



10 Ways to Get Fit for Soccer RIGHT NOW!

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Table of Contents

Introduction.....	3
Building Up Your Endurance.....	5
Cardiovascular Conditioning.....	8
.....	8
Consuming a Proper Diet.....	10
Changing Your Lifestyle to Help You Get Fit.....	14
Establishing a Workout Routine.....	15
Stop Eating Foods Which Claim to be Healthy but are Really Only Slowing You Down.....	16
Your Body is a Machine.....	17
Easy Drills to Get You Started.....	18
Lesson #1: Dribbling.....	18
Lesson #2-Drop Kicking.....	19
Lesson 3: The Throw In.....	19
Lesson 6: Chest and Head Blocks.....	20
Lesson 7: Passing.....	21
Lesson 8: The Heel Kick	22
Lesson 9: The Outside Kick.....	23
Playing With Injuries.....	24
Sprains.....	24
Cuts and Bruises.....	25
Strained Muscles.....	25
Broken Bones.....	27
You Gotta Have Fun!.....	27

Introduction

All right! So soccer season is right around the corner and you want to make sure that you're ready when try-outs roll around. Sounds like fun! Soccer is among the most notorious sports in history, and although it traveled to the United States from countries on the European continent (where it still holds the title of "football" rather than soccer, something that can be very disconcerting for those used to the term football referring to something played with a pigskin and slightly more violence than soccer) it has become one of the great American pastimes, along with baseball and basketball.

Although it is not nearly as brutal as football soccer is still not for the faint of heart. It takes a great deal of muscle and endurance to keep up when you are racing across a field as fast as you can in an attempt to outrun the competition and take home the prize-in this case, the black and white checkered blur that you see rolling down the field towards your goalie as the other team attempts to gain their advantage. If you have been an avid sports enthusiast all your life this is probably nothing new to you; you already know how to keep fit so that you are prepared for anything the playing field might throw your way. You probably make a concentrated effort to eat properly and set aside a portion of your day to workout. There will be no surprises waiting for you when you step out onto that field; as a matter of fact, if you have played soccer before you probably know exactly what you're getting yourself into and are wasting your time reading this report!

On the other hand, if you are new to the game and physical activity has never really been your "thing" but you have decided to give it a try you probably need to spend a little bit of time getting yourself in shape. If this describes you, it's okay; don't develop an inferiority complex simply because you are afraid that you may be a little bit behind the game. It won't take you long at all to catch up with your potential teammates if you are willing to put a little bit of effort into it.

Of course, simply knowing that you need to put in a little effort in order to keep up with your competition when the time comes for tryouts isn't going to do you very much good; you need to know exactly WHAT you need to do to ensure that you are as prepared as you could possibly be the first time you step out onto that field. (For reference sake, we are going to assume that the reason you want to prepare yourself for soccer is so that you can be ready when you go up against competition for a spot on the team for the very first time. We realize that this may not necessarily be the case; there are a number of leagues that do not require that their



players audition, and if you happen to play for one of these leagues it doesn't matter; the information we are going to relay below is going to apply just as accurately to your situation as well.)

In order to prepare yourself to play soccer you are going to have to build a fitness regime based upon ten key elements:

- 1) You are going to need to build up the strength and endurance of your leg and arm muscles in order to ensure that they will not falter halfway through a game and send you sprawling on your face on the field with exhaustion.
- 2) You are going to need to improve your cardiovascular conditioning, making it easier for your body to get the oxygen it needs to keep going and preventing you from becoming tired too quickly.
- 3) You are going to need to learn what foods to eat and which foods should be avoided in the interest of helping you to bulk up your muscles and decrease the fat content of your body, making it easier for you to increase your metabolism and get in shape.
- 4) You will need to eliminate all habits which are negatively affecting your health from your lifestyle.
- 5) You will have to establish a firm work-out routine that works all of your body's systems to their maximum capabilities.



6) You will need to stop eating certain foods that are touted as being healthy for you but are actually only serving to exert a negative effect on your body's well being.

7) Throughout the course of your fitness training you will discover that all of your body's systems are interrelated, and why it is therefore essential that you

discover how to achieve the best results from each one to help you to perform at your best when you get out on the soccer field.

- 8) Of course, there's more to getting fit to play soccer than simply getting fit. You need to know how to play as well! We'll give you a list of easy soccer related drills that will help you to become comfortable with the ball and your role on the playing field so that you will be prepared when you walk in on that first day.
- 9) As sports related injuries are incredibly common, particularly when you are playing a contact sport like soccer which focuses primarily on a single location on your body, we will briefly touch on the subject of injuries, playing while injured and how to rehabilitate an injury to help you get out on the field as quickly as possible, and finally
- 10) The single most important part of playing any sport is to make it fun, and that includes your workouts as well! We'll show you a couple of zany activities which will help you to get in shape while enjoying yourself at the same time.

Building Up Your Endurance

As we mentioned before, the most grueling part of hitting the field during a soccer game is the fact that you are never going to have the opportunity to rest. As long as the ball is in play you are going to need to be active at any given point in time, helping your teammates to move the ball into your goal while at the same time keeping it away from the other team. In most other sports you would have the opportunity to rest after one of the teams scored as they retake their position on the playing field. Although you will do this while playing soccer as well, the break you are going to be able to get is going to be brief enough that you are going to think it never even happened by the time you are once again moving down the field listening to your muscles scream at you in protest.

Fortunately, if you have a couple of weeks at your disposal you can quickly build up your endurance so that keeping up with the constant pace of the field does not leave you feeling like something vaguely resembling yesterday's garbage. Since the foundation of



the game is based upon your ability to run it is your running skills that you are going to need to focus on. The average soccer player runs five to six miles during the course of a game at an average speed of four to six miles per hour. (The average is approximately the same speed as would be exerted by a strong power walker; however, bear in mind that this is an average, not an exact number. You will not be running at a steady four mile per hour pace; rather, you will have moments of running full out interspersed with periods of movement at a mild lope.) In order for you to be able to keep up out on the field you are going to need to be capable of traveling five to six miles at a consistent pace to be fit enough to keep up with the stop and go traffic accompanying the ball.

