

Athletes get a splash of reality at combines

Mequon — Hearing the truth might hurt at times but it is always healthy for the soul.

About 40 athletes got a dose of reality — some good, some not so good — at the Xcel Sports Training / Wisconsin Football Coaches Association football combine Saturday at Homestead.

It was the last of five combines this spring across the state, with others happening in areas such as La Crosse and Stevens Point.

Modeled after the combine sponsored by the National Football League before its draft, the Xcel / WFCFA combine puts the athletes through drills aimed at assessing their potential to withstand the rigors of college football.

Football combines are designed to take the air out of inflated measurements and statistics that often result from overzealous parents and coaches hoping to gain an advantage on earning a scholarship or beating an opponent.

Inflated measurements are particularly a problem on the college scouting circuit, where a quarterback can be listed as 6 feet 4 inches and 225 pounds but turns out to be 6-1 and 195

PREPS



Bobbi ROQUEMORE

in person.

And the statistic in football that gets the most attention is the 40-yard dash, where times are also ripe for alterations.

Coaches and even other combines typically use hand-timing to record 40-yard dash times, but what sets the Xcel / WFCFA combine apart is electronic timing. Its use reduces the chance of human error to almost nothing.

"College coaches want a reliable number that they can hang their hat on, and that comes from the electronic timing," said Michael A. Tabor, president of Xcel Sports Training. "For them to receive a hand time, they don't know really where that number is coming from.

"Immediately, when they get a hand time, a college coach will add two-tenths of a second. We're going to give them a legitimate number right off

the bat."

Running back Joe Rodriguez, a Greenfield junior, epitomized the disappointment of those who saw what they *really* ran in the 40. But instead of staying down, he viewed it as a motivational tool.

"It was challenging with the 40 time, getting used to something like that," Rodriguez said. "When you get the results, it made you feel a little down on yourself, but you've got to keep working."

Other drills, however, brought out the best in the football players.

Rodriguez said he performed well in the pro shuttle.

"It seems like I'm more agile than fast," he said. "The more stop-and-go drills, I did a lot better in. It was challenging, but I enjoyed them more."

Indeed, the drills at the Xcel / WFCFA combine are not supposed to be easy.

Tabor, a Brookfield-based physical therapist, is a regular at the NFL combine and bases his company's combine on the professional model.

"We'll do some of the agility drills that are real popular," Tabor said. "We take some of those same tests and do them

here. We're getting an idea of what their agility is in addition to their speed. We look at their overall power through the vertical jump and broad jump, and we look at strength through the bench press."

A wide range of athletes, from blue-chippers to athletes on the verge of a breakout season, have attended the Xcel / WFCFA combine, now in its third year.

Once the eight drills are completed, the results are placed in a table that highlights the top performances.

College coaches can access the information from each combine free of charge.

Also, Xcel assists the athletes in building an individual profile that can be used to draw the attention of college scouts.

"There are a lot of kids in the state that can play college football that don't get looks, whether it's because they come from a smaller school, they didn't have a very successful season or maybe they got hurt midway through their junior year," Tabor said.

"What we're trying to do at this event is make sure that kids who can play get the exposure and can get on a

college program's radar."

But this combine isn't all about measurements. Tabor and his staff go through training drills that the players can take home and do on their own.

A final portion of the Xcel / WFCFA combine is a no-nonsense talk from national recruiting expert Dave Carl. He advises the athletes to set themselves apart from other recruits when talking to college coaches by asking intelligent questions, not by sending unsolicited videotape of them in action.

Carl explained the difference between being on a school's mailing list and being on its recruiting list. Yet something as simple as filling out questionnaires can catapult an athlete to the coveted role of being actively recruited.

"The more schools you're involved with, the more leverage is created," Carl said. "I'd rather be the last guy on the list than not on the list at all. You've got to be proactive."

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