**Warming up, or preparing to perform?**

I have decided to stop using the term warming up. After years of coaching juniors (and adults) the response is always the same. Groans at the thought of doing all the boring stuff before we can go and play. We even have to invent games to make warming up tolerable to children.

What if we called it a recruitment session, or performance preparation? Because that is what it is. It sounds a bit more exciting and hints at improved performance. That should get buy in!

**What does performance preparation do?**

At the risk of sounding flippant it prepares your body (and mind) for performance. Tissues take time to ‘wake up’ and be able to allow access to their full abilities. They need a gradually increasing stimulus to evoke a greater response until they reach their capability – recruitment. This just means you are able to access the full ability of that tissue. You really can’t pull on and perform to your best ability from cold. This applies to both pumpy climbing and hard bouldering. Those people who say they can may be able to spend less time on recruitment, but they would still perform better if they recruited prior to performing.

**What about injury prevention?**

It does also have some injury reducing properties. It’s a slightly pedantic point but we can’t prevent injuries, only reduce the chance of the occurring. We have only recently been able to definitively say this with the large-scale studies into the FIFA 11+. This is a standardised warm up used in football. You will see pretty much the same routine done in the under 11’s at your local park as in the World Cup Final. This has had amazing results of reducing injury by around 30% across all populations (children, adults, recreational and elite) who used it.

It is split into 3 sections:

1) lower level running drills involving controlled changes of direction and mid air contact.

2) Strength exercises progressing to plyometrics and balance

3) Higher level running drills involving rapid changes of direction and backwards running

Essentially it is a gradually intensifying process preparing the body for the task ahead - football.

Interestingly it is actually now suspected the injury reduction may well come from the strengthening exercises. A lot are core and lower limb based. This is because most injuries in most sports (including climbing) are to do with tissue loads exceeding the capacity of the tissue. Though there may be an acute incident related to the injury it is often load changes in the weeks leading up to the injury that have led to over-training or under-recovery. This acute incident may normally have been dealt with by the athlete, but now it was the straw that broke the camel’s back, as the under-recovery reduced the capacity of the tissue to deal with the incident.

Also interesting is which part do coaches and players skip the most when given the choice? The strengthening aspect. It doesn’t appear to bear much relevance to what they are about to do, it takes the most time, and it’s hard work. It is now recommended to be separated out, with the strengthening exercises done as separate training, but the balance and plyometric exercises kept in.

There are a couple of relevant arguments for this. One is the time and relevance aspect as mentioned above. The other is that if you train hard enough to promote strength gains you are likely to fatigue yourself for the performance. Proper, hard, strength training requires adequate rest and recovery afterwards. But balancing and bounding/sprinting around will recruit the tissues.

**Individualisation**

A preparation session should always be individualised to both you and what you are about to do. The preparation for an outdoor project bouldering session will look very different to an indoor aerobic training session on routes. This will look different again if the session is to be on vertical or slabby climbs with matchstick edge crimps, or based around steep, dynamic, climbing on bigger holds.

It will also look different based on your personal strengths and weaknesses and/or injuries

Take this basic warm up and tweak it for you and for what you are about to do – pockets, slopers, wide bridging etc

**Basic progressions**

Bar hangs are for 30 seconds – this can be split into 3 x 10 seconds or 6 x 5 seconds if needed.

Fingerboard hangs are 10 second hangs. This can be split into 5 second hangs if needed.

It is important to regulate this to your level. Use pull up bands, assistance from the other arm etc. or add weight if needed.

You do not have to do single arm hangs, or small edge fingerboarding. You can replace the one arm hangs with lock off work for example. Just start easy and make sure by the end you are trying hard.

Pay attention to what your body is telling you during this warm up. Do you feel good and sharp, or tired? Consider adjusting your session according to this – see the autoregulation chapter.

**Preparing to prepare**

You should start with some low-level aerobic activity (jogging, mountain climbers etc) to increase your heart rate and get the blood flowing forcefully around the body.

It’s a nice time to start shaking off the effects of the day so far and to focus on what is to come. No time limit on it. Just go until you feel warm and invigorated.

**Progressive recruitment**

* **Bar hang –** both hands – feet on floor or stood in a pull up band etc, engaged shoulders – don’t let your shoulders touch your ears 30 seconds
* **Fingerboard** – rounded jugs – 3 x 10 seconds
* **Standing hip circles –** 10 each side
* **Bar hang** – both hands – scapula pull ups – 2 x 6 reps– slow and controlled, engaged shoulders – don’t let your shoulders touch your ears

[How to do a Scapula pull up correctly - YouTube](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r1gC1F1y3rw)

* **Fingerboard** – big edge – 2 x 10 seconds
* **Wide horse squat stretch –** 20-30 seconds
* **Bar hangs** – one arm hang - feet on floor or stood in a pull up band etc, engaged shoulders – don’t let your shoulders touch your ears 30 seconds
* **Fingerboard** – medium edge – 2 x 10 seconds
* **Spiderman with thorassic spine rotation –** 6 each side
* **Bar hangs** – one arm scapula shrugs, left arm - 6 reps each side – slow and controlled, engaged shoulders – don’t let your shoulders touch your ears
* **Fingerboard** – smaller edge – 2 x 10 seconds
* **Cossack squats –** 6 per side
* **Pull ups** – 2 x 6 – slow and controlled
* **Fingerboard** – small edge – 2 x 10 seconds
* **Alternating jump lunge –** 10-12 reps
* **Hamstring walk outs (on heels not flat feet)** – 3 reps of 30 seconds walking heels out and back
* **Pull ups/press ups –** alternate between 3 sets of 3 reps, pull ups, and 3 sets of 5 reps, press ups, getting progressively faster with each set

This looks a lot and at first will take some time to do. Once you know it and can flow from one exercise to the next it should take 15-20 minutes.

This recruitment process should enable you to reduce the amount of volume you go on to do in your warm up climbing. Spend the first few easy climbs seeing if you have any tight spots, work on technique, do some heel hooks, and practice jumping off, if you’re bouldering, or falling off, if you’re routing.

This saves time for quality efforts, at a higher level, and reduces time spent on ‘junk mile’ climbing where we’re not really learning technique or challenging our bodies.

A lot of us who climb indoors spend way too long gradually working through the grades. Then we get to our project level and we’re fatigued. You may not feel it, but try this approach instead of doing 30 V0-V4 boulders and see if you perform better on your projects.

If you’re having a fitness or technique-based session then that may be appropriate. For most of us it isn’t.

**Preparing to perform outdoors**

If you’re outdoors it’s likely it’ll feel harder to prepare. You don’t have the same facilities. But it is actually potentially a more effective environment, as you won’t have the opportunity to spend too long on easier climbs and the natural environment provides us with a lot to use.

Use what you do have:

* Tree branches for hangs and pull ups
* Portable fingerboards for finger recruitment – or find some ground level rock holds
* Boulder mats for exercises on the ground without getting muddy
* Easy routes/problems gradually building up the intensity
* Bolt to bolt or pull on different sections of your project

You can also consider alternative approaches like visiting a nearby climbing wall to prepare. Or even prepare at home, if you’re climbing locally and can get to the crag within about 45 mins. You would still need to do a short session when you get there, but this can be surprisingly effective.