Of course, that does not mean that you need to go out there right now and run six miles. If you are not used to the exercise that would very likely kill you! (Not literally, but you would be fairly sore the next day and it is not overdoing it on one day and then having to take the next five off to recover that is going to help you shine on the field). Instead, what you need to do is start slowly and progress until you are able to run the entire distance. The distance you should begin at depends upon how much time you have until the season starts (hopefully you have given yourself plenty of time) and what your current level of conditioning is. Two miles is generally a good starting point; almost everyone can run two miles at a mild pace.

If you do not believe that you can run two miles or the thought of running for such a long distance intimidates you try to break it up into smaller goals; for instance, you could decide that you are going to run for twenty continuous minutes at a steady pace. This will probably still take you approximately two miles, but since you will be concentrating on the clock rather than on the distance you have traveled it will not feel as far. The important thing when you are doing a timed jog is to remember that it doesn't matter how fast you go just as long as you keep running. If you are moving in a baby jog that really isn't getting you where you want to go any faster than a quick walk would it's okay; the point is, your legs are still moving in a jog-like manner. It is much harder to get started again once you have quit running than it is to make your legs keep moving, so you will be doing yourself no favors by stopping to walk and catch your breath. If you find that you truly cannot run for twenty minutes try a smaller increment, such as ten minutes, and work your way back up.



After you are comfortable with your two miles and/or twenty minutes it is time to extend your distance a little farther. It should take you approximately two to three weeks to become accustomed to a particular distance; perhaps not so much so that you are able to travel it with very little effort but certainly enough that you can stretch it just a little bit farther. Try tacking on an extra mile or an extra ten minutes to your runs for two or three weeks, then another mile or

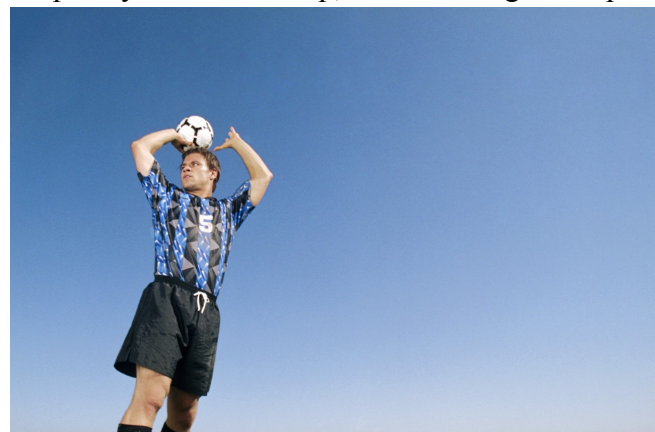
ten minutes after that, and so on and so forth until you are able to run a full six miles or an hour consecutively.

Tip: When you are out on the soccer field you are a distance runner, not a sprinter, and distance runners use a slightly different running style than track stars in order to make their stride smoother and help them to conserve energy. Rather than running on the ball of your foot as you would when you were sprinting attempt to keep your feet flat and close to the ground when you run, as though your legs were skis and you were a cross-country skier. This will make travelling the very impressive distances you are going to need to be able to cover much less painful than they would be using traditional methods of running, as you will not be expending the extra energy required to lift your legs higher off the ground.

Although you may not have realized it, your legs are not the only contributing factor when you are determining how far you can run. Your arms play a large part in helping the body to keep its momentum; you'll notice that after you have been running for a while your arms will be as tired as the rest of you from attempting to keep them in position for an extended period of time and from using them to help propel your body forward. This means that building up the muscles in your arms will help you to build your endurance as well (not to mention strong arm muscles are great when you are throwing the ball in from the sidelines following an "out of bounds" and you have to convince it to travel over the top of your competition in order to reach your waiting teammate).

If you do not have access to a weight room the simplest manner in which to build up the strength in your arms is to do push-ups...the right way. Many people cheat when they do push-ups because their upper body strength is not sufficient to allow them to successfully lift their weight, and while this makes the process infinitely easier it really is not doing your body any good. It is better for your arm muscles to do three push-ups properly than ten push-ups using the "cheat" method. Keep your legs and feet together, your back flat and your hands positioned directly beneath your shoulders. Go down far enough that you could touch the ground with your tongue if you were to stretch it out of your mouth (you probably are not going to want to *actually* lick the ground with your tongue, although that is probably directly related to precisely *where* you have chosen to do your exercises) then push yourself back up, remembering to keep your back straight all the while.

If you do have access to a gym take advantage of it as often as possible. In order to get the maximum results from your workout regime you are going to want to go at least three times a week. Not only will you be able to effectively work your arms on any of the numerous machines that a proper gym can make available to you, you will have the



opportunity to pit your leg muscles against the weight machines as well. The average soccer player can bench press twice their own weight with their legs; although you should not try to do this right away (a hernia is not a pleasant experience, and you really don't want to sign on the dotted line to give yourself one) it will give you a goal to work towards.

Remember that when you are dealing with weights it is repetitions as much as weight that plays a determining factor in how effective the machines are going to be in helping you to build up your body's muscle. You should do each exercise you attempt a minimum of thirty times, done in three sets of ten. Again, this goes back to the same principle as the push up; ten repetitions done with a slightly lighter weight is going to do your muscles more good than three repetitions of an excessive amount of weight, so be sure that you are choosing your weights accordingly.

On a side note, if you are going to be weightlifting in a gym be sure that you have someone with you at any given time to help you out if you run into trouble. There have been countless stories of individuals who have wound up trapped beneath weight machines or have had their chests crushed by a bench press because they did not have a spotter there ready to assist them. This does not mean that you should require someone to hang over your shoulder through each of your exercises; that would doubtlessly become extremely aggravating very quickly. Just be sure that there is someone to whom you can call out should an emergency arise.

