

Owen Anderson's The Special Warm-Up (SWU)

Many runners simply jog easily, stretch, and carry out some fairly non-specific drills to warm up, but the value of a warm-up can be enhanced if it does more than just elevate your heart rate and expand range of motion at your joints. It is good to turn the warm-up into a small-scale strength workout, too, so that you are improving your strength while you are getting ready to run (I call this "sneaky strength training"). It's also good to wake up your nervous system, not just your heart, during a warm-up, and the following "Special Warm-Up" (SWU) accomplishes that, too. After a couple of times, the SWU will become routine – and fun (hopefully) to carry out. Here's how the SWU works:

(1) Jog easily for about 10 minutes to "loosen up."

(2) Walk on your toes with your toes pointed straight ahead for about 20 meters, getting as high up on your toes as you possibly can. Your legs should be relatively straight as you do this, and you should take fairly small steps. Then, cover another 20 meters high up on your toes, but with your toes pointed outward about 45 degrees or so. Your legs should rotate outward from the hips when you perform this movement. Your entire legs should be involved in the rotation. Finally, walk another 20 meters high on your toes, but with your toes pointed inward. As you do so, rotate your legs inward at the hips.

Repeat each of these activities (toes pointed ahead for 20 meters, toes pointed out for 20 meters, toes pointed in for 20 meters) one more time before moving on to the next exercise. Keep your upper body relaxed and under control as you carry out this walking, and please avoid the temptation to look down at your feet. Please maintain a running-specific posture at all times.

(3) Walk on your heels with your toes pointed straight ahead for about 20 meters, getting as high up on your heels as you possibly can. Your legs should be relatively straight as you do this, and you should – at least initially – take fairly small steps. Then, simply do what you did with the toe walks, walking 20 meters on your heels with your toes pointed outward and then 20 meters on your heels with your toes pointed inward. Repeat each of the heel walks (toes straight ahead, toes pointed outward, toes headed in) one more time.

(4) Next, skip for about 20 meters, landing in the mid-foot area with each contact with the ground, and with your toes pointed straight ahead. Then skip for 20 meters with your toes pointed out, followed by 20 meters with your toes pointed in.

(5) Begin "spring-jogging" along with short, very springy steps, landing in the mid-foot area with each contact and springing upward after impact. As you do this, your ankles should act like coiled springs, compressing slightly as you make your mid-foot landings and then recoiling quickly – causing you to bound upward and forward. Please keep your legs relatively straight as you do this – don't allow your hips and knees to flex significantly; the idea is to get almost all of the propulsive action from your ankles. Move along in this manner for one minute with quick, little, spring-like strides, alternating your right and left foot as you would do during regular running. After this minute is completed, jog in your regular manner for about 10 seconds, and then "spring-jog" for about 20 meters, alternating three consecutive spring-like contacts with your right foot with three contacts with your left (i. e., three hops on your right foot and then three hops on your left, three more on your right, etc., until you have traveled 20 meters). Jog in your usual manner again for 10 seconds, and then hop along for 20 meters on your right foot only, before shifting over to your left foot for 20 meters (make certain you land in the mid-foot area with each ground contact). As you become stronger and more skilled at this, you can increase the length and quickness of each hop.

(6) Next, carry out dorsiflexion bounces. To do these, simply begin jumping vertically and repetitively to a moderate height, landing in the mid-foot area with both feet and then springing upward quickly after each contact with the ground. The interesting part of this exercise is that you should "dorsiflex" your ankles –

pulling your toes toward your shins – on each ascent, before you begin falling back toward terra firma (you should plantar-flex your ankles slightly, i. e., point your toes, just before making contact with the ground). Complete 12 dorsiflexion bounces, rest for 10 seconds, and then carry out 12 more. Later, you will do this exercise on one foot at a time.

(7) Complete some rhythm bouncing. Start by completing 10 jumps in place at a moderately fast speed, with medium height (don't try for maximum verticality). Utilize maximal motion and action at the ankles – but very little flexion and extension at the knees and hips. After resting for a few seconds, change the amplitude (height) of your jumps to less than an inch, and complete 20 jumps as fast as you possibly can (pretend that your feet are hitting a hot stove, so that you must minimize ground-contact time). Again, almost all of the action should be taking place at your ankles, not at your knees and hips.

(8) Jog easily for a minute or so, and then complete two 100-meter reps of speed bounding. Jog easily for 20 to 30 seconds between the speed-bound reps. Speed bounding involves moving along quickly while focusing on pushing against the ground with more force than usual with each step (while keeping footstrike time characteristically short) and thus taking longer strides than normal. Don't lengthen your strides by reaching out with your swing leg; rather, increase stride length by pushing harder with each contact with the ground.

(9) Hit 2 X 100 meters at what feels like 5-K race pace (fluid, relaxed, powerful running with your normal stride length and rate), with about a 30-second jog in between. Finally, jog lightly for one more minute, and then proceed to the main portion of your workout.

Here are some key pointers about the SWU:

(1) Stay relaxed as you do the exercises.

(2) Don't look at your feet as you perform the various drills. Look straight ahead, as you would during running. Try to always maintain a good running posture, with your torso and head relaxed and well-balanced.

(3) Once you have completed the last component of the SWU, move immediately into the rest of the workout. If you rest for more than a minute or so between the SWU and the body of your training session, some of the benefits of the SWU may be lost.

(4) When you first begin carrying out the SWU, make sure that all of your bouncing, hopping, and skipping is completed on a "forgiving" surface such as grass, soft dirt, a carpet, or a resilient gym floor. Avoid concrete and tarmac, at least for the first few weeks.

(5) In your schedule, the SWU counts for 2.3 miles of running (because of the great amount of movement) with 400 quality meters (~ 1/4 quality mile).

(6) In general, you will complete the SWU (or something like it) before all quality workouts, but not before easy runs.