

The Ultimate 4-Day Job Interview

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It's that time of year again folks. No, I'm not talking about the post-turkey-day bulge or holiday madness at the malls. For sports performance coaches, it's NFL Scouting Combine prep season.

All over the country, phones are ringing off the hook as agents recruit the nation's top college football players. Once their prospects sign on the dotted line, of course, they're placed in specialized training centers scattered around the country. In fact, choice of training site seems to be a bigger factor in this process every year. Combine preparation has become big business, with a growing number of performance training centers vying for a piece of it. The Combine itself has even become a high-profile event.

The *National Invitational Camp*, or "NFL Scouting Combine" as it's popularly known, is conducted in Indianapolis each year during late February. The list of invited participants is capped at 335 athletes. That's the bad news — the number of high-probability draft prospects is small. In fact, it's a fraction of the college football players who aspire of playing on Sunday. The good news is that this doesn't dissuade those lower-probability prospects from trying to make it, and seeking out our services. We can still help these marginal guys, even if they don't get invited to Indy and get their shot on pro-timing day. And of course NFL teams significantly reshuffle the whole talent pool based on how their top-ranked players perform at these events.

If you want to play in this space, you need to know what the Combine actually involves (a hint: it's the mother of all job interviews). Then you can develop strategies enabling your athletes to arrive in Indy in February, knowing what to expect and fully prepared to ace the interview. It's big challenge, considering how extensive the Combine is and how limited our window of preparation can be.

Take-Aways

Let's start with some take-home messages for NFL prospects:

Prepare like an Olympian. There's no doubt about it: Preparing for the NFL Scouting Combine

usually involves a fair bit of “training for the test”, but there’s more to it than just running and jumping well. The Combine is a 4-day event that’s part medical exam, part psychological test, part interview, part workout and of course part media circus (**Table 1**). Disappointing performance at any step of the process can be expensive. Above all, it’s not just about drills and tests. It’s about the attitude and character each player exhibits when performing them.

In my experience, preparing for this resembles training for an Olympiad more so than a football season. That’s a wake-up call for many athletes, especially when they discover what’s actually involved and how thorough — as well as different — their training needs to be. Consider how many football players have never experienced 6+ consecutive weeks of double sessions, a pre-event taper, or a running program that’s focused on technique instead of conditioning or punishment. Talk about a paradigm shift — that’s three rolled into one! The good news is that most Combine invitees are highly motivated because this is their shot to make it to the pros; and they usually don’t argue when you explain that you won’t run them into the ground. The challenge, however, is that much of this is new territory for them, requiring a leap of faith on several fronts. I have found that advance education is the key, beginning on the day I first meet each athlete.

Prepare with the intent of doing everything. The Combine truly is an invitational camp — an all-expense-paid opportunity for each athlete to showcase himself. Unless he’s the #1 rated player at his position and projected as a first-round draft pick, he won’t help his rank (or bargaining power) by opting out of something or deferring until his pro-timing day. Ultimately it’s the athlete’s call, and he’ll have several factors to consider including health/injury status and time to prepare after the season. It’s also a good bet he’ll be getting lots of input about this from others, particularly his agent. To the extent you can, counsel your athletes to fully prepare, understand what’s expected of them in return and participate in everything.

You’re being graded on *effort* as well as *execution*. These are the criteria coaches use to grade players’ performance on game day, and athletes need to understand that they’re being graded

with these same criteria in every Combine drill and test. There's more to earning a high rank than just getting a good score or using good technique. Coaches and scouts are looking for "snap-to-whistle" players who hustle and finish everything.

Listen to coaches' and scouts' instructions during performance tests and positional drills.

Understand what they want you to do and how they want you to do it so you can execute each drill cleanly, without repeated trials. Since the menu stays pretty constant and many events are run by the same people each year, doing some advance homework on previous network broadcasts is time well spent.

