Flag Football
Special Olympics Massachusetts
Coaching Guide
Active Practice

What is an active practice?
Sport offers valuable opportunities for physical activity. Coaches play an important role in promoting physical activity and fitness among their athletes and can assist athletes in reaching recommended levels. However, it can be a challenge to give fitness the proper emphasis in practice as sport skill development, game strategies/tactics, and sport rules are also necessary to prepare athletes to compete. With minor adjustments to practice plans, coaches can prepare their athletes with tactical and technical skills while also maximizing physical activity, thus improving fitness.

How to prepare for an active practice:
- Create a written plan for every session that includes activities, order, and duration to ensure smooth transitions and maximize activity time.
- Determine teams/groups/partners in advance so that you can assign athletes quickly during the session.
- Set up equipment (e.g., cones, stations, nets) before practice starts.
- When possible, provide enough equipment so that multiple athletes can actively participate at one time.
- Teach the team routines for practice components like warm-up, cool-down, transitions, and basic drills.
- Plan practice sessions that are physically demanding – practice sessions should challenge athletes and include appropriate breaks for rest and water.
- Encourage athletes to put forth their best effort in every activity.

Beyond Practice Sessions:
- Increase the duration and/or frequency of your practice sessions – consider adding 15 extra minutes onto each practice, increasing the frequency from 1-2x/week, and/or extending the season by including a few more pre-season sessions to help promote fitness.
- Encourage athletes to be physically active on non-practice days. Check-in with athletes during practice to hear what they did outside of your organized sessions. Provide praise and reinforcement for any fitness efforts.
WARM-UP

What is a warm-up?
- A warm-up should be the first physical activity in every training session or competition. It helps prepare the body and mind for the activity we are about to do.
- Warm-ups should begin at a slow pace and gradually become a little faster and more difficult.
- A warm-up helps us to reach a state of physical and mental readiness. When we prepare both the body and the mind, we are less likely to suffer an injury and will perform better at each practice, training, and competition.

Why do a warm-up?
Physical Benefits:
- Warm-up prepares the body for sport or exercise and helps to prevent injury by:
  - Increasing heart rate.
  - Increasing breathing rate.
  - Increasing blood flow to the active muscles.
  - Increasing body and muscle temperature.
Mental Benefits:
- Warm-ups prepare the mind to focus on the sport or exercise by:
  - Helping athletes shift focus from life to sport.
  - Mentally reviewing skills previously learned.
  - Connecting the mind and the body (e.g. linking hand and eye coordination).

How do we warm-up?
Step #1: Aerobic Activity (2-5 minutes)

Aerobic activities are whole body movements that will increase the heart rate. It should start at a slow pace and gradually increase in intensity/difficulty and last at least 5 minutes. Athletes should feel warm, a little out of breath, and energized by the end. This can be a really fun part of your training session.
- Examples can include
  - Walking
  - Running
  - Jogging
  - Skipping
  - Dancing
- You can introduce games or dances. Involve your athletes in choosing the activity. Try to be creative. Routine can be helpful for some athletes, but variety is also important.
Step #2: Dynamic Stretches (2-5 minutes)

- Dynamic stretches consist of active, controlled movements that take body parts through a full range of motion. Some examples are arm circles and leg swings. These are better than traditional/static stretches in the warm-up because the body temperature and heart rate stay elevated. In addition, dynamic stretches have been shown to reduce injury better than traditional stretches.
- Examples:
  - High knee march or jog
  - Butt kick step or jog
  - Leg swings
  - Knee circles
  - Hip circles
  - Torso twists
  - Walking kicks
  - Side stepping
  - Arm circles

Step #3: Sport-Specific Movements (5-10 minutes)

This is the final part of the warm-up. In this section, focus on skills or movements which are core to your sport. This helps prepare these muscles, joints, and ligaments and the mind for the movements the body will repeat in the training, practice, or sport session. This part of the warm-up can be a great way to review and practice previously learned skills and should move from simple to more complex skills. It can help to have a predictable routine with your athletes for this section. Remember, we are still warming-up and preparing the body, so athletes should be as active as possible. Avoid spending time on lengthy explanations.

