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UPMC prepares 8 elite prospects for pro football combine

Thursday, February 08, 2001

By Shelly Anderson, Post-Gazette Sports Writer

Deuce McAllister, a running back from Mississippi, never thought about training in a cold climate.



Fred Wakefield, a defensive end from Illinois, works out at the South Side facility yesterday. (Matt Freed, Post-Gazette)

Jarrod Cooper, a safety from Kansas State, knew about working out hard, but he lived on sweets.

Matt Light, an offensive tackle from Purdue, didn't realize he would be judged on so many things off the field.

They know better now.

Those three are among eight football players involved in a first-year, highly specific program at the UPMC Sports Performance Complex. All eight are potential NFL draft picks represented by SFX Sports Group, and they are preparing for the league's invitational workouts Feb. 22-26 in Indianapolis, commonly known as the combine workouts.

The NFL scouting combine preparation program, in its first year, is an elite setup for elite players.

It's a six-week course that includes more than athletic training and workouts. The UPMC staff also provides medical testing, injury evaluation and prevention, nutritional and psychological counseling and massage therapy. There is also interview training, and the players are set up with apartment-style hotel accommodations, cars, cell phones, shoes and other apparel.

"This is a one-of-a-kind," said Jim Steiner, a St. Louis-based agent from SFX who represents all eight players in the program. SFX is footing the bill for the players.

The other five players are Chris Chambers, a receiver from Wisconsin; Torrance Marshall, a linebacker from Oklahoma; Justin Smith, a defensive end from Missouri; Jabari Holloway, a tight end from Notre Dame; and Fred Wakefield, a defensive end from Illinois.

McAllister, Smith and Chambers have been rated as high as first-round draft picks, with Marshall and Light not far behind.

Players are using all three buildings in the complex, but primarily the one that houses the indoor football field and a 3,300-square-foot workout area with weights and machines.

They began arriving in January. Some left for a week or more to play in an all-star game.

"I thought it was going to be more of just a medical center, rehabilitation, stuff like that," Smith said.

Medical exams came first. Doctors hunted for anything that could concern an NFL medical staff -- including problems the players didn't realize or didn't disclose -- and then a training and rehabilitation staff headed by Jay Irragang and Brian Hagen worked to correct the problems in time for the combine.

Everything is tailored to what the players will face at the combine -- every test, every situation. They are shown tapes of past combines.

"They let us know what we can expect, how they're going to poke and prod at you," Purdue's Light said. "It's like going to a cattle auction. They're going to run you through everything you could imagine, and you've got to be prepared for it."

SFX -- a large network of agents who represent athletes and entertainers, with Michael Jordan perhaps the best-known client -- developed a working relationship with UPMC when its South Side complex opened last year. The company wanted to send its athletes to a place which specializes in sports medicine and sports performance.

While SFX's interests in the pre-combine program are obvious -- the better the players perform at the NFL workouts, the higher they are drafted, and the higher they are drafted, the more money the athletes and their agents make -- UPMC also has a keen interest in offering such programs.

UPMC already was known for sports medicine, but with the opening of the South Side complex last year, it was time to expand to related areas.

"We believe it's our responsibility to not only operate on people who are injured but to prevent people from being injured, to understand why injuries occur and to ultimately be able to enhance performance," said Tony Detre, vice president for business development at UPMC Health System.

UPMC offers programs -- or is willing to develop them -- that cater to people of all levels, from weekend warriors to high school athletes to top-flight pros. The programs combine research from its own labs with the expertise of a diverse staff.

Athletes from around the world -- including golfer Greg Norman, former Penguins defenseman Jiri Slegr, two Japanese baseball players and a

ranked overseas tennis player -- have gone through conditioning or rehabilitation at the complex.

The pre-combine program is the first that is all-inclusive and has such a specific goal.

"We looked at what these players were going to be up against [in Indianapolis]", said Alison Taglianetti, director of sports performance for UPMC Health System.

"It's a one-time deal. They have to do it right and do it perfectly. But it's not only physical."

Players meet individually with Leslie Bonci, director of the sports medicine nutrition program. She oversees the breakfast they have at their hotel and the lunch they eat at the Steelers' cafeteria.

"We can really fine-tune at this point," Bonci said. "We want to make eating and performance mesh -- eating to help with recovery, what they're eating before the workouts, things like that."

Kansas State's Cooper might have benefited most from the nutritional counseling.

"Especially since all I like to eat is sweetcakes all morning and all day," he said. "They gave me a nutrition plan, and I can feel it. When I wake up, I just have more energy and my body feels more fluid when I do things. I'm not all gummed up with sugar and Cocoa Puffs."

Sports psychology consultant Stephen Russo spends at least an hour a week with each player in the program.

"A lot of them are already using some of the sports psychology techniques that I talk about," Russo said. "We can then develop a game plan for them about the combine. Things that they have to go through -- interviews, physicians, physical activities -- are all performance situations. We can talk about setting goals, staying focused."

The players also go through interview training with an Ohio-based company, The Zone, so they will come across well when they sit down to talk to team representatives.

"They have everything we need," Smith said. "I think you've got to sell the total package, so it all comes in handy. You've got to use every advantage you can."

Some of the players wondered what they were getting into when they agreed to take part. And they wondered why they were being sent to Pittsburgh when so many players head to a warm climate to prepare for the combine.

"It's an area away from the sunshine, and a lot of guys go to Florida and work out," Mississippi's McAllister said. "But we have some great facilities here, some great doctors and trainers. It gives us an opportunity not only to work out but to be away from everything and to focus on

what's the real issue."

The program is so specific that it doesn't incorporate many of the things the players have come to associate with a football workout. Most of the tests at the combine -- such as a 40-yard dash, shuttle runs and a vertical leap -- require short bursts of energy using mostly the lower body, so that's what the players work on, along with technique for those tests.

"I'm used to thinking that you have to be huffing and puffing to get anything done, and we aren't doing a lot of huffing and puffing stuff, like conditioning," Cooper said.

"So I'm thinking to myself, 'Good Lord, what am I doing?' But every single day I wake up sore, so something's got to be working."

Of course, the players need to impress the NFL scouts and coaches in any way possible, and the program addresses that, too.

"I kind of describe it as a cat show," said Tim McClellan, one of the athletic trainers. "I'm trying to prepare them to look good in front of the judges. It doesn't really have anything to do with playing football, but they can make a lot of money by doing well at this."

Which is why SFX wanted to start the pre-combine program and, Steiner said, why he hopes it will remain exclusively for the agency's clients. He said the agency already is committed to participating next year.

"It has exceeded our expectations," Steiner said. "You never know until the players get here, but it's run without a hitch. The proof is that they've all stayed. We told them that if they didn't like it, if it didn't meet their expectations, their option is to leave. They haven't."

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