Cardiovascular Conditioning

Moving on from the build-up of your arms and legs, you are also going to want to ensure that your body is receiving a full cardiovascular workout on a regular basis in order to help the body to receive and process oxygen through its various systems as efficiently as possible during periods of high activity. The good news is that there are numerous activities in which you can participate that are considered to be primarily cardiovascular in nature and are extremely enjoyable; in fact, for many of them you do not even have to tell your mind that it is exercising!

Before we get to the list, however, let us briefly touch on precisely how often you should give your body a cardiovascular workout, simply because once you read down through the list you are probably going to be wondering to yourself exactly why it is that a special section should be made just for cardio- workouts. Quite simply put, although running every day will provide an adequate workout your body will quickly become bored with the activity, and it will cease to have such a strong effect on the systems. If you were attempting to lose weight this would result in a decreased number of calories being burned; since you are attempting to shore up your cardiovascular system the end result is that the



system eventually reaches equilibrium, the point at which the exercise no longer has any effect on it. Since you want your cardiovascular system to continue to grow in efficiency you need to stir the pot up a little bit by throwing in an extra half hour of exercise three days a week on top of running on a daily basis. Remember, you don't just want to be fit enough to play soccer, you want to be fit enough to play soccer well.

Cardiovascular exercises recommended for athletes by physicians are:

- Running/jogging
- Walking
- Swimming (this will provide you with a fabulous full body workout, helping to tone the muscles in the arms and legs as well as build up cardiovascular strength)
- Riding a bike (this is strongly recommended in conjunction with regular training runs for cross-country and triathlon athletes, as it serves to build up the thigh and calf muscles)
- Horseback riding
- Skiing
- Playing a sport (such as soccer, basketball or tennis)
- Skating (either ice or roller)
- Aerobics



- Dancing
- Karate
- Yoga
- Jumping rope
- Jumping on a trampoline
- Rowing
- Stairclimbing
- Anything else you do that causes your heart rate to rise!

You do not necessarily have to stick to this list; this is just to get you started. As a general rule, if there is any activity that you do that causes your heart rate to rise and you to break a sweat it is probably cardiovascular in nature and will have a positive effect on your system, resulting in increased efficiency and a higher level of fitness.

Consuming a Proper Diet



Now that we have discussed your fitness regime, let us take a moment to evaluate your eating habits as well. If you have ever attempted to lose weight you are well aware that getting enough exercise is only half the battle to getting your body in tip top shape; you must take your diet into consideration as well if you hope to achieve maximum results. The same can be said of preparing your

body for soccer; the foods you eat are just as important in getting your body prepared as the amount of exercise you participate in. The foods you should avoid are very simple, and they have probably been drilled into you since childhood. Try to steer clear of:

- Foods that are high in fat
- Empty calories-foods with a high caloric content that do not really provide your body with much nutrition, such as butter and white bread.
- Junk food-Unfortunately, if you are going to attempt to turn your body into a machine on the soccer field there are some things which are going to have to be sacrificed, and your sugar addiction is among them. Chocolate, ice cream, fruity candies, Twinkies, pies, cakes and anything else that falls into this category should be avoided as strenuously as possible. Potato chips and other greasy, salty snacks fall into this category as well. As a general rule, if you're dying for a snack while you're in training take the time to reach for some vegetables. They are easily metabolized by the body and provide a much more nutritious "munchies" than their high calorie counterparts.
- Fast food. Any type of fast food, regardless of how nutritious it is purported to be, is not going to be nearly as good for you as the real thing. It may take you a little longer at night to complete your nightly routine, but in the end it the rewards will be worth the effort.
- Foods which have been processed or fried, or contain a vast number of ingredients other than those at its core. You want to keep your diet as pure as is possible in today's society.
- Foods which have sugar listed as its primary ingredient, and this does not necessarily apply solely to cookies and candies. This includes items such as high fructose corn syrup, galactose, maltose...anything with an -ose on the end is probably some form of sugar. Manufacturers often use these ingredients in their preservatives, artificial flavorings and gels. Read the label if you are unsure if a product has a high sugar content.

- Foods which have been cooked in oil. Many oils are high in trans-fats, which are extraordinarily bad for you and are going to negatively impact your quest to get into shape.
- Sugary drinks, such as juice and soda. These are essentially empty calories, and the sugar you are consuming will only serve to make you even thirstier.

Although you are probably lamenting the loss of some of your favorite foods after reading through the list above, don't lose heart; there are still plenty of things on the "approved" list, and once you have gotten yourself in shape and broken the addiction to those unhealthy items which shall not be named you can reintroduce them into your diet in very small quantities (for example, a single chocolate chip cookie probably isn't going to hurt you, but eating an entire pack isn't going to do you any good).

Now that you know what you shouldn't eat, let's take a look at what you should. A healthy diet is a diet rich in the following ingredients:

- Vegetables, particularly green ones. Salad is excellent for you, as is broccoli; just remember to go easy on the dressing.
- Whole grains
- Lean meats, such as chicken, fish and low-fat steak
- Fresh fruits (try to avoid canned fruits and vegetables; the former are high in sugar and the latter high in sodium)



- Water. Even though iced tea is low in calories it is high in caffeine, something you should also try to avoid while you're in training. Drinking water regularly provides a second benefit as well; your body's levels of hydration are a critical factor in determining how well you perform on the field. Muscles which have been dehydrated, even

slightly, are going to cramp faster and tire more easily than muscles whose cells have maintained their high water content.

