



eBook

Pre-Season Blunders

The most common mistakes Aussie rules teams make preparing for round one.

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INTRODUCTION

The pre-season is here and it's time to build a winning footy team. This guide and the high performance coaches at Core Advantage are here to help.

Sports science has come a long way in recent years. While sophisticated GPS tracking and a full time sports science division might be outside the budget for most clubs, there are plenty of high performance activities that a club can implement to get their team fit, strong, and reduce injury risk in the season ahead.

THE GREAT NEWS IS THAT MOST OF THEM DON'T COST A THING.

Each chapter of this guide highlights one of the four most common training errors we see at clubs which sabotage their performance.

We offer alternative strategies that won't break your budget (in time or dollars). The emphasis is on approaches which are simple and actionable.

These changes can take just a few minutes per training session, and some minor tweaks to your training plan. The upside can be massive:

- ▶ significant performance improvements,
- ▶ reduced injury rates, and
- ▶ faster player recovery between games.

A NOTE ON NEW THINGS

This guidebook contains plenty of general ideas for training a team of Australian rules footballers, along with some specific tactics and plans that you might like to borrow and incorporate into your off season plan.

However...

As effective as these ideas are, you should also be wary of changing too much, or too many things, too quickly.

Athletes respond well to routine and consistency. That's why there is more risk of injury in the first few weeks of the season, or after some time away (like the shin splints inevitably suffered coming back from Christmas break).

So a word of warning: as you go about incorporating parts of this plan into your teams training do so gradually. Start with small doses of the new drill/exercise/activity before gradually building it up.

This book is also quite *general* in its advice. You will almost definitely need to scale the exact training dosage up or down depending on the level of your players.

ABOUT CORE ADVANTAGE

Based in Melbourne's South East, Core Advantage is a high performance team who work with athletes and teams of every level to maximise their performance.

We currently train athletes from over 15 unique sports, including women's and men's Aussie Rules from junior to professional levels.

We know sport, and we know high performance.

Core Advantage supports clubs and individuals with performance testing, programming, strength and conditioning training, nutrition consulting, and rehabilitation management.

For more information about our services or to get in touch go to coreadvantage.com.au and send us an enquiry, we would love to have a chat.

FAULT 1: NOT STRENGTH TRAINING

It goes without saying that injuries suck.

At Core Advantage we love to remind our athletes that: "Your best ability is your availability."

It doesn't matter how fit, how skilled or how tough a player is, that player can go from being the best member of your team to the worst player on your roster the minute they get injured.

A star player that is injured come game day is no help to their team.

This is not only devastating for that individual player. It can mess with your team's momentum and structure, potentially derailing a season as positions have to be shuffled and tactics revised.

Injuries can happen for all kinds of reasons, but the most heartbreaking ones are those that could have been avoided.

The good news is there is plenty we can do to prevent many common injuries and there aren't many higher value methods for preventing injuries than to build some strength.

Not only are stronger athletes less likely to get hurt, they also tend to be faster, fitter, and harder to tackle.

BUT WE HAVEN'T GOT TIME FOR PUMPING IRON!

This isn't bodybuilding. Athletes don't have to dedicate endless hours to gym sessions to get tremendous returns. Just a few minutes every week completing the right exercises can have a considerable impact on a team's durability.

This investment is even more valuable when we consider the time cost of missed games and training for an injured athlete. On top of that an athlete who has been injured once is 2-4 times more likely to suffer that same injury again, so a small investment in prevention is absolutely better than the cure.

BUILD A HABIT OF STRENGTH TRAINING

The best thing to do would be getting in the gym 1-2 times a week and following a strength and conditioning program (not a bodybuilding program - they're different).

If you can't make that happen, the next best thing would be to add a 5-10 minute strength block onto the end of your team training sessions, maybe incorporating it in with a cool down stretch.

THIS SHORT DOSE OF STRENGTH IS ONE THOUSAND PERCENT BETTER THAN DOING NOTHING.

Why the end and not the start of training?

Strength training leads to isolated fatigue in the worked muscle groups. It would be reckless to give these muscles a targeted dose of strength training before going out and running, kicking, and tackling with these same muscles that are now fatigued.

Best to do your strength activities it at the end of a training session so it has the longest amount of time to recover before your next training session.

KEY MOVEMENTS

Below are two example exercises that can be done anywhere with little to no equipment. They both have a huge payoff for keeping footballers strong and healthy.

Our Perfect Pre-Season program offers a complete body weight strength training plan for you to follow that takes your team from weak-as to as bulletproof as possible.

Nordics

Nordics are brilliant for developing strong resilient hamstrings and have a strong scientific backing as being able to significantly reducing the risk of hamstring strains.

