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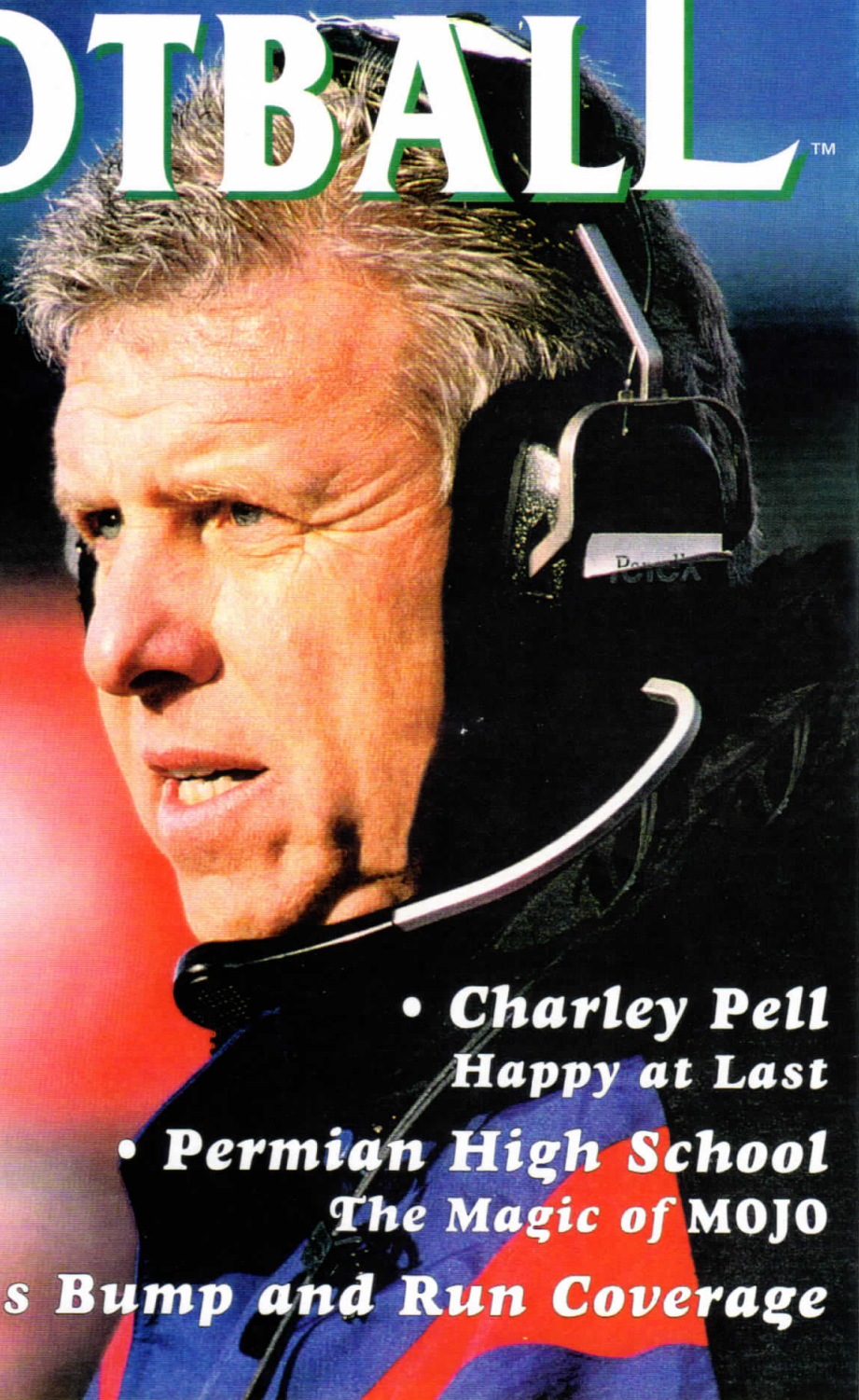
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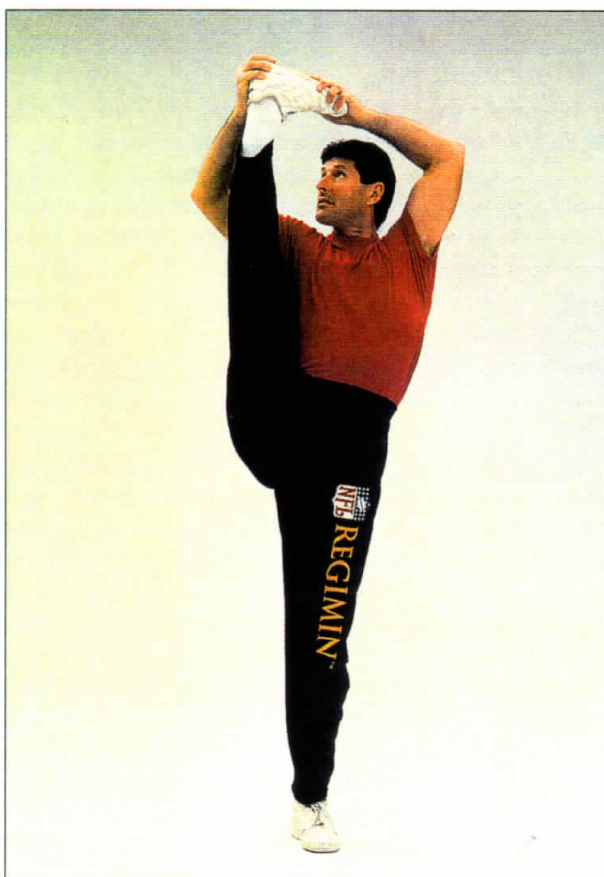
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# FLEXIBILITY AND MOVEMENT