- Examples:
  - 40 yard build up (can be shorter distance)
    - 25% of full speed, 50% of full speed, 75% full speed, full sprint
  - Practice forward running, backwards running, and turning around to catch the ball. Start off without the ball and can slowly work in the ball
  - Implement skill related fitness during this section of the warm up like agility, balance, or speed drills.

Why Sports Specific Movements are Important

- Drills are segments of the sport activity that, when separate and focused upon, allow the athlete to perfect technique. Incorporating drills in the warm-up 1) allows the athlete to work on specific muscle groups recruited for the activity at a lower intensity level and 2) allows the athlete to be fresh when completing the tasks by removing obstacles such as fatigue (physical and mental), which will create a greater environment for improvement.
- Progressions of learning start at a low ability level, advance to an intermediate level, and finally, reach a high ability level. Encourage each athlete to advance to the highest possible level. Drills can be combined with warm-up and lead into specific skill development.
FITNESS AT PRACTICE

During Practice Sessions:

- Infuse conditioning exercises that require minimal organization and equipment. Progressively increase repetitions as athletes improve.

Easy Exercise Examples

- Curl-Ups
- Side to Side Hops
- Jog in Place
- Plank from Knees
- Mountain Climbers
- Frog Jumps
- Squats
- Jumping Jacks
- Back Lunge
- Burpees
- Jump repetitions

Tips on how to incorporate these exercises

- Create circuit with these exercises at the end of practice
- Split the athletes into teams, have 1 group do a sport specific drill (throwing, catching, etc.) and the other do fitness drill (burpees, toe tap hops, etc.)
- During down times, or while athletes are waiting for their turn for a drill, encourage them to do conditioning exercises like push-ups, jog in place, squats, etc.

Other Ways to add Fitness into the practice

- The end of practice is often a good opportunity to integrate a few conditioning exercises. Utilize the Fit 5 Fitness Cards to select 3-5 exercises that you can build into a quick circuit. Repeat the circuit 2-3 times for increased benefit.
- Adding sprints at the end of practice
- Adding planks during a warmup

Tips and Tricks

- Have the athletes count out loud the repetitions to work on projecting their voices
- Make it a game or a competition, see who can do the most push-ups in 1 minute
- During down times, or while athletes are waiting for their turn for a drill, encourage them
- Encourage athletes to practice at home so they can improve
- Encourage athletes to jog or walk briskly during transitions and water breaks to decrease down time.
- If drills are done in lines, form multiple lines with fewer athletes in each to reduce time waiting for turns.
- Build in a 10 to 15-minute conditioning component at the beginning or end of each session.
- If multiple coaches available, break into groups so no one is standing around waiting to instructions as often
- When athletes are waiting for their turn to bowl, encourage them to cheer on the other athletes while doing conditioning exercises
COOL-DOWN

What is a cool-down?
- When your training, practice, or sport session is complete, you should always cool-down. It is just as important to have a good cool-down as it is to have a good warm-up. A good cool-down allows the body to gradually return to a state of rest.
- A typical cool-down includes light aerobic activity followed by stretching. The aerobic activity should gradually decrease in intensity/difficulty. It could be a light jog, moving into a brisk walk, and finally ending to a slow walk. You may also include some strength and conditioning exercises.

Purpose of a cool-down:
- Decrease heart rate.
- Decrease breathing rate.
- Decrease body and muscle temperature.
- Returns rate of blood flow from the active muscles to resting level.
- Decrease muscle soreness.
- Improve flexibility.
- Increases the rate of recovery from exercise.
- Promote relaxation.

Cool-Down Activities

Step 1: Aerobic Cool Down
- A light jog into a walk to help lower heart rate
- Keep moving until heart rate and breathing are back to somewhat of a normal pace

Step 2: Static Stretching
- Focus on the major muscles and joints used in the sport and build a routine with at least 5 stretches. Each sport will have different areas of focus.
- It is also smart to include stretches for areas that are generally tight on the general population, for example, hamstrings, hips, rotation, and sides.
- Think about the stretches that might be easier to do in your particular setting. There are modifications to most stretches in order to do them standing, seated, or laying down.
- Make sure to hold each stretch for at least 30 seconds.
- Examples:
  - Upper Body
    - Neck rolls
    - Shoulder rolls
    - Arm circles
    - Across the body
  - Trunk
    - Twist, lower back stretches
    - Arm reaches
    - Windmill
  - Lower Body
    - Hamstring stretches
    - Quad stretch
    - Butterfly stretch
Cool-Down Tips:

