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cu football

NFL draft hopefuls are rely on training centers to turn scouts' heads

By John Henderson
The Denver Post

Posted: 02/06/2011 01:00:00 AM MST

Editor's note: Second in a series detailing how former CU cornerback Jimmy Smith is preparing for the NFL draft in April.

CARSON, Calif. — Jimmy Smith is hanging on for dear life.

His chin is perched precariously over a bar as his biceps and forearms shake like branches in a storm. His mouth is carved into a grimace you'd associate with someone undergoing an appendectomy without anesthesia.

He's in a pull-up position, with gravity torturing him, wearing what looks like a grenade-proof vest. Forty-five pounds of lead probably could stop a grenade. It's not stopping Zac Woodfin, one of the keys to Smith's NFL future, from barking orders like a traffic cop.

"HOLD!" Woodfin yells. "Now go down! One.

Two. Three. Four. Five. Six. UP!"

Woodfin is a performance specialist at Athletes' Performance Inc., one of those intense, high-tech, pre-draft training centers that have become de rigueur for NFL prospects. Smith, a two-time all-Big 12 cornerback at the University of Colorado, is in the middle of an eight-week tour of duty he hopes will make him a first-round draft pick.

API is gearing prospects toward one goal, doing well at the NFL scouting combine Feb. 24-March 1. That's where one drill can determine if a player is set financially for life or must prove himself in training camp.

"It's the biggest job interview, not only in these athletes' lives, but it's the biggest job interview there is," Woodfin said. "Imagine going to a three- or four-day event and there's literally tens of millions of dollars on the line. You have six to eight weeks to prepare for this job interview.

"We take it very, very seriously."

How seriously? Take the combine's 40-yard dash. Each prospect gets two shots at it. Two. They can have another try at a pro day on their campus, but nail it in Indianapolis and they're set.

"A 4.5 to a 4.4 means a million dollars," Smith said. "A 4.4 to a 4.3 is literally tens

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University of Colorado football player Jimmy Smith takes a break from in drills during combine practices with Athletes Performance at the Home Depot Center in Carson, CA, Thursday, January 20, 2011. Photo by Steve McCrank / Daily Breeze (| STEVE MCCRANK)

of millions of dollars. If I run a 4.5, I'm just another big guy."

Success stories

Woodfin, 27, has the build of a fitness pro as committed to his clients' health as he is to his

own. Lean with bulging biceps, he doesn't have the hulking muscle-head build of some weight-room junkies, but he's got a body that commands every draft pick's attention.

He said he hasn't told his clients his story, but he should. He was an undersized linebacker on Alabama-Birmingham's only bowl team, in 2004, and begged his agent to place him at API. His stint there helped him go from 225 to 245 pounds and drop his 40-yard dash time from 4.8 to 4.6.

Green Bay scouts saw him at UAB's pro day and signed him as an undrafted free agent. He never made it on the field for a regular-season game with the Packers. He did get into a game with the Baltimore Ravens, and was on the Houston Texans' practice squad for awhile, and played for the Frankfurt Galaxy. His football card isn't much, but his stories are.

As for API, "It is very intensive," he said.

He's sitting on small bleachers watching Smith join defensive backs and receivers go through fundamental drills.

"We make sure that no one thing is overlooked. We make sure these guys have seen everything before they go into the combine," he said.

API is quick to trumpet its success stories. Last year, for instance, linebacker David Veikune, a projected late-round pick out of Hawaii, went to Cleveland in the second round. Utah's Koa Misi went from a projected middle- to late-round

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pick to Miami in the second round.

Still, many players punt their final semester of their senior year for API and thereby forego graduation. In an era when colleges are under pressure to improve graduation rates, API lures players away from degrees for short-term prospects.

"If you have an opportunity to make \$10 million and come out of one semester, I think that's a payoff," said Woodfin, who left UAB early for API but went back to school and earned his degree. "You can always finish school. You can't always go to the NFL combine."

One look at API and any player with a glimmer of the NFL in his dreams would shelve the books. Squeezed in the suburban sprawl between the south end of Los Angeles and the Pacific, API is a 7,400-square-foot sports training megalopolis.

Drive under the welcoming arch and you see a 27,000-seat soccer stadium, home to the Los Angeles Galaxy, Chivas USA and the U.S. Soccer Federation. The complex is also home to the U.S. Tennis Association and USA Track & Field.

There are 10 grass training fields, 32 tennis courts, a track stadium and baseball and softball fields. There's even a 3,400-seat velodrome, for crying out loud.

Working on weaknesses

The whole concept of pre-draft training centers started with founder Mark Verstegen. Georgia

Tech's former strength coach wanted a training refuge for elite athletes and opened the first one in an old Staples building in Tempe, Ariz., in 1999.

In 2001, the site became a specialized pre-combine training center. They've now expanded to five locations with 120 full-time employees, not counting area coaches who conduct drills.

It's not cheap. The charge is \$16,000 and is usually paid by the player's agent, who sees it as a cheap investment for a client whom he hopes will sign a contract worth millions.

The trappings are comfortable. The workouts are not. On a late January afternoon, the hottest place in the United States might be the workout area adjacent to one of the training fields. Smith lies on his back with his feet up on an electronic pulley machine. He pulls down 45 pounds 50 times in 30 seconds.

"They lower the weight a little bit, but not much," Smith said. "By the end of your workout, six pounds feel like about 100."

In another drill, athletes lie on their backs with 45-pound weights on their stomach. They pull themselves up on a bar eight times. On the field, Clemson defensive end Da'Quan Bowers, a possible pick of the Broncos with the No. 2 overall selection, is sliding sideways while pulling a physical therapist who is trying gamely to hold him back with a band around his waist.

Every player has a different workout that is

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specifically designed for the position he plays and his weaknesses.

"I've never heard of them," Smith said of many of the drills. "When we first did them, people were, like, dying. We didn't know what was going on."

Lean and mean

Smith is sitting in his apartment in Seal Beach, a small, quiet and affordable beach town 20 minutes down the 405 from Carson. He looks tired but doesn't act it. He's excited about the improvement he's made, although he's been slowed with a tweaked hamstring.

"I'm not taking anything away from Dal Ward and the strength program there (at CU), but this is designed for exactly what we're doing," he said. "At Dal Ward, it's a bigger group — way bigger group — 100 kids. And the lifts are more to get powerful. We're not trying to get powerful."

"We're trying to get into tiptop shape."

He's feeling leaner, stronger and faster than he did at Colorado. Everything he eats, from breakfast at the facility to the box dinners he takes home, are specifically chosen by API's nutritional staff.

He said he's always liked fruits and vegetables "but I never really incorporated it in my meal unless I got lettuce on my hamburger."

Today, he's gone native. On this night, his dinner is grilled chicken tacos packed with vegetables

inside a wheat tortilla.

"There were days in college when I'd hurry up and eat a Sonic burger and go to practice," Smith said. "Now that I've eaten good, I can tell it was the food that made me slow at practice."

His lone recreation has been an occasional collapse on the beach on his one day off a week, Sunday. There will be plenty of time to party after the April draft. Until then, API said Smith has been one of the more impressive specimens in camp.

"Jimmy Smith is doing excellent," Woodfin said. "He's got unbelievable strength for a corner. He's a tall corner, which is rare. His height, his strength, his mental ability, he's a very sharp kid. He's going to pick up defenses really, really quickly. The sky's the limit for Jimmy."

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