To perform a nordic the athlete begins kneeling with a partner holding their ankles and pressing their bodyweight down to anchor the athletes feet to the ground. The athlete begins to slowly lower their body forwards controlling the speed of the drop with their hamstrings and glutes. At the point they lose control they then fall forwards to the ground catching themselves with their hands.

NOTE: Keep sets short, a maximum of six reps per set.

NOTE 2: These can be quite intense, so take it easy for the first few weeks as you become familiar with the exercise. Make them easy by falling earlier.

Adductor Bridge

The adductor bridge (also known as a Copenhagen) has been rising in popularity in recent years due to its ability to build hip strength, reduce the effects of groin soreness and even mitigate the risks of developing OP.

To perform an adductor bridge, have a partner start in a 1/2 kneeling position, rest your top leg on your partners thigh and lift yourself up into a side planking position. Both legs should be straight and the bottom leg is hovering in the air.

Hold this position for 10 seconds each leg, building to 30+ seconds each leg over the weeks.

Performing a few sets of these exercises once or twice per week is all it takes to build some general resilience.

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FAULT 2: GOING TOO HARD TOO EARLY

There is a universal desire built in to the very fabric of pre-season to be the first team on the track and to be the hardest training team all summer long.

Athletes are enthusiastic and coaches don't want to waste any time getting their team match ready for the new season.

As it may feel to go into a Christmas break having torn up the track, this pre-Christmas period actually doesn't matter too much in getting match ready. In fact, it may even be counter productive to go super hard before the new year.

Why?

FITNESS DOESN'T TAKE VERY LONG TO BUILD AND IT FADES FAST

Now this comes with plenty of caveats and exceptions, but generally speaking, for athletes who are in moderate shape, the work required to get back to footy fit isn't actually that big of a job.

Four varied conditioning sessions a week over fifteen weeks, plus practice games is more than enough.

So yes, you can get fitter with more time and more work, but there is always the trade off between squeezing every last drop of fitness out of a team and running the risk of injuring or burning your team out before the season even starts.

On top of this, anaerobic fitness is not a lasting quality. During any break from team training (say over Christmas), anaerobic fitness (think repeat sprint ability) begins to drop. This can happen as quickly as four days after the last hard training session.

Working on the law of averages, most teams are going to have a decent number of players come back from Christmas less fit than when they went into the break. Even the most committed athletes struggle to run themselves as hard when training on their own in the middle of the summer heat.

Spikes in training elevates injury risk

Any time an athlete goes from a period of doing very little, to a sudden ramp up of workloads, they experience weeks of elevated injury risk. This is due to a violation of what is known as the acute to chronic workload ratio.

The acute to chronic workload ratio is the balance between how much training you have done in the past 5-10 days (acute load) compared to the average training load over the past four to six weeks (chronic load). It's one of the key reasons elite clubs spend so much time and money collecting and analysing GPS data on their athletes, prescribing extra sprints or easy sessions for individuals based on their training load balance.

For the non-elite clubs of the world, getting the balance right can be tricky. We want to push our athletes and get them fitter, but we also don't want to break them in the process by rushing headlong into massive workloads.

So with all this in mind, the narrow training window we have before Christmas is not the best time to be absolutely smash the team, instead we should be building a general base of well

rounded conditioning so we can go even harder when it really counts after Christmas.

BUILDING A FIT FOOTBALL TEAM THE SMART WAY

Assume the worst.

It's better to assume your athletes are in worse shape than better shape when they return from any time off. An easy and rough guide is to estimate they did 50% of the volume and 50% of the intensity that you planned or expected of them from their time away. This is the same for when they first return to the club, and when they return after the Christmas break.

Two weeks of red flag training.

With this assumption of lower than expected training loads (on average), you adjust your first 3-5 full training sessions to be lighter and easier than you might like.

Of course we don't want to waste these sessions! We see this time is a key opportunity to build resilience and begin ramping our hard training to where it needs to be.

Here are some ideas for this red flag training period:

- ▶ **Extra warm up and cool down**

Take your time building into each drill or conditioning block with more easy and moderate efforts. This is a great sneaky way to accumulate clean, crisp running metres without the risk of high speed work on unconditioned legs.

- ▶ **No competitive sprints/efforts**

Avoid anything that might give anyone a rush of blood to

the head. This allows you to control the intensity of efforts better.

▶ **Double the rest durations**

Or halve the length of the work effort. 60 seconds rest becomes 120 seconds, repeat 400m could become repeat 200m. This is even more important if you are training in hot conditions.

