceps), hip rolls (adductors), running cycles (hip flexors, gluteals, hamstrings and quadriceps) and straight leg skipping (gastrocnemius and soleus). Twenty repetitions were performed on each leg independently, with a walk back recovery.

The ASS group performed active stretches (an active contraction of the agonist muscle to its full inner range, stretching the antagonist's outer range) (18). Stretches were the same as those performed by the PSS group, held for 20 sec. per muscle group.

The SDS group performed the same movements, therefore stretching the same muscles, as the ADS group, but in a stationary position for twenty reps per leg.

Statistical Analysis

The two pre- and two post-sprint times were averaged. Interactions between groups and differences between pre- and post-intervention scores were analysed using a Factorial analysis of variance (ANOVA). Post Hoc analysis was carried out using Bonferroni. Statistical analysis was carried out using SPSS 10 for Windows. Significance was set at an alpha level of $p \leq 0.05$.

Results

Table 1. Mean and ± SD pre- and post-stretch sprint times.

Group	Mean pre stretch (sec)		Mean post stretch (sec)		Mean difference (sec)
PSS (n=28)	3.23*	±0.17	3.27*	±0.17	0.04
ADS (n=22)	3.24*	±0.2	3.18*	±0.18	-0.06
ASS (n=24)	3.24*	±0.18	3.29*	±0.2	0.05
SDS (n=23)	3.25	±0.22	3.22	±0.21	-0.03

* Denotes significant differences before and after stretch intervention ($p \leq 0.05$)

Table 1 shows the mean sprint times, pre- and post-stretch, and the mean difference in sprint times for each group. When the pre- and post-stretch data was analysed (using a factorial ANOVA) the PSS group showed a significant increase ($p \leq 0.05$) in sprint time after the passive static stretch intervention, matched by a significant increase ($p \leq 0.05$) in sprint time for the ASS group. The ADS group showed a significant decrease ($p \leq 0.05$) in sprint time after the active dynamic stretch intervention, however the SDS groups decrease in sprint time was found to be non-significant ($p \geq 0.05$). There were no significant differences between group data either pre- or post-stretch interventions ($p \geq 0.05$).

Discussion

The main finding from this study was a significantly faster sprint time when active dynamic stretching was incorporated into a warm up, with significantly slower sprint times observed for subjects employing either static active or passive stretching regimes.

The decrease in performance with the use of static passive stretching provides supporting evidence for a number of studies (19, 22, 12, 1, 7, 2, 5, 24). Knudson *et al* (11) hypothesised that the decrease in vertical jump performance they saw, was the result of a decrease in neural transmission, as they found no change in the kinematics of the movement. They concluded that this was attributable to acute neural inhibition from passive stretching decreasing the neural drive to the muscle (19, 1, 13). Kubo *et al* (13) suggests that passive stretching changes tendon structure, in effect making it more compliant, leading to a lower rate of force production and a delay in muscle activation. This change in muscle stiffness is important as Kokhonen *et al* (12) argues, a stiff MTU allows force generated by muscular contraction to be transmitted more effectively than a compliant MTU. Rosenbaum & Hennig, (19) and Avela *et al* (1) support this argument by demonstrating a decrease in EMG excitation (Electromyogram – or the electrical impulses associated with muscle contraction.) with muscle contraction after passive stretching.

However, these studies employed either no, or a very slow, eccentric component prior to concentric contraction. When sprint running is analysed, the need for a rapid switch from eccentric to concentric contraction is paramount. Although no study has looked at running performance, clues to the negative effect of static stretching may be found in the work of Young and Elliot (24). They found that there was a decrease in muscle activation, but that this was particularly important in regard to the pre-activation of the MTU (stiffening of the MTU prior to ground impact). This is a vital component in the drop jumps (more commonly known as depth jumps, involving an athlete dropping from a height, landing and jumping vertically as quickly as possible) Young and Elliot (24) looked at, but just as important for successful sprint performance. They concluded that passive stretching mainly affects the eccentric phase of movement, reducing the elastic return from the stretch shortening cycle. Cornwell *et al* (5) explains the decreases in performance, caused by passive stretching in the counter-movement jumps they employed, were the result of a decreased ability of the MTU to store elastic energy. Interestingly, the amount of elastic energy that can be stored in the MTU is a function of the units stiffness (9, 21), therefore the more compliant muscle observed after passive stretching (23) is less able to store elastic energy in its eccentric phase. This may well explain the decrease in performance exhibited in the static stretch groups in this study.