A general rule in any form of athletics (but particularly one where you are going to be running around out-of-doors for any length of time) is that if you are thirsty you are too late. Your body is already dehydrated enough to begin to cause complications. Try to drink water consistently throughout the day, whether you are thirsty or not. Keep a sports bottle with you at all times; freezing the water inside the bottle overnight will help to keep it cold and refreshing, since you will have a constant supply of ice. Just be sure to drink a big glass of water when you first get up in the morning to help get you over that “hump” where the ice is just beginning to melt. (Freezing a bottle of water, then taking it out of the freezer about an hour before game time will help to ensure that you have a cold liquid available to you the entire time you are on the field).

Although it probably is not something you focus on with regularity, if you are unsure as to whether or not your body is properly hydrated take the time to examine your urine each time you go to the bathroom. Urine contains certain substances which serve to give it its traditional yellow hue; when these substances are undiluted the urine will appear to be darkly colored. The principle is that you want your body to be as hydrated as possible, thereby expelling excess fluids in greater amounts and strongly diluting other substances in your urine, giving your urine a clear color. Short story: if you go to the bathroom and your urine is yellow, you need to drink more water.

- Fortified cereals. Try to steer clear of those which are high in sugar (sorry, Lucky Charms still aren't on the list of approved food intake while you are attempting to get your body in shape); however, Raisin Bran, Total, Special K and other related cereals are extremely healthy, keeping your body stocked up on the nutrients it needs to survive.
- Milk and other dairy products
- Carbohydrates. It is essential that you carefully monitor your daily intake of carbohydrates, however; although carbs are the part of your diet that provide your body with the all-important energy that you are going to need to keep up once you set foot on that field, if you do not use up the calories in your carbs they are going to settle in and

become fat (you've no doubt heard people say that the spaghetti they ate went straight to their hips and dismissed it as foolishness; there actually is a ring of truth to this statement).

Changing Your Lifestyle to Help You Get Fit

Although eating healthy and exercising regularly (and properly) will go a long way towards helping you to get fit, none of that is going to do you any good if you continue practicing those lifestyle habits which are going to negatively impact your health. If you do not participate in any of the following please forgive us for preaching to the choir; if you do, however, you are going to need to make some changes as soon as possible or you will be undoing all of your own hard work.

- **Drinking.** Although a little bit of alcohol never hurt anyone, alcohol in excess causes damage to the liver and contributes to the body's fat stores. If you regularly go out and get drunk or have three or four beers every night with dinner (beer is a high calorie beverage) you are going to need to make some changes. Substitute water or tea for the beer (coffee if you must) and stay home if you cannot go out without drinking. Remember, your primary objective is to get your body fit as quickly as possible, and it cannot do that if it is constantly forced to concentrate its energy on filtering the alcohol from your system.
- **Smoking.** You have no doubt heard it all of your life, but we'll say it again; smoking is extremely harmful on your lungs and has a strong negative effect on your lungs' capacity for oxygen intake. Although you may not feel these effects throughout the course of your daily activities they will become all too apparent when it comes time to spend ninety minutes running across a soccer field, and the last thing you want to have to do is come out of a game and sit on the sidelines while you attempt to get your breath back because you couldn't beat the habit.



There are a number of resources available on the market to help smokers to stop smoking, including a number of drugs in pill, patch and gum form that

will help you to wean your body off of its nicotine intake so that the cravings are not so strong that you go running back. Talk to your doctor about the program that is right for you.

- Allowing diseases to go untreated. If you have a chronic condition such as diabetes or asthma it is vitally important that you take all available measures to make sure that the disease is being treated to the best of your ability. There are many people with these conditions who frequently forget to take their medication or deliberately partake in foods and activities they shouldn't that are going to be detrimental to their health due to their condition but brush it off with the argument that a little won't hurt. When you are playing soccer you are placing an enormous amount of strain on your body, and those conditions which weren't a "big deal" back when you weren't playing sports are suddenly going to start exerting a greater effect on your body. If you have not been properly caring for them the end results may be sufficient to cause your body to effectively break down, at best resulting in time spent warming the bench and at worst causing you to spend a couple of days underneath the hawk-like eyes of a nurse at your local hospital who would put Frau (Austin Powers) to shame.
- A sedentary lifestyle. What is a sedentary lifestyle? It's one where you do not participate in a great deal of activity, and consequently your metabolism isn't up to speed. When you are simply going about your daily routine this is going to result in fat accumulating on your body; however, when you are participating in a sport it is going to mean that it will be much harder and require a much longer length of time for your body to get into shape than if you were constantly up and around, cleaning your home or taking a walk around the block. Suggestions for an exercise regime were given above; remember, it is going to take more than simply walking into a soccer practice to get you fit and ready to play.
- An unhealthy diet. Again, suggestions for a healthy diet are given above. Remember that every time you place something unhealthy into your body you are making it that much harder for it to perform its natural functions. The idea behind eating is to help your body perform at its top capacity, not to slow it down.

Establishing a Workout Routine

We have already harped on the necessity of a proper workout routine and the dangers of a sedentary lifestyle, so there is no sense going into a great amount of detail concerning this topic.



Suffice it to say that in order for it to be able to operate as efficiently as possible and continue to grow in strength, endurance and flexibility it is necessary for the body to be exercised at least once a day, preferably for thirty minutes to an hour. Try to establish a regular exercise routine you can live with; over-exerting yourself is going to result in both an unwillingness to continue on (and who can blame you when you are pushing yourself far beyond your capabilities?) and

the need for an extended period of rest between workouts while the body recovers from the damage inflicted upon it.

In addition, try to regularly “shake up” your daily exercise routine. Although exercising every day is both healthy and necessary, doing the exact same thing every day will result in both you and your body becoming bored with it, which means that you are going to be less likely to workout and your body will receive fewer benefits when you do. Throw in a little variety; go bicycling one day and ice skating the next, then take the following day off from your cardiovascular routine to pay a visit to the weight room. This way you’re never at a loss for things to do and you and your body will be able to anticipate your workout with as much enjoyment as possible.

