



To Stretch or not to Stretch

A misleading title I suppose, as there is plenty of evidence to support stretching. Research continues to support the outcome of targeted, well-performed and timely stretching.

The method of stretching hasn't changed much in the last 30 years, with the general consensus being that a stretch should be held for a minimum of 20 seconds (30 seconds preferable) and repeated at least 3 times. To maintain flexibility, the stretching should be done once daily. To improve flexibility, stretching should be done at least twice if not three times daily.

Stretching should be targeted at the correct structure (most commonly a muscle or a group of muscles) and should not be painful. If done well, the sensation should start as a light pull, which should ease off during the 30 seconds and allow further application of the pull (leaning more into the stretch). After stretching, the body part should feel more supple. However, this may last only a short time initially. To achieve permanent lengthening, research suggests that it can take 6 weeks of targeted stretching.

Where the jury is out, is whether stretching as part of a warm-up or warm-down regime is beneficial. Anecdotal evidence suggests it is, but more recent research has led to reports that people are wasting their time stretching as part of a warm-up. Some say that stretching is only beneficial if done on a warm body, yet the research previously done did not require a "warmed-up" body to achieve results.

So, what we are saying here is that the evidence is perhaps still somewhat lacking to confirm the benefits of stretching as part of a warm-up.

Now, before you stop your stretching as part of your warm-up (yes, the regime that you were taught at school/in the armed forces/ by other sportsmen/by therapists etc), consider this; is it doing any harm? There is inadequate evidence to suggest that correct stretching as part of a warm-up is harmful. There is evidence to support that putting the body through an active range of motion starting with small movements and increasing the range of movement (for example; swinging the arms gently by your side, then increasing the size of the swing) is beneficial to the body before forming a functional activity. It doesn't matter whether this is shooting, playing golf or hanging wall-paper. This is effectively a light and active stretch.

I hope that if you have read this to this point, you are screaming at the page "what about the psychological benefits?" Consider this; if stretching has been part of your regime for the last number of years of your successful shooting career, then the chances are it is beneficial to your preparation for achieving good results. It may be that the stretching you do is merely perfunctory, but as it is now routine, it allows you time to mentally prepare for the shoot ahead of you. Therefore, the stretching is now more vital to your regime than you think.

If you have not done stretching as part of your warm-up and preparation regime, is this a time to consider it? If not for the actual benefits of stretching then perhaps for the benefits of mental preparation. Simple stretching does not have to be complicated and as said above, should not be painful.< /p>

On an anecdotal note, I strongly recommend some form of physical warm-up, best started with the range of movements mentioned above. I also believe that these movements and a light stretch will advise you whether certain parts of the body are stiff and need more attention prior to a shoot or later in the day. A stiff and tired body is more likely to suffer from injury. This injury may appear mild (sore neck, aching shoulder) but will eventually hamper your ability to perform at a high level and gradually reduce your ability to perform at any level. I therefore, also advocate light movement and stretches as a warm-down. Having held your body in an asymmetrical position for shooting, the body is grateful for activity back in its normal symmetrical (nearly!) position and any areas needing more attention may be highlighted.

So yes, I am a believer of stretching, when targeted and performed well, in a timely manner.
