**STAY HEALTHY, STAY HAPPY, PLAY SOCCER**

Whether you are a professional soccer player or are playing for your high school or club team, the most important aspects of the game are staying fit, staying healthy, and having fun. We had the privilege of speaking with George Chiampas, United States Soccer Federation’s Chief Medical Officer and team physician with the US men’s national soccer team, as well as Lea Thomann, United States Soccer Federation’s senior medical manager. They provided us with a tremendous amount of knowledge in regards to staying healthy on and off the pitch, as well as how to best prepare for a match or a training session and how to avoid burnout.

**PRE-GAME**

Warming up properly before a game or a training session is crucial. Thomann explained the importance of slowly building up to a rigorous training session or game. The first thing a player should do is “raise their body temperature, heart rate, respiratory rate, and blood flow via a light warm up.” This could include jogging, walking, or hopping on the bike.

Next, a player should focus on activating key muscle groups and range of motion. At this point, a player should utilizedynamic stretching, as opposed to static stretching. Dynamic stretching includes more functional movement patterns similar to what you’d see on the soccer field. It consists of motions that will stimulate the joints and the muscles, is held for a second or 2,and then repeated multiple times. For example, shuffling, quick repeated squats, lunges across the field, or leg swings.

Once the muscles and joints are warmed up and activated, it’s important for a player to increase their activity level close to what their body will experience during a training session or a game. Examples of this include quick sprints and acceleration drills, jumping and landing mechanics,andhigh intensity drills utilizing a soccer ball. The purpose of this is to ensure that an athlete’s body is ready for the demands of a game or a training session.

**GAME TIME/TRAINING SESSION**

If a player has warmed up properly, theirperformance level should be at its peak during the game or training session. It’s important to stay hydrated and listen to your body. If a player is feeling an injury coming on, they should assess whether they need to step off the field or if they can push through. Listening to the needs and limits of the body will help prevent injuries.

**POST-GAME**

The work doesn’t end once a game or training session has concluded. Chiampas explains that all players “should treat post-match as the beginning of training for the next match.” After the game or training session, a player should address any injuries, big or small. This may include foam-rolling, sitting in an ice bath, or speaking with an athletic trainer if there is something more serious that needs to be addressed.

**A** good diet of fish, chicken, or red meat after a training session or gameis vital to post-game recovery.It’s also important to replenish your body with carbohydrates, stay hydrated, and get a good night of sleep.

**AVOID BURNOUT**

It is incredibly important for players to have fun and enjoy the game, especially at the youth level where players may still be deciding if they want to continue playing. The game of soccer is about being physically fit and active, interacting with teammates in a positive way, and learning to grow as a person and as a player. Chiampas suggests “incorporating opportunities for fun and games, as well as growth and mentorship. If you do those things at the right times, hopefully that mental burn out and fatigue isn’t there. Create balance.”

Finally, it’s important to remember that kids, and even older players, need a break sometimes! If you have a kid playing soccer year round, they should try to take 4-6 weeks off to disengage from the routine of their typical training schedule. It’s crucial to take a break, both mentally and physically. During that period of time, other things like swimming, strength building, and speed training can be incorporated. Keep in mind that more isn’t always better; sometimes it’s good to give kids a break from sports or soccer, let them have fun, and have an opportunity to be a kid. They’ll hopefully come into the next season refreshed and excited to play!