- Develop a standard routine for your cool-down. Not only will this provide an opportunity for you to review the session or provide suggestions leading into the next practice, it will also create a routine you can suggest your athletes do at home.
- Pay close attention to how your athletes are stretching. Ballistic or “bouncing” movements while stretching can cause injury. Stretching may feel a bit uncomfortable but should not be painful.
- Use the time at the end of practice to encourage healthy habits at home. Athletes can listen to your tips and reminders about healthy habits while they stretch.

TIPS AND REMINDERS FOR ATHLETES

Nutrition

- Make sure to bring healthy snacks for long practices and competitions
  - Examples include mixed nuts, fruits, yogurt, low-fat granola bar
- Before practices, be sure to eat a healthy breakfast if possible (some practices may be too early for athletes to do so)
- Avoid foods high in fat, these can take a long time to digest and make your feel tired
- Avoid fast foods, especially before practices, events, and games, since they do not provide the proper energy needed to complete the work required by athletes

Hydration

- Athletes should ALWAYS bring water to practice to ensure hydration
- Athletes need to be instructed to “drink as much water as they want.” If you are practicing in warm environments, you may need to increase the frequency of water breaks. The best replacements for most events is plain water.
- Drink a glass with each meal (breakfast, lunch, dinner and 2 snacks) and more during practice, games and competitions
- Carbohydrate fluid replacement drinks (PowerAde, Gatorade) should not be used frequently, they contain excess calories can contribute to unnecessary weight gain and dental caries. If used, they are more appropriate for the more intense sports such as cycling and track and field.
- NOTE – Energy drinks are not recommended; they contain stimulants (such as caffeine) and could impact the athlete’s health. In addition some medications the athletes take can be impacted by excessive caffeine.
8 Week Practice Plan

**Week One**

- **Goal of this practice**
  - To introduce the basics of the sport and conditioning needed to make it through the season
  - Focus on stretching and conditioning. Introduce activities as a lifestyle that can be done at home in between practices as it'll improve their overall day to day life as well as their ability to be an athlete
  - Set up a fitness challenge with weekly goals for athletes to hit as well as make it a fun competition between teammates

- **Team Talk**
  - Review practice plan for day
  - Expectations for all players both at today’s practice and throughout the season
  - Begin to review rules of the sport

- **Warm Up**
  - See the “warm up” section above to plan a proper warm up. Tip: make sure to include both an aerobic and a stretching (specifically dynamic stretching) component.

- **Fitness Tests**
  - This can help set standards for the rest of the season. Test athletes in the middle and at the end of the season to see if they have improved!
    - **Distance Run**
      - 0.5 mile - 1 mile timed run
      - If you have an outdoor track available this would be the easiest way to run the test. If not, you can set it up around the field!
      - **Directions**: use 2 cones to create a start and finish line. Use a stopwatch to keep track of time.
    - **20- 40 yard dash**
      - **Directions**: Put down 2 sets of cones. Use 1 cone set for the start line, and the other for a finish line. You can create more than 1 test zone to have multiple athletes go. Time the athletes sprint from start to finish. They can have multiple tries.
      - Tell the athlete that you will begin the stop watch on their first movement *(this way you can be at the end zone)*
- **Box Cone Drill**
  - **Directions:** Lay down 4 cones in the shape of a box (each cone should be 10yrd apart). Athlete will sprint from cone 1-2 then shuffle from 2-3 then back pedal from 3-4 then sprint from 4-1. Use a stopwatch to time athletes. Can set up multiple boxes if you have multiple coaches to help with timing.

- **Push Up**
  - How many pushups can you complete in 30 seconds?
  - **Directions:** Partner up athletes. Have 1 athlete doing pushups and the other counting. You control the time. After 30 seconds, record scores and have the partners switch. Athletes can do regular or knee pushups.

