

Flexibility Training for Fitness Competitors and Competitive Aerobics

Both Fitness and Competition Aerobics are sports in which the importance of flexibility is emphasized. Beside strength flexibility is something that the judges are paying special attention to. Among all the top athletes in the world, there is no-one without extreme flexibility.

To reach the flexibility that is needed it is necessary to stretch regularly. Especially during a heavy strength training period the stretching is extremely important.

Stretching should be done with both active and passive methods. In the active method the muscle is stretched by contracting the muscles on the other side of the joint. The strength of the contracting muscles and the stretching ability of the muscle determine the amount of the stretch. The active stretching method is also one kind of strength training. The active flexibility is essential in hip flexors. The most usual exercise for hip flexors is the high leg kick. With a trampoline it is quite easy to improve active flexibility in lower extremities.

In the passive stretching method the muscle is stretched with external force (either with the help of partner or with one's own body weight and gravity) Here the ability to relax is important. The muscle reacts to the stretch with a contraction, especially if the stretch is fast, this contraction can be reduced with active relaxation.

There are three kinds of stretching:

- stretching that prepares muscles to perform (stretching before exercise)
- stretching that helps body to recover (stretching after exercise)
- stretching that improves flexibility

Stretching before exercise prepares body to the exertion. The stretches are of short duration, they last about 5-20 sec.

Stretching that helps with the recovery brings muscles back into their resting length and speeds recovery. These stretches should last about 20-30 sec.

If the goal is to improve flexibility, the stretches should last for 1 minute or longer. After an intensive weightlifting workout it is not recommended to do heavy stretching right after the workout, because of the risk of muscle injuries.

FLEXIBILITY AFFECTING FACTORS

Muscle tonus

Muscle tonus has effect on the stretchability of the muscle. A relaxed muscle stretches better than a muscle with high tonus. In fitness and competitive aerobics the muscle is almost always stretched fast before contraction, e.g. in the jumps. Only those muscles that are able to relax, can output force effectively after a pre-stretch. With massage and relaxation training it is possible to manipulate the muscle tonus.

Warm up

With a proper warm up, muscles and other tissues become more flexible. The warm up raises the temperature in the body, and the inner viscosity decreases.

Time of the day

In the morning flexibility is worse than in the other times. In morning competitions this thing should be taken into consideration and the warm up should be done more rigorously than normally.

Temperature

Cold is similar to morning. In a cold environment a proper warm-up is essential.

Tiredness

Tired muscles are not flexible. The energy stores of the tired muscles are small and the muscle spindles are sensible and protect tired muscles.

In order to increase flexibility, you should stretch every day and if possible, twice a day. Wake up 10 minutes earlier than usual for gentle stretching in the morning, this will then make it easier to stretch later in the day. Remember that quality is important. Good technique must always be used. If you practice splits with feet flexed and back leg bent, then you are also likely to repeat these errors in other skill such as split leaps and balances. I have found that the fastest and most efficient way to get down in splits is to do them on the floor, with two chairs at either side at your arms. Hold on to the chairs (whilst in splits) and push with your legs against the ground for 10 seconds, then relax, slide down a little further and repeat. This is a version of PNF stretching and is very successful if you're almost down in splits but not quite. It is also very good to use on your 'bad' leg.

Forward Splits - Hints and Tips

If you are able to perform splits, sitting in splits will maintain your ability to do them, but will not improve flexibility any further. In order to increase flexibility, over splits should be performed with one leg on a height. This height should increase gradually as flexibility improves.

Ideas for a height include:

- a stack of books
- a chair
- a stack of pillows
- a box
- or anything lying around the gym

Forward Splits – Preparation Exercises;

Kneeling Lunge

Lunge with back leg against a wall/box

Pike sit reaching forward

Single leg stretch on back

Hip stretch on box

Splits

Start by holding stretches for 20-30 seconds, and gradually increase to 60 seconds. Do not 'bounce' when stretching. Rather than holding a stretch for 2 minutes, hold it for 1 minute.

Have a 30 second rest, then hold for another minute. You often find that you will be more flexible the second time around.

The best way to Increase flexibility is through:

Static stretching - where a stretch is held at its maximum for a length of time.

PNF stretching - where the stretch is held and at the same time resistance is offered so that the muscles have to work in order to keep the stretch at its maximum. This is more advanced than static stretching and is usually done in partners with one partner stretching and the other offering resistance. All exercises must be performed correctly, ie: in splits the hips should not twist

Forward Splits - Preparation Exercises

Kneeling Lunge

Hips square

Body Upright

Hands on floor either side of front leg

Lunge with back leg against a wall/box

Keep hips square

Push hips to ground

Keep shoulders square and tall

Keep body upright

Pike sit reaching forward

Keep legs straight

Keep hips on Floor

Lean forward with a flat back

Try to reach over toes

Single leg stretch on back

Keep hips square

Keep hips on floor

Gymnast uses own force to stretch

Leg not being stretched should be bent

Hip Stretch on a box

Keep hips square

Pull bent leg to chest whilst maintaining

force on the straight leg

Splits

Shoulders square

Keep hips Square

Front leg facing the ceiling, back leg facing the floor Support hands to be even and behind hips

Side Splits - Preparation Exercises

Frog position on stomach (baby splits)

Keep hips square

Keep knees in line with hips

Keep body flat on floor

Straddle sit

Knees facing ceiling

Lean body forward with a straight back

Knees and feet should be fully extended

Side Splits - Hints and Tips

The ideal position for side splits (in my own opinion) is with knees facing the ceiling and legs hyperextended (so that the knee pushes into the ground and the heel of the foot is slightly off the ground). These splits can only be achieved if you are past splits with your knees facing forwards. The first step for side splits is with knees facing forwards and elbows on the ground, rather than straight arms. It is harder to 'cheat' this way and is safer for your back.

The second step is oversplits (ie. with one leg raised)

The third step is splits with knees facing the ceiling, and body upright to help with splits.

TRAIN WITH DESIRE, DESIRE TO BE BETTER TOMORROW THAN YOU ARE TODAY.



Connie