

KEY ELEMENTS OF INJURY PREVENTION

The key elements of effective injury prevention programmes for football referees and assistant referees are core stability, neuromuscular control and balance, eccentric training of the hamstrings, plyometrics and agility.

Core training: the “core” represents a functional unit, which not only includes muscles of the trunk (abdominals, back extensors), but also of the pelvic-hip region. The preservation of core stability is one of the keys for optimal functioning of the lower extremities (especially the knee). Football referees must possess sufficient strength and neuromuscular control in their hip and trunk muscles to provide core stability. There is growing scientific evidence that core stability has an important role in injury prevention.

Neuromuscular control and balance: neuromuscular control does not represent a single entity, but complex interacting systems integrating different aspects of muscle actions (static, dynamic, reactive), muscle activations (eccentric more than concentric), coordination (multi-joint muscles), stabilisation, body posture, balance and anticipation ability. There is strong empirical and growing scientific evidence that sport-specific neuromuscular training programmes can effectively prevent knee and ankle injuries.

Plyometrics and agility: plyometrics are defined as exercises that enable a muscle to reach maximum strength in as short a time as possible. Eccentric muscle contractions are rapidly followed by concentric contractions in many sport skills. Consequently, specific functional exercises that emphasise this rapid change in muscle action must be used to prepare athletes for their sport-specific activities. The aim of plyometric training is to decrease the amount of time required between the yielding eccentric muscle contraction and the initiation of the impending concentric contraction. Plyometrics provide the ability to train specific movement patterns in a biomechanically correct manner, thereby strengthening the muscle, tendon and ligament more functionally. Plyometrics and agility drills were the important components of the programme which were shown to be effective in the prevention of knee and ankle injuries, and in particular ACL injuries.

MOTIVATION AND COMPLIANCE

The coach should be aware of the importance and efficiency of injury prevention programmes. Not all injuries can be prevented, but especially knee injuries, ankle sprains, muscle lesions and overuse problems can be significantly reduced by the regular performance of preventive exercises.

It is crucial that the coach motivates the referees to learn the “FIFA 11+ FOR REFEREES” and to perform the exercises regularly and correctly. Research has shown that compliance is the key factor for efficiency.

The easiest way is to perform the “FIFA 11+ FOR REFEREES” as a standard warm-up at the beginning of every training session.

Finally, if match officials do not have a pre-match routine, parts 1 and 3 could also be used as a warm-up before matches.

Note: if a professional fitness coach is supervising the training session, some modifications of the exercises are obviously possible.