The changes in performance shown by the ASS group have not been demonstrated before. Although active static stretching is considered to be less effective than passive stretching in terms of increasing muscle length (23), the prolonged isometric contraction could lead to reduced sensitivity of neural pathways, reducing muscle spindle sensitivity. This is because this type of stretch involves an agonistic muscle contracting, while the opposite antagonistic muscle relaxes, decreasing excitatory impulses through the nervous system to the motor units (reciprocal inhibition). Therefore, in a complex movement pattern (such as sprinting) where muscle pairs need to work in conjunction, one set of muscles may be in a position of being 'switched off', through a decrease in nervous system stimuli.

The reason why active dynamic stretches positively affect performance may be because of a greater increase in core temperature in comparison to other forms of stretching. Increases in core temperature have shown an increase in the sensitivity of nerve receptors and an increase in the speed of nerve impulses, encouraging muscle contractions to be more rapid and forceful (20). Core temperature was not recorded in this study. However, all testing was performed on warm summer evenings after a substantial warm up (2000m jogging). Any temperature increase was kept to a minimum by the static dynamic stretching being performed in a slow, controlled manner and the active dynamic stretching had built-in walk back recovery. In addition, active static stretches also involve an amount of isometric muscle contraction, which may affect temperature. In this study, whether temperature differences between interventions would have been great enough to cause the performance changes demonstrated is debatable.

The other possibility for the positive changes in performance observed in the ADS group may be the rehearsal of movement in a more specific pattern than static stretching. Proprioception is required in sprinting, particularly for pre-activation to help the rapid switch from eccentric to concentric contraction that is required to generate running speed. It may be that active dynamic stretching helps rehearsal of movement pattern co-ordination, to allow muscles to be excited early and quickly, producing more power and, therefore, decreasing sprint time. Evidence is available to demonstrate that passive stretching has a negative effect on co-ordination. Avela *et al* (1) explains the decrease in motoneuron excitability, observed after passive stretching, through the depression of the H-reflex. This leads to a possible reduction in discharge from the muscle spindles because of increased muscle compliance. This may lead to a reduced efficiency in the self-regulation and adaptation to differences in muscle load and length (14), modifying running mechanics through loss of control and, therefore, affecting optimum power output.

In conclusion, the results from this study suggest that static stretching (active or passive) has a negative effect on 20m running time. This could be due to an increase in MTU compliance; as Cornwell *et al* (5) explains, too much 'slack' has to be taken up in the initial part of the contraction. On the other hand, active dynamic stretching appears to improve 20m running time. The reasons for the positive increase in performance, brought about by active dynamic stretching, are not clear, but could be linked to rehearsal of specific movement patterns which may help increase co-ordination of subsequent movement. There is a clear need for confirmatory studies, as well as more fundamental research, to investigate the underpinning mechanisms behind the effects of warm up stretch protocols on athletic performance.

Practical Application

20m-sprint performance in trained rugby union players can be improved by using an active dynamic stretch protocol, while the use of static stretching appears to decrease 20m-sprint performance (static dynamic stretching was found to have no significant effect on performance). Coaches and athletes need to be aware of the potentially negative effects of both passive and active static stretching on immediate performance of short sprints and the potential positive effect of doing specific movement pattern rehearsal (active dynamic stretching) before performance.

However, though this study demonstrated an increase in performance over 20m with active dynamic stretching and a decrease in performance with static stretching, it must be remembered this is a mean change recorded for a number of subjects. Some subjects did not follow this trend; a small minority had a decrease in performance through the dynamic intervention and an increase in performance after the static stretch. It can, therefore, be concluded, that, for the majority of sports performers needing to optimise sprint performance over a relatively short distance, a dynamic stretch (particularly active dynamic exercises, mimicking specific aspects of the sprint cycle) is advisable, rather than the standard static stretch approach. But care should be taken, as a minority of individuals may not exhibit the positive changes in performance that this study has demonstrated.

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