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Chip Shots: NFL prospects gear up for combine at D1

FRANKLIN — Ryan Karl got two days off from football, and then it was back to work.

Two days after Tennessee beat Wisconsin in the Outback Bowl, the Volunteers linebacker was working out at D1 Sports Training in preparation for the NFL Scouting Combine.

The former Battle Ground Academy star is one of more than 300 college players who have been invited to the six-day combine that begins Wednesday at the RCA Dome in Indianapolis.

The players will go through a series of drills, tests and interviews with NFL coaches, general managers and scouts. Some call it a job fair for April's NFL Draft.

"The combine is very important because I'm looking at changing positions," Karl said. "I'm a little too small to play linebacker, so I'm going to try to (switch) to strong safety. If I can show I have the speed and agility to play, that will definitely help me a lot."

Karl, a 6-foot, 218-pound senior, has the strength to play strong safety, but he's trying to improve his time in the 40-yard dash. He's likely to be drafted in one of the later rounds or sign as a free agent.

"Training-wise, Ryan is a beast," D1 pro performance director Kurt Hester said. "He feels no pain. He's come through a really horrendous elbow injury and to be able to even bench press one rep at 225 (pounds) is phenomenal. He hit 17 or something like that (Monday)."

NFL teams use game tapes, all-star bowl appearances and combine results to evaluate draft prospects. A player's football skills are probably the most important aspect, but the combine can have a big impact on a prospect's draft status.

"I've seen guys go from free agents to the third round because of their times in the combine," Hester said. "I've seen first-round guys drop to the fifth round because of their workouts."

Karl and 14 other prospects have been preparing for the combine six days a week since early January at D1. Seven of the prospects are from the Southeastern Conference.

The combine is extra important for Tennessee tight end Brad Cottam, who played in only five of the Volunteers' games because of a wrist injury.

"To a lot of people, I'm kind of a mystery," Cottam said. "They don't know that much about me. The week before the season started I dislocated my wrist, so I missed the first nine games. It was devastating, and it was really hard to get through."

Cottam (6-8, 270 pounds) boasts the rare combination of size and speed. He's seen predictions of himself being drafted anywhere from the second to the seventh round.

They come from all over

NFL prospects have journeyed to D1 from all corners of the country, including players from Oregon, California, Texas and Army.

"My agent told me to come out here and check it out, and I thought it was a great idea," Oregon offensive tackle Geoff Schwartz said. "The trainer-to-trainee ratio is almost like three to one, and you really can't beat that. And it was a good place for me to get away from home and the distractions to get the job done out here. This is a business trip."

Agents pay for combine training as a business investment to improve their clients' draft status. The higher a prospect is drafted, the more money an agent will make on the pro contract.

Four of the D1 prospects have signed with Athletic Resource Management, an agency in Memphis.

"Facility-wise, if you look up and down the East Coast, there's nothing like this that has the weight room and the indoor facility with this length of field," ARM agent Jim Denton said. "It's the same turf that you have at Indy, and then you have the rehab to go with it. You've got Dr. (Burton) Elrod, a (Titans) team doctor, who's actually going to be at the combine looking at these guys."

Texas defensive tackle Frank Okam said his agent recommended D1, and the Longhorns senior wanted a chance to train under Hester because of his good reputation.

"I also heard this is Peyton Manning's place, and that's a guy I really respect in the NFL with the way he plays the game," Okam said of D1's co-owner. "I've heard I could go as high as first round or as low as fifth round. After the combine you get probably a more realistic gauge of where you are going to go."

California Golden Bears tight end Craig Stevens likes preparing for the combine at D1 because it gets him away from the distractions of his hometown, Los Angeles.

"You come out here and you just focus on lifting, running and getting faster and better," Stevens said. "It's really just a giant job interview at the combine, and I want to be as prepared as I can. I don't want anything to get in my way."