▶ **Go short or go long, shorter efforts**

Short efforts are anything sub 4 seconds/20 metres. This distance restricts athletes from reaching top speed, placing less stress on the hamstrings. Longer efforts above 90 seconds/500 meters result in slower running velocities as athletes pace themselves to complete the effort. Anything in between these two distances are the high speed danger zone for soft tissue injuries in unfit athletes. Avoiding it for a few sessions is a great way to build fitness in a low risk way.

▶ **Keep kicking distances and volumes down**

Kicking is just as important as running to get right. It's quite possible that a decent number of players might have done some running over Christmas but barely kicked further than 20m and definitely did no long kicking on the run. This lack of kicking fitness is a torn quad or hip flexor issue waiting to happen. Build your drills around progressive kicking loads over the first few weeks of training as well.

▶ **Hard training doesn't have to be fitness training**

Teams only have so much time to train together, so every minute spent on hard running is typically a minute that can't be spent on developing other qualities, like tactics, strength, tackling, goal kicking, agility, or clean hands etc.

Instead of spending hours of valuable training time before Christmas building anaerobic fitness only to have much of this lost over the break there might be better ways to spend these pre-Christmas training sessions, working on qualities that are more likely to stick around over the break, no matter how slack your team is over the break.

▶ **Build IQ**

One area of training that is so valuable, but so often left until much later in the pre-season is team tactics and individual decision making. Challenging small sided games, modified rule scrimmages, or decision making drills can create artificial pressure and competition which helps athletes develop their IQ, touch, and team cohesion.

▶ **Work on speed and agility**

These qualities are more neural in nature so gradually building up technical and elastic sprinting qualities can be incredibly valuable. As a bonus this translates to better fitness as your players become more efficient runners.

▶ **Strength and power**

Devote a little extra time to your strength and resilience pre-Christmas to acclimatise your team to these new exercises, laying a foundation for great strength training habits over the break and through the season.

▶ **Balanced running program**

Instead of just programming the toughest gut running every single training, build a well rounded running plan that gradually builds all dimensions of running needed for the demands of football. We detail specific details of how to do this in our *Perfect Pre-Season* training program.

FAULT 3: TRAINING ONLY THE EXTREMES

There seems to be two distinct types of footy pre-season:

- ▶ The ones where you run a marathon worth of steady state km's each week, building incredible aerobic fitness... or,
- ▶ The ones where a session hasn't started until someone spreads their lunch across the sidelines, as the team grinds through 400 after 400.

It doesn't have to be one or the other, in fact the best pre-seasons should take a blended approach to their running and fitness work incorporating a range of distances and intensities.

I like to think of building your football fitness through three zones, each of which has value and needs some level of attention. Each of these running zones is its own skill, with unique running styles, different muscle actions and energy systems that all need to be developed.

TOP SPEED

This zone covers anything done above 90% of your top speed, for distances between 10m to 60m. Almost always these efforts are run all out, pushing the effort above 9/10 intensity.

This kind of running is essential in all team and ball sports, the game is won and lost with explosive efforts, it doesn't matter how fit you are, if you can't break open the contest, or chase down an opponent it won't matter. Additionally high speed running builds the resilience and elasticity in your muscles

(particularly hamstrings) and tendons (the achilles and knees) to be able to withstand the intensity and volume of work coming in round one.

But it's also the most poorly prescribed form of running across junior and recreational football teams.

The most common mistakes we see are:

- ▶ **Too much volume**

20 reps of 100m with 90 seconds rest is not a speed session. That's conditioning.

- ▶ **Long distances**

Anything that forces athletes to pace themselves is no longer really speed development. Beyond 60 to 70m is actually speed maintenance or threshold running. These distances mean athletes just can't run at a high enough intensity to truly be developing top speed.

Yes, the 100m is the fastest event at the Olympics, but even those sprinters only maintain top speed through the 70-80m mark, so stick with efforts of 40 to 70m.

- ▶ **Rest intervals aren't long enough**

Not enough rest means that each subsequent effort is impacted by the fatigue from the effort before. See the 20 reps of 100m example from above, this will lead to a pacing strategy and lower running speeds than the athlete is truly capable of.

Here are some recommendations to get more out of your top speed running sessions:

- ▶ **Build your speed gradually**

This is done on two time frames, weeks and minutes. Firstly over the initial 2-3 weeks back at training keep the

distances shorter (10m-30m) and focus on running at an "effortless 80%" before building towards 95% efforts. Secondly, within each session your top speed running should be done early in a session (before fatigue sets in) and there should be plenty of accelerations included before you have your athletes go all out. 60%, 70%, 80%, 85%, 90% efforts over the sessions distance is a good ramping strategy before going all out with the main reps of the day.