Stop Eating Foods Which Claim to be Healthy but are Really Only Slowing You Down

It is an unfortunate truth that although many foods claim to be good for you, they are not giving you all of the facts. When you are selecting the foods you want to eat be sure to read the labels; many of those that you would think would be nutritious are actually packed with empty calories. White bread is the most classic example of this; it is much less nutritious than its whole wheat counterparts, yet it claims to be a healthy part of any complete diet.

When you go grocery shopping, take the time to read the labels on the foods you buy. As was mentioned above, stay away from anything that has a high sugar and/or salt content (sugar leads to foods being highly fattening, and excessive sodium with have a negative effect on your blood pressure and your body electrolytes). Steer clear of juices, unless they are freshly squeezed; most juices possess massive quantities of sugar. Unless you drink



your coffee black try to stay away from that as well; the cream and sugar you had to your coffee can add calories to your diet very quickly.

In addition to sugar and salt it is important to check the fat content on the meat you eat. Lean meats are often more expensive to purchase but are infinitely healthier for you. Stick to fresh fruits and veggies rather than their pre-packaged counterparts (again, these are high in sugar and sodium-are you beginning to notice a trend here?). The short story is that any type of preservative is going to be much worse for your body than eating the food in its natural state.

Your Body is a Machine...

...and like a machine, in order to perform with maximum efficiency it is necessary for all of its pieces to be in prime operating condition. This means that when you are training for the soccer field you are going to have to exercise your entire body, not just those parts that you are going to be using while interacting with the ball.

Think of it this way. When you don't exercise your muscles properly your body begins to accumulate fat; your metabolism is slowing down, and your body is incapable of processing the foods you eat in the manner that it must to keep your systems up and running. As a result of the fat accumulating in your body your organs begin to have a harder time fulfilling their function; your lungs will find it more difficult to breathe, your heart will have a harder time pumping your blood, your circulation will suffer and your extremities may not be able to receive all of the nutrient-rich oxygenated blood that they need in order to work properly.

As an end result of these processes you will find that your body tires more quickly and you do not have the endurance you previously possessed. In addition, you will find that you have much less energy on the whole due to the slower rate of your metabolism, which will make accomplishing daily chores a trial and playing through an entire soccer game purgatory. You may also find that your body's hormone levels have changed in order to compensate for your decreased metabolism, resulting in an increased risk of depression and general crankiness-all because you forgot that all of the body's systems work together and you chose to only exercise a specific part.

In order to prevent this unfortunate occurrence, be sure that you have a well-established workout plan that works all of your body's systems, in various foods and liquids that will help your body to flush out toxins and not have to work quite so hard throughout the day.



Yes, perhaps this is a case of beating a dead horse; after all, you have already seen the importance of regular exercise and a healthy diet in helping your body get into top condition; however, it is important enough that it really cannot be overemphasized.

Easy Drills to Get You Started

All right, you know the secrets to getting your body into shape, now let's touch upon some basic skills that you are going to need to have when you step out onto the field. Most of these skills will be "formally" taught to you when you begin to practice with your team; however, most of these are fundamental components of the game and therefore will require your skills to be as finely honed as possible.

Lesson #1: Dribbling

Dribbling is the fundamental method of moving the soccer ball from one end of the field to the other, and you will spend more time on the field dribbling the ball than you will doing virtually anything else. Obviously, this is a skill you are going to need to develop veeeeeeery carefully. Dribbling a soccer ball is much more difficult than dribbling a basketball by simple virtue of the fact that you are not allowed to use your hands. You are therefore going to need to maintain perfect control of the ball using only your feet while running as quickly as possible, keeping an eye out for members of the opposing team and scouting for your own teammates so that you know where to pass the ball to should you need to do so. Obviously, this means that you are not going to have a great deal of attention to spare for your dribbling technique!

Fortunately, dribbling competently is an easy skill to master. All you need is a regulation sized soccer ball, an open field and a little bit of time. The trick is to tap the ball from one foot to the other using your instep so that you essentially are keeping the ball in between your legs as you travel down the field; pushing the ball too far ahead of you will result in the ball being free and available for any member of the opposing team that happens to feel like picking it up, while not pushing it far enough of you will inevitably trip you up and cause the ball to drop back



behind you. Attempt to only push the ball as far forward as your running stride; this will prepare you for when you are stuck in a pack of players. If you happen to be moving down a relatively free field you are going to be able to send the ball a little farther forward; however, kicking the ball out in front of you is the easy part.

Again, be sure to focus on only allowing your instep to touch the ball while you are dribbling. It is often

very tempting to allow the front of your foot to connect, as this is the part that is most readily available when you are running; however, kicking the ball with the front or top of your foot will only serve to push it out of your reach. You will have virtually no control over where it goes or what it does. As learning to run while dribbling a ball between your insteps can be an interesting and generally undignified event, it is best if you initially practice this skill when you do not have an audience; that way, when you are in front of your peers you will be able to display at least a little bit of competence and save yourself from the inevitable ribbing that comes along with displaying any lack of proficiency on the playing field.

Lesson #2-Drop Kicking

Okay, this is probably not a skill you are going to have to spend a great deal of time learning to master. Chances are that at some point in your misspent youth you managed to drop-kick a ball off of your front porch onto the roof of your house (or through the neighbor's back window) and therefore have already had some experience. If you have not, this skill is also a relatively easy one to master; however, if you should ever find yourself in the position of guarding the goal it is going to be vital that you know how to properly place your drop kick to ensure that it is in prime position for your team to pick it up and carry it back down the field.

The single most important thing you need to know about drop kicking is that you need to ensure that the ball connects with the top of your foot, near the toes but not on top of the toes. That will enable it to have the strongest forward momentum while at the same time attaining some height. Precisely how much height is directly relevant to where the ball is when it meets your foot; kicking the ball closer to the ground will result in more forward momentum but not as much height, while kicking the ball nearer to the waist will give you plenty of height but not a great deal of momentum. The trick is to learn to place your kicks, so you are going to want to give this a try at several angles to determine precisely how much distance you can get from each connecting position.