Teamwork, teamwork, teamwork. Players are herded through the Combine workouts in position groups. This can get interesting during skill drills, when they may have to line up (and cooperate) with other players who might eventually be competing with them for a draft spot. Obviously, some might not be inclined to play well with others if they think they might be able to gain an edge. The coaches and scouts running these drills are clear about directing athletes to work together and help one another — and a player's stock can drop fast if he gives off any vibes that he's a "me guy". So advise your athletes to be team players even when their instincts tell them otherwise, and to focus their competitiveness on their own effort and execution.

X's & O's

The list of invitees for the NFL Scouting Combine is published each year in December, and the players on it receive invitations via mail. They're chosen by a selection committee comprised of directors from NFS and BLESTO scouting services, as well as members of various NFL player personnel departments. There aren't any walk-ons at this event.

The first camp for NFL draft-eligible players was conducted in 1982. By 1985, all teams decided to participate and share the costs. After brief stints in a few locations, the Combine was moved to Indianapolis in 1987 and has been conducted there ever since. Its main purpose is to ascertain medical information on college football's top players. It has evolved through the years to include a battery of tests, interviews and meetings, and is now a thorough and intensive 4-day

job interview (**Table 1**).

Athletes usually put big emphasis on measurables, especially the “workouts” (read: performance tests). These tests are commonly performed at most schools’ pro-timing days as well, typically sometime in March. While the tests are clearly important, it’s important to realize that they’re really a means to an end: *grading and ranking players*. As part of the entire event, measurables are used to try to gauge the same immeasurables most employers screen for when interviewing candidates for a position. Besides health and durability, these include:

- Character and discipline
- Work ethic and productivity
- Instincts and intelligence
- Demeanor and coachability
- Competitiveness and teamwork

NFL teams use the Combine to screen prospective players for more than just *athleticism*. They’re also looking for *professionalism*. This isn’t surprising considering the investment they make in their personnel.

Game Plan

The NFL Scouting Combine is deployed over a 7-day stretch where groups of players arrive on a rolling basis and rotate through a 4-day schedule. Typically starting in the third week of February, the sequence is as follows:

- **Wed-Sat** — Specialists, Offensive linemen, Tight ends
- **Thu-Sun** — Quarterbacks (2 groups), Wide outs (2 groups), Running backs
- **Fri-Mon** — Defensive linemen (2 groups), Linebackers
- **Sat-Tue** — Defensive backs (2 groups)

Here’s an overview of how each group’s schedule proceeds:

Day 1. In addition to traveling to Indianapolis, the first day’s events include registrations, medical pre-examinations, orientations and formal interviews.

Since medical screening is a top priority, it’s crucial for players to arrive prepared for their medical pre-exam. Athletes should consult their college team’s sportsmedicine staff for any x-rays, MRIs or CT scans performed in past 12 months, along with their interpretation, as well as any written surgery or test notes. Failure to bring any of these to Indianapolis may result in

having to repeat tests and possibly getting behind schedule. Players should be advised to keep copies of any test results they bring in case they don't get the originals back.

The medical pre-exam also includes Cybex isokinetic testing. This test involves bilateral concentric knee extension-flexion at two different speeds on a Cybex HUMAC NORM (for more information: www.csmisolutions.com). As isokinetic testing and rehabilitation has become less popular in recent years, many athletes have no experience with this kind of “accommodating resistance” machine. Hence, it is very useful to familiarize them with one in advance if possible because poor performance on this test can be used to flag a potential problem during the medical exams conducted on day #2. The test protocol is as follows: After warming up on a bike or arc trainer, each player performs 3 practice repetitions on the Cybex. He then performs 3 maximal reps with each leg at 60 degrees/second, as well as 15 maximal reps at 300 degrees/second. The test is usually completed in less than 5 minutes, and results are provided on a 1-page report including the athlete's demographics, a graph of torque vs. positions curves, best repetition values and comparisons. These are evaluated by an Athletic Trainer and included with the athlete's folder. The report and all other test results are stored on a CD and provided to each team.