▶ **Run clean and tidy**

To get faster you have to run fast. Running at 95-98% — just below your maximum speed — for multiple repetitions and learning how to stay relaxed but in control at this speed will pay off tremendously. You definitely should also be doing some 100% efforts but 95-98% for the bulk of your top speed reps is a good place to be.

▶ **Keep volumes small**

You don't need many reps of this high intensity work to build your speed. 4-8 efforts is more than enough for a speed session. 200-400m of total sprint work, that's it.

▶ **Plenty of rest between sprints**

For shorter sprints (20-40m) a minimum of 40 seconds rest is needed, for longer sprints (40-70m) you are looking at more like 60-120 seconds. The longer the sprint, the higher the number of efforts you want to do, or the faster you want to run, the longer you should rest.

As a coach, you know you are getting the rest right for speed training if you are getting twitchy and impatient in the rest periods. Fill the rest with stationary handball drills or touch work if needed to fight this twitch.

THRESHOLD RUNNING

Thresholds have a few different classifications depending on who you ask. The details aren't as important as sports scientists make it out to be, anywhere from 75-85% of max speed with distances of 80m - 500m.

This zone is the classic gut running zone, distances long enough to feel the burn and rest periods typically too short to fully recover.

Here are some best practices:

- ▶ **Rest according to the distance and the number of reps**

The longer each effort and/or the more repetitions you are running the longer you should rest. As a general rule rest stays at around a 1:1 ratio. 30seconds on 30 seconds off for example.

- ▶ **Running should look light and loose**

Threshold running shouldn't be sluggish, on these efforts, runners should have fast legs, relaxed arms and be flying over the ground. Think Lewis Jetta running away from Cyril Rioli along the wing, or the 400m final at the Olympics.

- ▶ **Volumes don't have to be massive**

If we take 400m repeats as an example, a good rule of thumb is that 50% of the fitness benefit is attained on the first rep, 75% after the the second, 87.5% on the third, 93.75% on the forth and so on.

This is diminishing returns that occur with every extra repeat added to the workout means that not all reps are created equal. A session dosage of as little as 6x400m with 2 minutes rest per effort is more than enough to develop

and challenge the anaerobic fitness of an athlete. In fact, smaller threshold workouts might actually be better than longer sessions as athletes don't pace themselves for the long haul, giving more effort on less sprints can lead to better results.

► **Know your paces**

Threshold intervals should be run between 7/10 and 8.5/10 of an athlete's maximum effort. So a cruisy introduction to thresholds might be one round of 5x200m at a 400m pace (6.5/10 effort). While a tough session might be two rounds of 5x400m at 500m pace (8.5/10 effort).

Scale each training session to build on the session before and don't forget that changing your rest periods will also change the outcome for your team.

EASY RUNS

This is volume running, it is most often done at less than a 6/10 intensity and for distances of above 1km, but much more often between 3-8km.

Not much to talk about here: this is the kind of training where you just need to accumulate minutes in that low-moderate zone.

As a general rule athletes fall into two buckets for their relationship with long distance conditioning.

The athletes that love it, and will run kay after kay after kay all season long. These are the slow twitch athletes, they can run all day, but tend to lack explosive speed and power.

The athletes that hate it, and will do whatever it takes to avoid this kind of running. These athletes can either be unfit so they

just need to suck it up and get to work, or they might be the fast twitch, impact players, quick, reactive and explosive, but not as good at endurance activities.

As a rule, the athletes who are good at distance running probably don't need to be doing much of it and should be working on their speed while the opposite is true for those who aren't as good with their endurance, getting some Kays in the legs will be super valuable.

Most often this extra steady state training is best prescribed outside of main team trainings, going for an extra easy session on the weekend.

A few notes for planning long runs:

- ▶ **Surfaces and footwear matters**

Adding too many kilometres on concrete in bad shoes can create more problems than the fitness it potentially builds. I recommend a variety of surfaces (concrete, gravel, grass) building up from softer to harder as you increase fitness and tolerance to running. If you can avoid concrete all together then you should.

- ▶ **Don't push it too hard**

Cruising sessions are supposed to be easy – that's the idea. Accidentally racing for a new 5km PB is defeating the purpose of this run. Start easy and hold that steady pace throughout.

- ▶ **Don't run sloppy**

These runs need to be easy enough that they genuinely are cruisy, but not so slow that you run heavy with bad technique causing shin splints or sore knees. We have a

whole video series on running technique over on YouTube, check it out here.