- **Long Jump**
  - Have two cones about 3 feet apart from each other to create a starting line. Have the athlete stand at the starting line and jump out as far as they can. Watch where they land, and place a cone down where their heels land. Count how many steps they jumped (heel-toe steps so that it is consistent). Although this is not as valid as a tape measure, if you test later in the season you will have the same measurement method.

- **Cool Down**
  - See the “cool down” section above to plan a proper cool down. Tip: make sure to include both an aerobic and a stretching (specifically static stretching) component.

- **Set goals and activities for participants to work on in between practices**
  - Examples: Being active outside practice for 30minutes per day, Work on your 20/40 yrd dash time, complete 10 pushups 5-7 days a week
Week 2

- Goal of this practice
  - To introduce is work on techniques of throwing the football

- Team Talk
  - Review key points from previous practice
  - Review practice plan for day
  - Expectations for all players both at today’s practice and throughout the season
  - Continue to review rules of the sport

- Warm Up

- Throwing Drills
  - Teach proper grip to hold football
  - Work on proper arm motion, stepping into throw, release point & follow throw
  - Pass Drops
    - Incorporate 3 steps & 5 step drops
    - Throwing on the run
  - Accuracy drills
    - Set up targets at different distances to promote accuracy
    - Move up to targets of different sizes at the different distances
  - Active Practice Tips:
    - Split the team in half, have half of the team work on throwing drills and the other work on fitness/conditioning – this will help to shorten the lines, allowing athletes to get more reps while minimizing the standing around. After a certain time, have the groups switch.
    - After teaching proper grip and proper arm motion, split team up into groups of 4. Assign lanes for each group of 4. Split the group of 4 into 2. Have 2 athletes at one end of lane and the remaining 2 athletes at the other end. Have one pair work on throwing, and the other pair complete 1 lap around the field, 10 pushups, 10 squats, 10 sit ups then 1 more lap around the field. After 5 minutes switch the pairs. Now the ones working on throwing are doing conditioning

- Fitness/Conditioning
  - Drill #1: L Drill
    - Directions. You need 3 cones set up 5 yards apart from each other in the shape of an L. This will end up looking like you are one cone short of a complete square. (For direction purposes, cone 1 is the start line, then cone 2 is the middle and cone 3 is the end of the L)
    - Have the athlete start at cone1, run to cone 2, stop & turn and run back to cone 1. Stop & turn, this time around the outside of cone 2 and head to cone 3. Wrap around cone 3 and then head back to cone 1
    - Since this can only be done by 1 athlete at a time- you can have other multiple stations of this or have the athlete’s complete exercises while they wait.
Up Downs
- Directions: have athletes start doing quick feet. When you say down, they hit the ground (in a burpee manner) then return to standing to resume quick feet. In this drill you can incorporate other “commands” such as shuttle and then pointing in the direction they should shuttle in. Other commands: jump, back pedal, high knees.

20 Yard Sprints
- Have all the athletes start in a line, spaced out appropriately so they are distant from other athletes. Walk out about 20 yards. Call out go, all the athletes will run 20 yards. Have the athlete run around and lightly/ slowly jog back to the start line (this is their recovery). Once they reach the starting line, wait 10-20 seconds and repeat.

Cool Down

Set goals and activities for participants to work on in between practices
Week 3

- Goal of this practice
  - To introduce is work on techniques of catching the football

- Team Talk
  - Review key points from previous practice(s)
  - Review practice plan for day
  - Expectations for all players both at today's practice and throughout the season
  - Continue to review rules of the sport