This is also the first of three days of team interviews. On days #1 and #2, these are conducted in a kind of gauntlet format often lasting well into the evening (up to 11 pm). Each team is allowed to send advance invitations to as many as 60 players they'd like to formally interview. These sessions are limited to 15 minutes, where players may rotate from one meeting to the next over a period of hours. There's even a timer who sounds an airhorn (complete with 2-minute warnings) to keep everyone on schedule. Each team has its own style of conducting these meetings and choosing which staff members attend. By all accounts, pretty much anything goes — short of running live drills — in these interviews. This is an area where many agents have invaluable experience in getting players well prepared. My advice: Know the golden rules (**Table 2**) and expect the unexpected!

As the Combine has become more of a spectacle each year, athletes should also be prepared

for the dog-and-pony show that takes place outside the hotel. Vendors set up shop. Autograph-seekers and people-watchers hang around, hoping to get a glimpse or chat with a future NFL star. While hotel and stadium security do a good job of sequestering the players from outside activity, it helps to know what's waiting for them when they have to hike between buildings or head off site.

Day 2. The second day's events include measurements, team medical examinations, media interviews and psychological testing. Formal interviews similar to those described above also continue into the evening.

Measurables include height, weight, arm length, hand span, body composition and “weights and reps” (225 lb. bench press test). Contrary to what many athletes are accustomed to, these aren't conducted in a discreet setting like a doctor's offices or training rooms. In fact, height and weight are gathered in an auditorium where — wearing only compression shorts — the players are literally on stage in front of hundreds of coaches and scouts, as well as TV cameras. It would seem the Combine serves, at least in part, as an eyeball test.

Athletes' body composition is assessed using the BOD POD, another apparatus many of them may be unfamiliar with (for more information: www.bodpod.com). It uses “whole-body densitometry” technology to determine lean/fat mass. It's based on the same principle as hydrostatic weighing, but uses air displacement instead of water. According to the manufacturer (Life Measurement Inc.), air is more convenient and comfortable than water, thus providing an easier and safer testing environment as well as better reliability, repeatability and accuracy. The surface area of clothing and hair can have a significant impact on measurements, so athletes must wear minimal, form-fitting clothing (compression shorts) and a cap to compress the hair on their heads. The protocol is pretty much effortless and only takes about 5 minutes:

1. Basic subject information is entered into a computer
2. BOD POD is calibrated
3. Body mass is measured with an integrated digital scale
4. Body volume is measured while sitting inside BOD POD
5. Thoracic gas volume is measured
6. Results are displayed

Medical exams are also conducted in a kind of gauntlet format with players proceeding from one room to another, where they're evaluated by several groups of physicians. Any significant health/injury issue — whether it's identified during these evaluations, the prior day's pre-exam results (discussed above) or team scouts' inquiries with the school's sports medicine staff — may be grounds for further assessment. That frequently involves being sent off site to a hospital for x-rays or other procedures. This can be very frustrating for athletes because the hospital visit may take several hours and possibly push them off schedule. In reality, it reflects the teams' effort to do their due diligence when screening prospects' health status.

The “weights and reps” test is conducted in an interesting environment. Typically, it takes place in a hotel meeting room that's filled with two galleries of coaches and scouts (flanking the testing station), three spotters and one or two camera crews. Besides the testing station (a bench press preloaded with 225 lbs), a second bench press (usually stocked with up to 315 lbs) is available for players to warm up on as they wait their turn. Testing is done in alphabetical sequence, so depending on where athletes are in the order and how many priming sets they plan to do, some have more time to prepare than others. As each player takes his turn, he must first introduce himself by name and school to each gallery, and then perform as many reps as possible — with a high-energy spotter in his face, two others checking to make sure his buttocks stay on the bench (touching his leg as a warning if the butt lifts off), a camera spotlight shining in his eyes and dozens of observers taking notes. Needless to say, most athletes aren't accustomed to these kinds of distractions when lifting, and should be prepared for them in advance.

