

Taking the 'Bleep' out of Bleep Test!

Are you the umpire that has no problem umpiring a full game (making sure you're up with and often slightly ahead of play) but just can't get that Bleep Test level you need? Is your failure to reach this level forcing you to make a decision to stop or lower the level you umpire at?

In this article, Super League Umpire and Sport and Exercise Science Graduate Gary Burgess talks about how to reach your target level and offers suggestions on getting there with minimal stress or worry.

For many umpires, the 'bleep' in Bleep Test could represent any number of your favourite swear words and for some - failure to make the grade could spell the end to them umpiring in a particular league or competition. If you truly aren't fit enough to continue you don't need a test to tell you, but more often than not, it's the mechanics of the test that will be causing you most of your problems.

Even before you embark on a strenuous training regime there are things you can do without breaking a sweat.

Improving Your Mental Toughness. (Negative Psychology)

The Bleep Test for some can be a mentally tough challenge. You can make vast improvements even without any change in base fitness, just from having a more positive mind. To reach the highest level required, 7.1 for Super League, you are only being asked to exercise progressively for 7 minutes. I am sure if you were asked to run a certain distance in 7 minutes you'd be able to do it, equally it translates to running around the court 11 and a half times in 7 minutes which I believe is more psychologically 'do-able'. A strategy you could employ to break the monotony of the endless shuttles is have somebody shout to you how many minutes you have left. This has worked very well in the past and is often more psychologically appealing than listening for the dreaded 'Start of Level Five etc'!!!

A different approach you could try is to perform the test as frequently as possible. Don't just do it when England Netball needs you to. It will come as no surprise that the more you do it the easier it should become. As part of my own pre-match warm up I incorporate part of the Bleep Test. It provides a great progressive cardio-vascular warm up which will

prepare you well for your match. Try a few levels, perhaps up to level 4 to start with after you have completed your stretches.

An area where the jury is still out is whether you should either perform the test individually or in a group (having an accredited coach with you in both situations of course). There are both advantages and disadvantages present with either choice. Studies have shown that athletes that perform the test on their own often achieve higher scores as they push themselves harder and don't stop when others do. Someone dropping out before you means in a roundabout way that it's ok for you to. If you're in the camp that prefers to perform the test in a group - ensure that everyone in the group is both physically and physiologically similar. A negative situation could occur if you have someone that's tall running with someone that's short. Over the course of the test the long legged participant will cover less distance than the short person purely based on the size of their stride. Everybody in that group needs to be pushing for that common goal - to achieve the level that is required.

If you have a large group split it into two. While the first group is performing the test the second can give moral support and encouragement which will often push participants towards and beyond the target level. At the end, the groups swap over giving support to the others.

The nature of the Bleep Test is that athletes performing it and should push themselves to exhaustion. When performing the test to achieve a particular level a person's focus is different. In a recent Bleep Test I did it with a Great Britain athlete, I continued past the required level and went on to exhaustion. The level I would normally stop at came and went very fast and in the grand scheme of things I did exceptionally better than I expected. By effectively making the peak of your mountain the level you require you may be indirectly making the whole thing an up hill struggle.

Pacing and Technique

Also without any change to your aerobic fitness, you may be able to improve your score by pacing yourself so energy is not wasted from end to end. Try and stay relaxed, quickly getting up to the required pace. Running at a constant pace will be more efficient and whatever you do

don't race to stay ahead of the 'bleep', it wastes a massive amount of energy. You should arrive and then leave as you here the bleep.

The way you turn could affect you reaching your desired level. Using an efficient turning technique will minimise any excess energy wasted during the turning phase. As you come in to the turn, time it so that only one foot just touches over the line and turn sharply, not following a wide arc which will mean you don't travel a further distance. You should drop your hips slightly as you turn and push off strongly for the first few strides to get up to pace. When you near the end of a level try to be on time with the bleep and step up your pace straight away. Run efficiently to conserve energy, run with your shoulders relaxed and breathe deeply and smoothly.

Physical Training

If you find that after trying some of these suggestions you are still coming up short then its back to the drawing board with your training techniques. The single best way to improve your Bleep Test score is Interval Sprint Training and should only take about 15 minutes a day, twice a week.

Interval Sprint Training on a hill is the best way of increasing your score and should be part of anyone's training who wants to improve cardiovascular endurance. Hill Sprints consists of finding a hill, the steepness of which is varied - the fitter you are the steeper the hill. It should have a length of around 100 metres. After a warm up you begin the session by sprinting at 100% effort to the top of the hill. Once you reach the top start a stopwatch and slowly jog back to the bottom giving yourself one full minutes rest. When you arrive at the bottom, turn around and sprint to the top again. You will need to repeat this eight times. This will take around twelve minutes to complete and will really push your body and your cardio-vascular endurance. Be warned! This sort of training really takes it out of you so it is suggested you do no more than two sessions a week.

I hope that I have provided you with a collection of ideas to try to make reaching that level easier. All of these ideas are only suggestions and I would welcome any further input or personal experiences to further 'fill out' this problem. One thing you shouldn't do....

Do not defeat yourself before you've even started and keep on trying.

