

NFL draft prospects flock to Florida to hone their skills

Greg Auman - Tampa Bay Times

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When Chris Chambers prepared for the NFL draft 14 years ago, he stayed on campus at Wisconsin, working for months with the Badgers' strength and conditioning coaches to get ready for the all-important NFL combine workouts.

"I felt like I was ready to go," Chambers said. "Once I got there, there were a few things I was not prepared for. I did a lot of training, but I didn't focus on the football part, the pass-catching and routes. ... I remember missing balls, not running routes well. It was kind of disastrous."

Nine receivers were picked before Chambers went to the Dolphins in the second round. And while he ended up outperforming most of them — he had 540 catches and 58 touchdowns in a 10-year NFL career — he knows that he could have hurt himself by not preparing better in the months leading up to the draft.

"This is probably the hardest you may ever train. I tell the guys, 'This is going to be the longest year in your entire life when it comes to football,'" said Chambers, now in his third year running The Chamber, a training facility for draft prospects in Davie. "You play your college season, then you jump into combine training, then you jump into camp, then play a whole season. The guys say they're going to come back and train the same way, because that's what gave them their edge."

Facilities such as Chambers' are all over the state, and draft prospects from across the country come down for two months in the winter like NFL snowbirds. But they're hardly retirees, instead just getting started and aiming to maximize their chances before the draft.

"It's beyond training and speed work. It's everything," said Pete Bommarito, who got his start at IMG Academy in Bradenton and now runs his own facility in Miami. "I'm very adamant about the medical side of things. I think it's by far the most underrated aspect of this process, and it could be the most important."

Teams measure, test and judge prospects in all manner of ways. Draft prep often focuses on measurables that NFL teams use to rank prospects, one-tenth of a second over 40 yards could move a prospect up or down a round. The higher you're drafted, the more money you make and the greater your chance to make the team.

Those measurables are still crucial parts of training, but today, facilities proudly advertise themselves as one-stop shops, offering everything from yoga to personal nutritionists to interview practice and monitoring sleep patterns. A decade ago, there were only a few training facilities in the state, but now there are more than a dozen, running from Miami to the Interstate 4 corridor and up to Pensacola.

Yoga? It's part of the training at Performance Compound in Tampa, where football players are expected to take part twice a week, some more begrudgingly than others.

"It's hit or miss. Some of the guys absolutely love it," said Jason Riley, the facility's director of sports performance. "Close to 80 percent of the guys need it. Flexibility's not typically high on their priority list in terms of what they worked on in college. It's not only flexibility and mobility, but just breathing techniques and being able to relax the body."

Performance Compound has between 10 and 16 players in draft prep at a time — Southern Cal receiver Nelson Agholor, a Berkeley Prep graduate, is there, as is USF receiver Andre Davis, and Duke's Jamison Crowder, a speedy potential later-round match for the Bucs.

Another local training center, D1 Tampa, lists Derrick Brooks, Chipper Jones and Tim Tebow among its co-owners. The facility uses Fusionetics, a system that tracks an athlete's diet, fitness and even sleep patterns

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“A guy might be underperforming one day and say, ‘Coach, I feel like I’m working too hard,’ and I can tell by the sensors that they wear and say, ‘Well, the problem is you didn’t go to bed until 3:30 last night,’ “ said facility coordinator Taylor Scott. “It monitors everything these young athletes are doing.”

Weston’s Fit Speed facility includes everything from weekly IV nutrition therapy to an all-organic diet with grass-fed meats, with housing options starting as modest as 625-square-foot suites.

“The guys are in the building from 7 a.m. til 5 or 6 p.m., every single day, going through anything that will be thrown at them in Indianapolis (at the NFL scouting combine) or at their pro day,” said Matt Gates, who has worked alongside top NFL receivers such as Cris Carter and Brandon Marshall. “We make sure they stay on point.”

Specialized training can help an athlete showcase freakish athleticism — FSU cornerback P.J. Williams generated buzz last month with a video showing an insane “box jump,” leaping from the ground to land on a pad that was as high as his shoulders. Williams is training with Tom Shaw — a Gulf High grad who was once track coach at Hudson High — at Disney’s Wide World of Sports near Orlando.

Former Armwood High running back Matt Jones, who entered the draft after his junior year at Florida, chose to train at IMG in Bradenton and has remained there after the combine to prepare for the Gators’ pro day.

Since the end of football season, Jones said he improved his bench press enough to add five reps at 225 pounds, and he was surprised by the improvements he made as a running back.

“My technique was horrible, and they got my technique down right,” Jones said. “They had me going to the combine, feeling like I was ready for whatever. The position work I was getting helped me with explosion and acceleration, becoming an all-around back to be better as an every-down back at the next level.”

Add in the cost of housing and food, and IMG can run a football player as much as \$18,000 for two or three months — potential draft picks usually have their agents cover the costs, to be reimbursed after their first pro contract is signed. Turn a late-rounder into a third-rounder, and there’s good word of mouth to set up a pipeline at that player’s school, or to others with the same agent.

“It’s an ever-growing thing,” said Scott Gaden, IMG’s director of physical conditioning. “We’re not trying to get the most numbers, but it’s more about the quality of players we can get. We’ve got everything here on campus that you would need.”

Among Chambers’ clients in Davie this spring is FSU receiver Rashad Greene, who added 15 pounds to a 170-pound frame while maintaining speed that should make him a mid round draft pick.

“He already was a flawless route runner, already a student of the game,” said Chambers, who patterns workouts like NFL practices, using terminology, drills and pace his players can expect in the pros. “He put on 15 pounds and was still able to run (an unofficial) 4.47 at the combine. I talked to a lot of coaches (at FSU’s pro day) and they said they know he’s fast enough. He’s quick and he can separate.”