▶ **Cross training is your friend**

Alternative forms of cardio, particularly spin bike or swimming are great options to build aerobic fitness without adding more running stress to an injury prone or overloaded athlete. It's not as good as running for footballers, but it beats the hell out of developing a stress injury or just sitting on the couch.

FAULT 4: POOR WARM UP AND COOL DOWN

Every training session and match starts with the warm up.

This warm up consists of 5-30 minutes elevating body temperature, increasing blood flow, activating energy-producing enzymes, firing up neural pathways, sharpening skills, and locking in mentally.

If you train or play for 35 weeks per year, with an average of three sessions per week and warm up for 10 minutes per session, that adds up to more than 1000 minutes of training time being spent on warm ups.

Over sixteen hours dedicated to just warming up for footy.

And most teams, if I am being honest, warm up like crap.

A little jog around the boundary, a few leg swings, maybe a chat and some stretches. This is not a high performance start at any level of competition.

There is a better way to approach the warm up. A better warm up can reduce injury risk and improve performance in both the short and long term while simultaneously working on important physical qualities like speed, agility, and footy skills.

WE CALL THIS WARM UP 2.0

we have spent years developing a better approach to warming up and the compounding benefits are immense. The best bit is this warm up can still be completed in under 15 minutes, costs nothing and can be done anywhere.

Here are a few specific ideas for you to include in your warm ups that will increase your teams performance.

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INSTEAD OF A JOG AROUND THE BOUNDARY...

... try sprint technique drills

In the cold dark depths of winter, the jog around the boundary is undoubtedly the quickest and easiest way to simply elevate body temperature and get joints moving. Building on this team lap by including some sprint drill work is an often missed step in getting your running going.

Including drills such as skips, piston running, ankle dribbles, agility hopping, curved running and 3 point starts can improve an athletes running shapes, elasticity, proprioception and sprinting speed, plus the full range movements will take muscles through a wider range of motion than just jogging, improving dynamic hip and ankle mobility. We have a heap of YouTube videos on the topic for inspiration.

INSTEAD OF A CHAT STRETCH...

... sports specific mobility and flexibility work

Stretching and flexibility work is really valuable. The research is mixed as to whether stretching helps in the short term, but it is

undoubtedly a vital long term strategy. Our athletes who regularly stretch before and after each session have lower soreness levels, recover faster, move better and tend to be injured less. The key is to be doing stretches that actually matter, not just the ones that make it easy to have a chat with your teammates.

Instead complete three of our favourite stretches, 20-30 seconds each, once per side, the whole series can be done in under three minutes. [This 90 second video explains how to do them.](#)

Crouching adductor/hamstring

Kneeling hip flexor

Lying glute

INSTEAD OF LEG SWINGS...

... A progressive and competitive kicking game

Leg swings are a whole thing. Mostly they are an ineffective waste of time, but they can also be slightly risky. The reason athletes love them is they love the habit and placebo effect.

The problem is they don't actually do what people think they are doing which is to stretch the hamstrings and groins, preparing the legs for kicking. At best they give a slight nerve stretch, at worst they actually create compensatory motion through the lumbar spine and pubic symphysis potentially irritating and loosening key joints of stability.

If the goal of leg swings is to prepare the legs for kicking, a better approach would be to warm up specifically, with some kicking. In our online training plan *Perfect Pre-Season* we detail a

great alternative warm up series and a great competitive kicking drill to replace these leg swings, progressively sharpening up your teams short and long kicking on both legs.

PERFECT PRE-SEASON

Hopefully the above strategies and tactics have been of some value and can help you structure a scientific pre-season plan to give your team the best opportunity to thrive in the season.

This book is a free sample taken from our online coaches product *Perfect Pre-Season*.

This product contains everything a football coach needs to build and execute a professional grade pre-season training plan.

Complete with periodisation templates, example workouts for speed, strength and stamina and a full 15 week progressive pre-season training plan to get your team fitter and stronger than they have ever been, ready for the upcoming season.

The training guide is available on our website through the link below, and all the content, templates and instructional videos are delivered digitally.

As an exclusive for all coach members of footyreruits.com use the code **FR20** when you checkout to get 25% off the price.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



My name is Jacob and I am a high performance coach at Core Advantage Athletic Development.

I started my career in 2013 at the Oakleigh Chargers with the u15s and then u18s teams working as head of the strength and conditioning programs before moving to work full time at Core Advantage as a strength and conditioning coach.

My role now sees me deliver coaching and programming for teams and individuals from a range of sports, running performance testing for clubs while researching and writing on all things training, performance and rehabilitation.

You can learn more about Core Advantage at:

www.coreadvantage.com.au

Or follow us on Instagram:

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