Considerations for lower body training for the NFL Combine

Training the lower body for the NFL Combine is an entirely different animal than training the upper body. So much so, that the two should not be planned or programmed at the same time, as the end goal for both is entirely different.

The 225 Bench press test is simply a safe, measurable and standardized way to compare athletes from different generations, positions and sizes. What it tests depends on the athlete: for some athletes, it’s a strength test (they can only do 2-5 reps). For others, its an endurance test (25+ Reps). Most fall somewhere in between there.

With all of these events, what is the commonality you see? They are all speed or power events. Notice: they are NOT strength or strength emphasis events! Keep this in mind for later when I tell you that “strength training” isn’t going to help for long!

The goal of strength training in preparation of NFL Combine athletes is to improve their ability to perform the following events at their highest potential level:

10 Yard Dash

40 Yard Dash

Broad Jump

Vertical Jump

Pro Agility

L Drill

And you only have a few weeks to get them there. With all of these events, what is the commonality you see? They are all speed or power events. We need to keep this in mind when doing the strength programming, as any time you spend on trying to develop “strength” is time you are not spending on speed or power. As I mention in my economics article, training is all about opportunity cost, and this is no exception. We need to spend the majority of the time training the things that are most important.

Another note, every athlete you will train has been lifting heavy weights for years, spending another 4-6 weeks on it really won’t create much of a transferable gain. **The purpose of heavy loading for combine is to prime the nervous system as maximally as possible before moving to speed and power training, not to set PR’s. A good benchmark is to hit their previous offseason max. Trying to set PR’s during combine serves only to increase their squat, not their drills!**

Here is the caveat: eccentric and isometric training are VITAL to NFL Combine Offseason training. Rate of adaptation for eccentric and isometric strength is very fast, which is necessary when training in such a short window. In addition, these two components will be a bigger limiting factor to combine performance than maximal concentric strength.

This is why all heavy loading we do is going to coincide with eccentric and isometric strength training. Given the transferable effect of maximal strength can be as much as 30 days, and most athletes have enough maximal strength to run their peak speed, we will essentially abandon heavy loading after week 4, and focus solely on the goal. Using a program inspired by true block periodization, using the concept of residual training effects and specificity, we will peak an athlete at their highest when it counts. What readers of this blog will not do is use a cookie cutter westside program and justify our training with “if we increase max strength we will increase peak force”. Doesn’t work that way with athletes who have been lifting for 8+ years.

That said, here is an 12 week breakdown of potential offseason combine training program. For athletes going to Indy, certain developmental phases will need to be condensed to try and hit peak faster (within 7 weeks).

Weeks 1

Emphasis A: Volume

Emphasis B: Regain Strength  
ROM: Full

Implements: None

Introduction or Retention: Introduce training methods and heavy loading.

Frequency: 2-3x

The goal here is to combine volume / mobility and try to increase work capacity and range of motion as fast as possible. Heavy loading begins week two, so preparing for that immediately is vital.

Weeks 2 & 3

Emphasis A: Maximal Strength

Emphasis B: Eccentric Strength  
ROM: Full

Implements: None

Introduction or Retention: Intensify

Frequency: 2-3x

This phase will be more intense then the previous phase in terms of maximal strength, and will begin eccentric loading. Begin using exercises that mimic joint angles as seen in actual combine events. Using PAP training with your eccentric work will maximize its effect.

Weeks 4 & 5

Emphasis A: Maximal Strength

Emphasis B: Isometric Strength  
ROM: Full

Implements: None

Introduction or Retention: Intensify

Frequency: 2-3x

This phase will introduce isometric training, and maximal strength training will place on emphasis on fast concentric. Isometric training must be done with strict technique.

Week 6:

Emphasis A: Deload

Emphasis B: Test new 1RM

In this phase, you can both test a new squat 1RM and deload simultaneously. Remember: volume is the main source of fatigue, not intensity. Lower volume of running and cutting.

Week 7 & 8:

Emphasis A: Force Training (~60-70%)

Emphasis B: Maximal Speed  
ROM: Full

Implements: Chains

Introduction or Retention: Loaded Jumps

Frequency: 2-3x

All maximal loading is done at this point (unless the athlete is training for an extended time). One day of power training at 60-70% with bands, another day at 30-40% with heavier bands. Athletes need to train fast to be fast, so that’s our emphasis, the background work has already been done.

Week 9 & 10:

Emphasis A: Pure Concentric Speed

Emphasis B: AFSM  
ROM: Full

Implements: Bands – Squat Jumps – release Jumps

Introduction or Retention: Heavy warmups / Strength Retention

Frequency: 2x

We are in peak speed phase, we have one day of pure concentric power (think DE Westside) and one day of AFSM. AFSM is the glue that holds the eccentric and isometric work together.

Week 11 & 12:

Emphasis A: AFSM

Emphasis B: Pure Concentric Speed  
ROM: Full

Implements: Bands – Squat Jumps – release Jumps

Introduction or Retention: None – Peak / Deload

Frequency: 2x

Continuation of the previous phase, make sure warmups are heavy to both prime the system and retain previous maximal strength. Adjustments must be made for timing.