Psychological testing is performed with the Wonderlic Personnel Test, a 12-minute, 50-question intelligence test used to assess aptitude for learning and problem-solving (for more information: www.wonderlic.com). The test is designed to assess how well people comprehend problems and how quickly they can solve them — in other words, rather than measure what someone knows, it measures their ability to learn and process new information. It's administered to millions of people in a wide range of occupations each year, but is best known for its use in the pre-draft assessments of prospective NFL players. The questions become progressively more

difficult, and test various domains of intelligence by addressing different subject matter. They involve word comparisons, disarranged sentences, sentence parallelism, following directions, number comparisons, number series, analysis of geometric figures, and story problems requiring mathematical or logical solutions. Calculators or other problem-solving devices are not allowed. In order to finish the test, each question would have to be completed on average in 15 seconds.

Legend has it that the Wonderlic Personnel Test was first introduced to the NFL in the early 1970s by Dallas Cowboys coach Tom Landry. By the time the league conducted its first Combine a decade later, it was already a popular tool because — like many other tests at the pre-draft workout — performance is scored with a simple number. A score of 20 indicates average intelligence, corresponding to an IQ of 100.

Day 3. The third day's events include a meeting with the NFL Players Association, continued psychological screening and informal team interviews. The interviews conducted on day #3 are less structured than those on days #1 and #2, giving teams additional time to meet with certain players or catch up with those they missed on previous days.

The NFLPA meeting includes a presentation entitled “Pipeline To The Pros” aimed at college football players making the transition to playing on Sundays. This presentation addresses a range of issues including: the NFLPA's mission; their collective bargaining agreement with the NFL; the benefits of completing one's degree (longer average careers, higher average salaries); the realities of underclassmen declaring early for the draft (1 of every 3 don't get drafted, 60% of those drafted are selected below round 1); guidelines for working with agents; and information about their financial advisor and player development programs.

Day 4. The final day is dedicated to the “workouts” that dominate the televised broadcasts and generate so much discussion. These include positional skill drills as well as a multi-event test of athleticism:

- Vertical jump
- Broad jump
- 40 yard dash
- 3 Cone Drill

- 20 yard (pro agility) shuttle
- 60 yard shuttle (perimeter players only; interior players are excluded)
- Flexibility tests

The vertical jump is performed on a rubber mat on pavement. All other drills and tests are conducted on the stadium's playing surface. Starting in 2009, these will take place in Lucas Oil Stadium on the same type of Field Turf used in the RCA Dome from 2006-08 (prior to that, the surface was AstroTurf).

Once again, athletes need to be prepared for the media presence in the stadium. Broadcast stages and crews are perched in the stands. Another media platform is built on the field, with additional crews there. The overhead cablecam is in use. In addition to the coaches and scouts running the drills, hundreds more are in the stands — mostly concentrated at the 10 and 40 yard lines.

The workouts start in the morning and can last up to 7 hours, depending on the number of athletes comprising each group. Out of pragmatism, larger groups may get split up, which in turn can affect drill sequence. Workout apparel is provided, although each player must bring his own shoes. This is a major consideration. Cross-trainers, basketball or tennis shoes are good choices for the vertical jump; while cleats are appropriate for everything done on the turf. Some players believe lighter is always better when it comes to footwear, and bring newfangled sprinting shoes with them despite the fact that they offer little traction or stability on this surface. In addition to preparing for these drills on field turf or natural grass whenever possible, my advice to players is to use the same kind of shoes they would wear on game day. Those, along with anything else they'll need (snack bars, water bottles), should be carried with them in a backpack.

Positional drill menus and descriptions are posted at the Combine's official web site (www.nflcombine.net). Network broadcast footage is also quite useful for getting a sense of how the respective coaches administer them and what they expect of the players. One thing from the footage that jumps out at me right away is drill duration: Regardless of position, each rep typically lasts 17-20 seconds. The durations of the performance tests are significantly shorter than this, so the coaches take advantage of this opportunity to see how athletes respond to some

fatigue. Although the overall metabolic stress is pretty modest — typically 5-6 positional drills, with each player doing two trials of each (one each to the left and right) — this has straightforward implications for training.

