

# **How Facilities Prepared College Athletes for This Year's NFL Combine**

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When someone goes on a job interview, they often buy new clothes, get a haircut, and maybe even shed a few pounds, in hopes of making a good first impression to a potential future boss.

The idea of making a good first impression also holds true for the approximately 330 college football players who were invited to workout at the 2010 NFL Scouting Combine in Indianapolis from Feb. 24-Mar. 2. Each athlete undergoes extensive mental and physical evaluations by the personnel of all 32 NFL teams, which serves as their job interview for the 2010 NFL Draft on April 22-24.

In an effort to get into optimal physical and mental condition for the Combine, most athletes go through a pre-Combine training program, which is geared toward improving their draft position. The difference in getting selected in the first round versus the second round is literally millions of dollars. For other athletes, a good showing at the Combine can mean the difference between being selected on the first day of the Draft instead of the second day or being drafted at all.

Most pre-Combine programs have a similar goal of providing comprehensive physical and mental training specifically geared toward the numerous drills conducted at the Combine. Standard amenities generally include strength and speed training, learning position-specific skills, usually from former NFL coaches and players, as well as access to a nutritionist, massage and physical therapists and more.



Where the programs vary is the path a facility takes to achieve this shared goal. Selecting the proper training program has become an important part of the NFL pre-draft process and numerous Valley-based facilities rank among the elite.

### **Command Performance**

No Valley-based facility has made more of an impact on the NFL Draft than Athlete's Performance Institute, which began offering Combine training in 2001. Their clientele list reads like a who's who of NFL players, as founder Mark Verstegen and his crew have trained 257 draft picks, including 53 first rounders and the last four number one overall picks.

API offers 28 specialists that focus on speed, strength, nutrition, position specific, chiropractic, physical therapy and on-site meal preparation by a culinary team. They also provide a specialist for the Wonderlic Exam, the 50-question aptitude test given to all NFL draft prospects, and a media specialist, who works with the athletes on improving their interview skills and dealing with the media.



API has four facilities nationwide. In 2009, its Arizona facility relocated from Tempe to its current luxurious location in North Phoenix. This facility is as high end as they come and offer too many amenities to list in their entirety.

This year's class of 22 NFL hopefuls include former Sun Devils Chris McGaha and Dexter Davis as well as Notre Dame wide receiver Golden Tate and Oklahoma defensive tackle Gerald McCoy.

### **A Combine pioneer**

Warren Anderson, executive director of the Phoenix-based Make Plays.com Center for Human Performance is considered a pioneer of Combine training when he began his program in 1985 at the urging of Bruce Allen, now the Washington Redskins general manager.

"We worked together in the USFL," Anderson recalled. "Then Bruce went into the agent business and I was just starting up in the training business. He told me I should consider doing Combine training for his athletes, so he could offer them a competitive advantage."

Anderson has nearly 30 years experience and, along with his team of former NFL coaches and players, work toward improving football skills through the Makeplays Combine Training Program where athletes train twice a day, 5 – 6 days a week. Since launching combine training, Anderson has worked with more than 500 players that were drafted in the NFL, including 41 first-round draft picks.

## **No Doubt**

Another major player in pre-Combine training is Brett Fischer of Phoenix-based Fischer Sports Physical Therapy and Conditioning. The facility is well known for its work with baseball players but for more than 10 years, Fischer has partnered with Will Sullivan to train an average of 10-15 players per year through his No Doubt! Football, NFL Combine Training Camp.

While Fischer has trained five first-round picks and six-second-round picks, he has established his reputation for training many unheralded players and turning them into higher than expected picks.

"These are the kind of guys I like working on," said Fischer, who has more than 20 years of sports conditioning and rehabilitation experience. "I'm not downplaying the importance of also working with the first-round picks but it's also important to find the guys that no one projected very high that go and do well."

Fischer also prides himself on 40-yard dash training as many athletes he worked with went on to set Combine records.

## **Diamonds in the rough**

Other NFL Combine training options include Triple Threat Performance in Tempe, which will train more than 20 athletes this year and is growing its reputation in this area. Triple Threat boasts former Olympian Dan O'Brien on its coaching staff.

The IKEI Performance NFL Draft Preparation Program is limited to 10 players each year. Founder Chad Ikei has more than 20 years of experience and a background in strength and power sports. IKEI Performance has locations in Scottsdale and Chandler.

Speed specialists know about Mo Streety, who has worked with athletes for 11 years. Players he has worked with include Darrelle Revis, Roddy White and Terrell Suggs. Coach Gary Zauner was an NFL special teams coach for 13 years including with the Arizona Cardinals. He has carved out a niche for working with punters, kickers and long snappers and holds annual camps in Scottsdale to prepare prospects for the NFL Draft.

With millions of dollars potentially at stake, making a great impression at the NFL Combine and ensuing Pro Day workouts have taken on greater importance. Leading up the NFL Draft, many players will climb up the rankings of prospects, as they gain favor in the eyes of those who have scrutinized their very move. And once the names are called on April 22, smiles will come across the faces of many Valley-based sports performance professionals knowing they played an important role in prepping members of the Class of 2010 for their chance at a career in the NFL.

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