That said, as a general rule you are going to want to make your drop kick at an approximate 45 degree angle from the ground, approximately level with your knee. That allows you to get a fairly decent forward thrust on the ball while at the same time controlling its height and trajectory. If the two paragraphs you just read make you feel as though you are reading Greek don't worry; once you actually start putting some of these basic skills into practice it will all make perfect sense.

Lesson 3: The Throw In

If you are familiar with the game of soccer in any way, shape or form then you are fully aware that much like basketball or football the game must be played within the designated playing field. If the ball should happen to go out of the playing field it will automatically go to the other team, who will have to right to throw the ball back into play. This is one of very few

exceptions to the “no-hands” rule of soccer, and it is a very valuable asset because it allows the team that has control of the ball to determine exactly where it is going to go; they can completely change the direction of the game by gaining custody of the ball and sending it back into their territory.

Although you may have images dancing in your head of grabbing the ball in one hand and hurling it down the field like an ancient Greek Olympian, the proper method of throwing a soccer ball back into play is vastly different from the way you would throw any other ball. You hold the ball in both hands, fingertips in the middle and palms facing out, draw it back behind your head and then give it a two handed toss to your nearest available teammate. Be aware that, much like in basketball, you are going to have a member of the opposing team directly in your face while you are attempting to throw the ball; however, as they are not allowed to use their hands (and will actually earn a penalty if one of their hands happens to come into contact with the ball while attempting to block your throw) you stand a very good chance of making contact with one of your own.

The key element to a successful throw in is power. Although they cannot use their hands the opposing team has no other limitations on the methods they can use to gain control of the ball, and so you are going to have to make sure that the ball goes up in the air, yet too high to successfully block it with their chest and too low to make a reasonable attempt at blocking it with their head. You are also going to want to put some “oomph” on it; throwing a soccer ball is not as easy as you would think, and if you are attempting to get it to travel long distances you’re going to need to be able to put some muscle behind it (another reason to hit the gym to work on your arm muscles regularly).

Lesson 6: Chest and Head Blocks

As we mentioned before, using your hands is completely off limits when you’re playing soccer; however, that is quite literally the only part of your body that you are not allowed to use. With that in mind we’ll give you a brief introduction to the use of your chest and head when you are playing the game.

Using your chest to block the ball is a simple matter. As you might imagine, you use your chest to block balls that are coming at you at too great a height to get a hold of with your knees but not quite high enough to hit with your head, and it is a great way to divert what would otherwise be a penalty for touching the ball with your hands (every once in a while the ball comes at you at just such an angle that you virtually have no choice). Simply spread your arms wide to the sides in the same manner as you would if you were being searched by a police officer to ensure that they are safely out of the way and center your chest around the ball.

It is vitally important that when you are taking a ball to the chest you place it appropriately. The proper place to stop a soccer ball with your chest is smack dab in the middle of the breastbone. Ladies, this is approximately where the uppermost portion of your cleavage is, and if



you want to prevent a great deal of discomfort you'll be sure that you place the ball appropriately. This is equally important for both sexes, however; at the bottom of your breast bone you have a tiny extension of bone known as the xiphoid process, and although this bone has generally hardened by the time you reach adulthood it is still far more easily damaged than the rest of your sternum. A well placed ball or a poorly placed kick could result in this bone fracturing off and puncturing a lung, so it is essential that you ensure this is not the part of your body you are willingly offering up for target practice.

A chest block is precisely what it sounds like—a block. Its entire purpose is to stop the ball's forward motion and restore it to your control (ideally the ball will drop down between your feet after it strikes your chest). A head block, on the other hand, serves to not only stop the forward motion of the ball but to send it on another trajectory as well. Ideally you would use your head to stop a ball that was flying through the air at a level even to or higher than your forehead—attempting to squat down to get your head under a ball is possible, but generally not very comfortable.

As with the chest block it is very important that you ensure that the ball connects with your head in just the right point. You want to hit it using the broad portion of your forehead between your eyes; any higher and you will not be able to use your neck muscles to connect with the ball and change its trajectory (the ball will simply bounce off the top of your head), any lower and you will find yourself sporting a bloody and possibly broken bone for the remainder of the day. The trick is to draw your neck back just slightly, then get your head moving forward before it meets the ball so that you can use the your forehead and the ball's own momentum to change its course.

Lesson 7: Passing

Along with dribbling, passing is going to be the single most important skill you will need to master in order to succeed at soccer. Out on the field a team's strength lies in its ability to present to the other team a single united front; the offense is nothing without the defense there to back them up if the other team breaks through their line, and the defense can't do very much without the offense there to help them move the ball out of their territory as quickly as possible. Since teamwork is such a vital part of soccer success there is going to be no room for



showboating out on the field; one single person is not going to be guaranteed to be able to take the ball into the goal at any given point in time. You are going to have to be able to work with your teammates.

You are probably sitting there thinking, “What’s so hard about kicking a ball to someone else?” The difficulty with proper passing is not getting it to the other person, it’s maintaining control of the ball so that it goes precisely where you want it to go. Picture this: You are standing on the field, you have control of the ball and you are headed for your goal. The next thing you know you are rushed by four members of the opposing team. You need to get rid of the ball and you need

to do it quickly; however, you can barely make out the other players on your team. You hear a shout, and a quick glance to the diagonal off of your shoulder reveals one of your own open and ready to receive the pass. The only problem with this picture is that you are going to have to slide it past two of their defense.

In this situation, which is going to be all too common when you get out on the field, you are going to have to hit a very small target while ensuring that the ball is traveling along a clean, smooth path at a speed high enough to ensure that it will be out of your custody before the other team has time to register what you have done-and you are going to have to do all of this while simultaneously running down the field, dribbling the ball and dodging your opponents.