Before we leave the subject of performance testing, there's an urban legend I'd like to poke some fun at. The Combine workouts were supposedly designed in the belief that you can't coach speed, and thus a player can't improve his performance through training. He's either fast or he isn't, so the belief goes, and these drills will reveal his true athletic ability. This notion still exists to some extent today, but has evolved. Now we hear coaches and commentators talking about “manufactured speed” vs. “game speed”, and debating whether or not these tests reveal one or the other. In my opinion, this misses the point:

- *If it involves movement, it involves an ability/skill set that can be improved — just like the sport itself.*
- *As long as the NFL uses a battery of standard tests to screen prospective players, athletes will prepare specifically for them.*

So when you hear someone say “you can't coach speed”, understand that it's really code for “I don't know how”.

Wrap Up

Earlier I touched on the issue of tapering and importance of explaining its benefits to athletes. For guidance, I recommend the articles by Mujika & Padilla (2003) and Thibault (2007) cited below. Their recommendations were aimed at endurance athletes, but are equally helpful when tapering for an event like the NFL Scouting Combine where training volume-loads are high and fatigue must be managed.

We haven't really addressed the issue of nutrition and hydration. The good news is that meals are provided at the Combine, and some sports drinks and snack bars are available in the stadium on day #4. It's still a good idea for players to bring their own water bottle and snacks to Indianapolis, and keep these with them at all times. Energy and fluid balance are fundamentals of performance, particularly over a 4-day stretch like this.

The bottom line: the Combine is a business trip. The stakes are high. Players invited to participate in it should be businesslike in their approach. If you expect to go pro, conduct yourself like one!

Resources

Mujika I., Padilla. Scientific bases for precompetition tapering strategies. *Medicine & Science in Sports & Exercise* 35(7): 1182-1187, 2003.

Plisk S.S. Speed, agility, and speed-endurance development. In: T.R. Baechle & R.W. Earle (Editors), **Essentials of Strength Training & Conditioning** (3rd Edition). Champaign IL: Human Kinetics, 2008; pp. 457-485.

Plisk S.S., Stone M.H. Periodization strategies. *Strength & Conditioning Journal* 25(6): 19-37, 2003.

Thibault G. Resting to win. *Training & Conditioning* 17(4): 53-59, 2007.

About The Author

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Table 1
Schedule Summary: NFL Scouting Combine

Day #1

- Arrive in Indianapolis
- Registration
- Pre-exam & X-rays
- Cybex Isokinetic Test
- Orientation meeting
- Interviews

Day #2

- Measurables
 - Height
 - Weight
 - Arm length & Hand span
 - Bod Pod test (body composition)
 - Weights & Reps (225 lb. bench press; except PK/PT/KO, QB, WO)
- Team medical exams
- Media interviews
- Wonderlic Personnel Test
- Interviews

Day #3

- NFLPA meeting
- Wonderlic Personnel Test
- Interviews

Day #4

- Workouts @ Lucas Oil Stadium:
 - Flexibility (prone overhead, prone behind back, supine low back, seated V hamstring, standing hamstring)
 - Positional skill drills
 - 40 yd dash
 - Vertical & Broad jumps
 - 20 yd shuttle
 - 3 cone drill
 - 60 yd shuttle (perimeter players; interior players excluded)
- Depart from Indianapolis

Table 2
Golden Rules of Interviewing

- Your qualifications will get you in the door. Your attitude will get you the job.
- Do your homework.
- Groom yourself.
- Be prompt.
- Be forthright.
- Be prepared to support your ideas.
- Be positive. Don't say anything negative about anything or anyone.
- Be team- and future-oriented.
- *Be professional!*