## *“The Missing Link In Conditioning”*



*Adrian Crook demonstrates flexibility and stretching exercises that can increase your athlete's performance.*

By Adrian Crook

*Flexibility and Movement Trainer*

**F**ROM THE NCAA TO THE NFL, FOOTBALL players are highly conditioned athletes who have, for years, been exposed to the most advanced training techniques and facilities throughout the world. Yet their understanding of flexibility, balance and focus, all elements crucial to movement and proper mechanics, is generally limited. As a result, their ability to optimize their athletic potential is also limited.

This article's goal is to give you some insight into the most overlooked facets of conditioning — flexibility and movement. These two elements affect football players in all facets of the game. Whether it's a kicker, quarterback, receiver or lineman, flexibility and balance are often the limiting factors affecting strength, power, quickness and injury prevention.

It is important to recognize that no power on earth can prevent some of the injuries that occur on the gridiron — that is the nature of the game. On the other hand, the “disabled list” in the sports section of any newspaper reads like a who's who of elite,

All-Americans and million dollar athletes sidelined with injuries that too often resulted from improper mechanics, or inadequate conditioning. These injuries can and do affect the outcome of games and entire seasons. If these injuries go unchecked and become a recurring problem, they can severely affect a player's career.

From the conditioning standpoint, the problem usually stems from the fact that many athletes spend too much time working the major muscle groups to the point of overlooking the linkage — joints and connective tissue (the body parts most often injured).

Just because you can squat 400 pounds doesn't necessarily mean you have a strong lower body — ask any athlete who has pulled a groin muscle, hamstring or twisted an ankle. A good flexibility program will strengthen these areas and promote the suppleness necessary to keep these areas injury free, thus promoting the integrity necessary to be truly strong. As the saying goes, “A chain is only as strong as its weakest link.”

### **Sound Mechanics = Injury Prevention**

When discussing injuries which result from improper mechanics, it is important to look at the body as a bio-mechanical machine comprised of a series of levers designed to move within certain perimeters. For example, it's common for a quarterback to concentrate too much on the arm holding the ball and not enough on the hip, shoulder and waist rotation.