- Warm Up

- Catching Drills
  - Teach player how to catch ball
  - Using both hands
  - Out in front of body
    - Properly securing ball to body
    - Drill should be stationary to start
    - Incorporate catch radius by throwing ball to different heights and to side of receiver
  - Build in catching on move
  - Have run to different distances
    - Build in different routes (Fly, slant, curl)
  - Active Practice Tips:
    - Split the team in half, have half of the team work on football specific drills and the other work on fitness/conditioning – this will help to shorten the lines, allowing athletes to get more reps while minimizing the standing around. After a certain time, have the groups switch.
    - Have half the team run laps.
    - Split teams into small groups then within the small groups split the athlete up again. Starting 5 yard apart (half the group on one side the other on the other side). Have one side throw the ball, and the other side catch it. Once the athlete throws it have them sprint to the catching side. When the athlete catches it, have him sprint with the ball to the other end (throwing side) The next athlete throws the ball to the athlete across from him. Increase distance, build in routes or moves. Have those in line complete 10 pushups, sit ups, squats, jumping jacks each time.
• Fitness/ Conditioning
  o Exercise Circuit
    ▪ Have 5 cones lined up next to each other but with space in between them. Give each cone an exercise (cone 1: squats, cone 2: pushups and so forth). Split team up into 5 group and have each group start at 1 cone. Set a time for 30sec-1min then tell the groups to move to the next cone. Do until each group has been to each cone. Complete 2-3 times through
  o Different Running Drills
    ▪ Using the lines already created or creating them with cones. Have a start and end point. Have the athletes line up at the start line, then instruct them on what type of running pattern they will do (sprint forward, then backpedal). Give them different combinations to do
    ▪ Examples: sprint forward, shuffle back. Skip forward, sprint back,

• Cool Down

• Set goals and activities for participants to work on in between practices
Week 4

- Goal of this practice
  - To introduce is work on techniques of playing the offensive line and blocking

- Team Talk
  - Review key points from previous practice(s)
  - Review practice plan for day
  - Expectations for all players both at today’s practice and throughout the season
  - Review rushing and blocking rules of the sport

- Warm Up

- Fitness/ Conditioning
  - *Redo the Fitness Test!* See if the athletes have improved in their fitness!

- Drills
  - Proper stance
  - Snapping the ball
    - Between leg
      - Shot gun
      - Under center
    - Side snap
      - Shot gun
      - Under center
  - Shuffling feet
    - Drills at different distances with feet shuffling, no cross over
    - Incorporate pivoting and change of direction
  - Add a defensive player and have lineman keep defensive player in front of them
    - *Non-Contact* drill – Practice social distancing
    - Starting with rush player at a walking speed, increase speed of rusher throughout drill as well as change of directions

- Cool Down

- Set goals and activities for participants to work on in between practices
**Week 5**

- **Goal of this practice**
  - To introduce and work on techniques of playing the flag pulling and coverage

- **Team Talk**
  - Review key points from previous practice(s)
  - Review practice plan for day
  - Expectations for all players both at today’s practice and throughout the season
  - Review defensive rules of the sport

- **Warm Up**

- **Drills**
  - Proper stance
  - Flag pulling drills
    - **Stationary-**
      - Ball carrier and defensive player face each other.
      - Both players in athletic stance. Defensive player pulls flags
      - Incorporate speed by setting up cones at different distances from ball carrier (stationary). Further cone from ball carrier faster the defensive player approaches
    - **Box drill**
      - Set up a box using cones
      - Both players enter box, offensive player goal is to leave box, defensive player goal is to get flag before offensive player exits the box.
  - Coverage drills
    - Back peddling drills
      - Straight lines – staying in athletic stance and low to ground
      - Incorporate hip rotation and running with receiver
        - First do it solitary
        - Add in receiver (keep social distance) and shadow receivers moves
  - **Active Practice Tips:**
    - Split the team in half, have half of the team work on football specific drills and the other work on fitness/conditioning – this will help to shorten the lines, allowing athletes to get more reps while minimizing the standing around. After a certain time, have the groups switch.
    - Have the athletes not in the box drill hold a plank or complete sit ups

- **Fitness/ Conditioning**
  - Agility Ladder (Cones)
    - If you don’t have an agility ladder use cones to create a ladder. Have the athletes do a number of different ladder drills. Place another cone 15 feet away from the ladder, have the athletes sprint to the cone after completing the ladder.
Sprint Ladder

- Have athletes start at a starting line, you can decide where that is. Have the athletes run 10 yard and back to the starting line. Each time the athletes sprint, increase the distance. Increase distance until 50 yards then start to decrease the distance. To make it fun, create a competition out of it.
  - sprint 20 yards, rest 20 seconds between sprints
  - sprint 30 yards, rest 30 seconds between sprints
  - sprint 40 yards, rest 30 seconds between sprints
  - sprint 50 yards, rest 30 seconds between sprints
  - sprint 40 yards, rest 30 seconds between sprints
  - sprint 30 yards, rest 30 seconds between sprints
  - sprint 20 yards, rest 20 seconds between sprints
  - sprint 10 yards, rest 10 seconds between sprints