Fortunately, the fact that you are already dribbling means that you are in the perfect position to pass the ball. Since you are already dribbling the ball off of your instep anyway, you always want to pass using your instep as well. Again, using the top of your foot will give you a little more distance, but your instep provides you with more control. You will be able to target your teammate and pass the ball without ever having to relinquish control.

When you practice passing at home be sure that you are practicing using the proper form. Choose a target off of any angle of your body and use the instep of the opposite foot to propel the ball. For example, if you were attempting to make a pass to a teammate who was at an immediate diagonal to your right as you were in the example above you would use the instep of your left foot to make the pass. If your teammate is directly to your left you would use the instep of your right foot to slide the ball on over. Using the opposing foot allows you to maintain your balance and your forward propulsion while making the pass, which will allow you to keep control of the ball at all times until it leaves your possession and may temporarily disorient the opposition focusing on you.



Lesson 8: The Heel Kick

Of course, all of this is fine if you happen to be passing to someone who is ahead of you or directly even with you, but what do you do when you need to pass behind you? This situation will happen quite frequently on the field, particularly if you happen to be charging into a solid wall of opposition with your teammates flanking out behind you. Passing in this situation is considerably more difficult than its more straightforward counterpart; however, it can be done.

To pass a ball backwards, simply step over the ball and kick it using the heel of your foot to drop it back behind you. This is going to be a move that you are going to need to practice a great deal, because keeping your balance while performing the short stop and reverse kick that you are going to need is very difficult. If you are not careful you will wind up sitting crosslegged in the middle of the field with absolutely no idea how you got there. Prior to making your kick be sure that all of your weight has been shifted and balanced onto your other foot, which should be positioned in front of its side of the ball in order to help you maintain control and protect the ball from your opposition; it may help to practice sprinting down the field (or across your lawn) and then making a sudden stop and performing a reverse kick. Once you get the hang of it, performing this move at high velocities will be a piece of cake.

Lesson 9: The Outside Kick

All right, obviously you can't learn all that you need to know about playing soccer here; we would be here all day! So we'll make this your last lesson in elementary soccer maneuvers. Sometimes you will need to make a pass or change direction and there will be no easy way to do so using the instep of your foot; you will have to leave the ball exposed and vulnerable this way, opening the door for the other team to come in and take control. Since the name of the game in soccer is to keep control of your ball at all costs this is obviously something you want to avoid; therefore, what you are going to want to do is what is known as a cross-over move.

This move is precisely what it sounds like. What you are going to do is stop your forward momentum, bring the foot on the side of the direction that you want the ball to go across your other foot and give the ball a tap with the outside of your foot. Now, instead of using your instep



to push the ball forward you are using the exterior portion of your foot to push the ball sideways, and since your leg will be directly in front of it the ball will be protected from your competition. Again, the major risk in this move is losing your balance and falling (in a most undignified manner) on the field at your opponents' feet and getting a cleat to the nose for your trouble, so it would be a very good idea to be sure that you have perfected this move before you take it out onto the field.

Playing With Injuries

Unfortunately, although soccer will never make the top ten list of dangerous sports there is still a high risk of injury associated with playing the game, particularly to the hips, knees and ankles which are exposed to the risk of injury with greater frequency than other parts of the body. Regardless of how careful you are and how well you and your teammates follow safety regulations it is still virtually inevitable that at some point in time during your athletic career you are going to suffer from a sports related injury.

When you are down with an injury you are going to find yourself faced with a very difficult choice; should you play injured or allow the coach to bench you? The decision should be simple; playing injured makes it very difficult for the body to properly heal itself, therefore



resulting in an increased risk of permanent injury. However, real life is not always as cut and dried as theory. There will that last all-important game, this championship and that tournament, and you team will be short experienced players if you do not participate. Even though you know the risk you are still going to want to get back in there and pick up the slack.

Since the occasion for this is inevitable, below you will find a compiled list of common soccer related injuries, home treatments and suggestions for playing when you aren't 100%. Remember, however, that this is a very generalized list. If you have been injured the decision about

your suitability to play should be made by your physician and your coach. Telling them that the report on the internet said that you could play probably isn't going to get you very far!

Sprains

Sprains and strains of the joints are probably the single most common form of injury suffered by soccer players, again particularly of the ankles and knees. These can occur when the joint is wrenched too abruptly in an unfamiliar direction, particularly when the player takes a fall on the field while moving at a high velocity.

Treating a sprain is a simple matter; there isn't much that you can do for it other than attempt to keep ice on it to minimize the inflammation, avoid putting pressure on the joint as much as possible and keeping the joint wrapped to provide extra support on those occasions during which you must be up and about on it.

Playing with a sprain in one of the joints in your leg or foot is an extremely foolish course of action; however, if you are absolutely determined to play or your injury is all but healed and you feel that you are capable of going out on the field there are a number of knee and ankle braces that can be purchased over the counter that will provide suitable support while you are on the field.

Cuts and Bruises

Any game in which you have an entire field full of people kicking at each other while wearing shoes with spikes on the bottom is bound to result in a fair share of scrapes and bruises.

If a bruise seems to be accompanied with an inordinate amount of swelling or seems to be spreading under the skin rather than staying in a centralized location, or a cut seems to be deep enough to require stitches or bleeding profusely you should see a doctor; you may have suffered a more serious injury than you previously believed. Otherwise, putting ice on a bruise and keeping your scrapes clean and clear of infection is the best treatment you can provide.

It is especially important for you to ensure that any cut received while on the field is properly cleaned and treated with an antibiotic ointment; there is an incredible amount of bacteria naturally residing in dirt, and although it usually does not present a problem it will have a field day reproducing in an open cut. This will result in the wound being extraordinarily painful, taking an inordinate amount of time to heal and opens up the possibility of the infection spreading out from the injury to other parts of your body, presenting you with a systemic infection that is going to be even more difficult to get rid of. Trust us when we tell you it is much easier to take a couple of minutes to clean the cut out with some soap and water or saline and apply a quick dose of Neosporin.