Too often it's the forward movement of the throwing arm that turns the shoulders and waist (rather than the other way around), putting undue stress on the shoulder. These errors in mechanics can be corrected by developing the range of motion and kinetic advantage the body has to offer.

For throwing and striking movements, like those of a quarterback, strength comes from sound mechanics. Therefore, it is important that you never sacrifice movement for muscle mass in an attempt to develop more throwing power.

Strength in throwing comes from the athlete's ability to rotate his or her hips, waist and shoulders, and the ability to collapse your shoulder with your follow through. All of this requires great upper body flexibility and kinetic awareness.



## Flexibility and Balance = Increased Performance

Balance is an element that few people understand, yet it plays a major role in a player's ability to be quick, strong and powerful. First, it must be recognized that there is more to balance than just standing on one leg. The real value of balance training is that it develops a keen sense of weight distribution. Understanding how weight is distributed over a standing base, and learning how to control it, is the key to strength and quickness.

There is a big difference between strength in the weight room and strength on the athletic field. In a clash of linemen, he who can more effectively lower his center of gravity and maintain balance will dominate, regardless of who can press the most weight. This kind of strength is developed, among other things, by conditioning the ankles to flex forward. When the ankles flex forward, the athlete is more readily capable of lowering his center of gravity while keeping his hips underneath him — he has more balance than his opponent. Learning to squat with your feet flat, your back straight and your hips underneath you, will enable you to assume the most optimum posture to overpower your opponent. If you couple this with the flexibility necessary in the hips and pelvis to take a strong, balanced and deep first step, you can more rapidly exploit the angles needed to unbalance your opposition.

## Quickness and Change of Direction

Quickness and the ability to change direction are crucial. First and foremost, the athlete must be balanced and have the ability to shift his weight. An aggressive cut or change of direction starts with the ankle, which must be strong and able to flex laterally. If the ankle can flex, the foot can more readily contact the field, establishing a stronger base from which the athlete can push and redirect his momentum. This makes the move more explosive.

The power of the push comes from the inner leg, groin, hamstring and hip flexor. All areas must be strong and flexible to exert maximum power and avoid injury. By using specific stretching exercises with movement, you can develop great integrity in these areas.

## Teaching Movement

Flexibility training is dramatically different from mere stretching routines. It is a discipline that uses a system of progressive exercises that involve movement. These exercises are grouped into sets, with each set having a prescribed number of reps where movement is the key. Although static stretches are beneficial, they should only be part of a system that ultimately teaches movement.

Once the athlete has developed an understanding of the basic movements, more sophisticated, position specific exercises should be introduced. In time, the player is practicing a whole series of movements specific to his position that incorporates his new sense of balance and flexibility.

This type of training develops tremendous strength and endurance. And, because some of the previously practiced exercises will become redundant and less effective, they can be eliminated. This allows the athlete to streamline the workout and be more time efficient.

Because everyone is different, athletes must allow their body to change at its own pace. You must be consistent and non-competitive with flexibility training, not aggressive. It's a good idea to divide the team into groups according to their position. At first, the team will do much of the system together, but as the routine progresses, the groups (positions) will focus on different exercises: linemen will work on forward ankle flex to lower their center of gravity; defensive backs and receivers will focus more on lateral ankle flex, groin and inner leg strength to help with lateral quickness; quarterbacks will focus on exercises for throwing, exercises which may not be relevant to other positions; kickers will practice movement relative to kicking.

## Time Efficiency

Time efficiency is a major consideration when implementing a stretching program into a player's or team's schedules. From a resource management point of view, it is clear that just keeping the players healthy can mean a winning season and less wasted hours in the training room. While some time for stretching must be provided for the players at the team level, the bulk of the training and fitness responsibilities falls on the individual. Fitness, especially flexibility, is a year-round pursuit. *A.F.Q.*

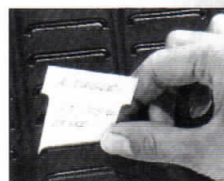
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