Line Jumps

- Complete each of these twice, 30 seconds each time.
  - Two Feet Front/ Back Line Jumps
  - The line should start in front of the athletes
  - Two Feet Side to Side Line Jumps
  - The line should start either on the left or right of the athletes
  - Single Foot R Front/Back Line Jumps
  - Single Foot L Front/Back Line Jumps
  - Single Foot R Side to Side Line Jump
  - Single Foot L Side to Side Line Jump

Cool Down

Set goals and activities for participants to work on in between practices
Week 6 – 8

- Goal of these practices
  - Incorporate up to two of the previous weeks drills to reinforce the skills that players have been working on throughout the season
  - In normal times this would be good times for intra-squad scrimmage but as Flag Football is a high-risk sport this is not allowed. Instead set up skills competitions to create a fun competitive environment amongst teammates

- Team Talk
  - Review key points from previous practice(s)
  - Review practice plan for day
  - Expectations for all players both at today’s practice and throughout the season
  - Continue to review rules of the sport
  - Have a rules test where players get prizes for answering questions correctly
    - Prizes can be:
      - Leading a session
      - Sitting out a conditioning run etc.
      - Or get to play popular position for the day

- Warm Up

- Drills
  - Active Practice Tips:
    - Remember that you can split the team in half, have half of the team work on football specific drills and the other work on fitness/ conditioning – this will help to shorten the lines, allowing athletes to get more reps while minimizing the standing around. After a certain time, have the groups switch.
    - Or add in sprints, laps or other exercises to keep athlete moving!

- Fitness and Conditioning
  - Reuse some of the previous fitness and conditioning drills.
  - Make sure to complete fitness test at least once more before the end of the season!

- Cool Down

- Set goals and activities for participants to work on in between practices
SAMPLE ACTIVE PRACTICE PLAN
Throwing and catching the ball technique

Warm Up

**Aerobic**
- Light jog around the field (5 minutes)

**Dynamic Stretches**
- High knees, walking leg swings, arm circles (5 minutes)

**Basics and Conditioning**
- Basic and progression throwing drills at close range (5 minutes)

Transition:
- Team jogs to get water while coach explains drills and skills stations while breaking into groups (5 minutes)

Drills/Skill Building

**Passing Drills**
- Split athletes into 2 groups, both run down the field throwing the ball back and forth to each other until they reach the end of the field
- Focus on pass accuracy with a moving target

**Catching Drills**
- Have athletes run downfield and turn around to catch ball thrown my coach
- Focus on catching the ball and continuing to run down the field
- Work on bringing the ball into the body when caught to secure the ball

Notes:
- Split into 2 teams with 5-7 people (coaches and volunteer can play if needed)
- If more than 14 athletes, use alternates
- Run a game with 7-minute halves
- Allow 1 minute during halftime for water
- DO NOT stop play to fix technique
Transition: Light jog to get water, discuss how to take skills practiced into game play

Game Play

Notes:

Cool Down:

Aerobic: brisk walk (5 minutes)
Stretching: chest opener, arm across the body, triceps stretch, butterfly stretch, quad stretch, hamstring stretch, straddle stretch (5 minutes)

Importance of drinking water before, after, and during practice. Talk about signs of dehydration (5 minutes)

Fitness Lesson of the Day:

Tips/Reminders for Athletes:
- Weekly Challenge
  - Who can drink more that 3 waters this week?
  - Start to use Fit 5 Tracker for water
    - Winner gets to lead cooldown next week
- Ask athletes to practice their Fitness Card Exercises (wall push-ups, curl ups, wall sits) at least 2x for 10 reps before next practice
- Email athletes and caregivers reminder with URL to videos
Date:__________

Practice Focus:__________________________________________

Warm Up: _______ minutes
   Aerobic   Dynamic Stretches   Basics and Conditioning

Transition:________________________________________________

Drills/Skill Building: _______ minutes

Notes:____________________________________________________