Unless a cut or a bruise is severe enough to seriously hamper your mobility you can probably continue playing.



Strained Muscles

Any sport where you place an unusual demand on your muscles is going to result in strains and “pulled muscles”, and soccer is no exception. The good news is that this usually is not severe, and you will be able to get back out on the field. Be aware that the muscles are going to be very stiff and sore for two to five days afterwards, making movement uncomfortable; however, getting these muscles loosened back up will go far in relieving the pain, and you may find that by the end of the day you barely feel those muscles that were screaming at you when you rolled out of bed.

To this end, a warm shower will help to loosen the muscles. The best thing you can do for them after that is to stretch your way through the pain. Although it is going to feel like the torments of hell when you attempt to get these muscles to work you will find that once you have loosened them back up you are able to move much more easily. If you have a severely strained muscle attempt to avoid overdoing it, however; while a little stretching will help to loosen it back up, overdoing it will just result in your injury becoming more uncomfortable and taking longer to heal. Your body will be able to tell you what it can and cannot handle. Applying a muscle rub intended for over-extended muscles such as BenGay can provide some relief as well; although the smell will be enough to make you want to run from the room the benefits to your aching muscles are innumerable.

There are a few exceptions to this rule. The number one severe muscle related injury suffered by soccer players is a pulled hamstring. Be very careful; although your hamstrings are probably going to ache when you first begin to play due to the fact that they are not used to the demand you are going to be putting on them it is possible to severely injure your hamstring and make walking impossible. As you can well imagine, that puts playing soccer right off the list! If you have injured your hamstring and the pain exceeds that which you would expect from a pulled muscle talk to your coach or physician; a single game (or even a single season) is not worth the misery that will be visited upon you if your hamstring is not given the opportunity to heal properly.



Another exception to the rule are strained ligaments and tendons. Ligaments are the fibrils that connect your muscles to the bone, and they are often damaged when you are playing a sport such as soccer that places heavy demands on the muscles. A strained ligament or tendon will need proper time to rest and recover in order to ensure that it heals properly and you are able to come back to the game in fit, fighting form. A doctor will be able to confirm whether or not you have an injury more severe than a simple pulled muscle; if you are in more pain than a pulled muscle would warrant be sure to get it checked out, and abide by your doctor’s decision.

Broken Bones

Although it is extraordinarily frustrating, if you have suffered a broken bone you are going to have to ride the bench until it has had the opportunity to heal. Bones take longer than muscles to heal, as the body reproduces its bone cells much more slowly than those that comprise its tissues, and if the bone is not allowed to set properly it will not heal at the right angle and you will either have to live the rest of your life with a deformity in your bone structure which may permanently impede your mobility or have the doctor rebreak and reset the bone,



which is going to be extremely painful (remember how much fun it was the first time you did it?) and is not going to guarantee that there will be no consequences from the bone healing improperly the first time.

This rule applies to broken digits as well. There have been countless soccer players who have broken fingers and continued to play, thinking that it wouldn't matter because they didn't need to use their hands. Unfortunately,

they forgot that although they couldn't use their hands to handle the ball that in no way, shape or form should be misconstrued to mean that their hands would not be open an vulnerable to further injury. They quickly discovered the error of their ways the first time they fell on the field and got their fingers stepped on, or accidentally got their hand in the way of either a projectile ball or a projectile opponent with no idea that they were playing injured. Just say no; the six weeks healing time is a small price to pay for being whole for the rest of your life.

You Gotta Have Fun!

All right, the hard part's done. You've got the skills, you're fit and fine and ready to hit the field and make a splash-but you're forgetting the most important part. Soccer is a *game*. That means it's supposed to be fun! No doubt by now you are heartily sick of exercising and practicing, running drill after drill and not getting to do anything you really enjoy in the process. Fortunately, that's all about to change. Why should your practice routine be a total drag? You'll eventually come to loathe your practice time, turning you off to soccer as a whole before you've even gotten started. There are ways to practice your soccer skills and get fit while at the same time having a great time! We'll introduce a few of these bizarre (and not so bizarre) methods for your perusal and you can introduce them to your teammates. We guarantee that you'll never think of soccer the same way again!

- 1) Chicken soccer. No, you read it right. This was a game that was introduced by counselors in a summer camp in West Virginia over a decade ago that has never been forgotten. How do you play? First, you're going to need to gather together your supplies. This game requires a tarp of some sort, water, dish soap and a thawed, frozen, whole chicken. The idea is to mix the soap and water, pour them over the tarp (which is going to act as your field) and put your chicken into play! The first team to five goals wins!
- 2) Totally repulsed by the chicken idea? What about a game of flag football at the beach? This will give you a pleasant diversion from your usual soccer routine while at the same time allowing you and your teammates to practice working together as a team while having a great time-and the fact that playing in sand requires your muscles to work harder than they ever will on a grassy field is an added bonus!
- 3) Balloon/Beach Ball Soccer. Yep, just like it says. Hit the field using either a balloon or a beach ball rather than a regulation ball; you'll be surprised at how much more difficult the game becomes when you no longer have any weight working in your favor! Want to stir it up a little bit? Add a little water to the balloons-not enough that they'll break at first contact but enough to ensure that somebody at some point is getting wet. There's no end to the entertainment this will bring! (Although to be on the safe side it would probably be wiser to play in ordinary tennis shoes rather than cleats; balloons and beach balls aren't nearly as durable as their regulation counterparts!)
- 4) Lose the shoes. Try playing soccer barefoot (after carefully searching the ground for possible hazards, of course). You'll be amazed at how much more focus you have to put into controlling the ball without your sturdy cleats to help you out!

All right, that's it! You now have all the tools you need to go out there and knock 'em dead. Remember, just because you are no longer in pre-season conditioning does not mean that you should begin to slack off on your fitness regime; you're just going to have practices to take the place of some of your normal workouts. Keep up the good work, and have a great season!

