

Epps: Brown, bagels and Ickey — NFL training is no joke

Tuesday, July 15, 2008



By:
[Darren Epps](#)

The question startled me.

“What did you have for breakfast?” asked Cos DeMatteo, the gregarious facility coordinator of D1 Sports here in Chattanooga, where I will condition with Tony Brown of the Tennessee Titans.

I tell him I enjoyed a bagel. Before I can tell him the contents of this bagel, DeMatteo smiles and pats me on the shoulder.

“Good,” he said. “It would have been a bad idea to have one of those biscuits with sausage, cheese and eggs.”

My bagel had cheese and eggs.

We’re off to an A-plus start.

Let me just begin with this: you, and I, are the opposite of professional football players. I don’t care if you work out all the time and, maybe if you put even more effort into strength and conditioning, you think finding somewhere to play would be possible. No. That’s wrong. You can’t understand how fast these men are moving on television, because all of them are so quick.

I will remember two experiences from my workout with Brown: first, eating a cheese and egg bagel before working out is dumb. Secondly, Brown’s feet are so quick, so precise with every step during drills, it’s difficult to comprehend this man is 6-foot-3, 285 pounds.

As I watched Brown performing the “Ickey Shuffle” ladder drill — the steps are reminiscent of former running back Ickey Woods’ touchdown dance — I found myself mesmerized by his footwork and did not pay enough attention to the drill. And, of course, I messed up.

It would not be the only time.

The warmup

So, here we are, 15 minutes into the session. Sweat saturates my white T-shirt and drips down my red face. I’m already breathing pretty heavily when my workout partner makes a startling (kind of the theme for the day) remark.

“We’re done warming up. It’s time to get started,” Brown said.

Get started? I’m almost finished.

Here’s the scene: I’m at the D1 Sports training facility with Brown, a starting defensive tackle for the Titans and former City High School star. Our leader is Cameron Russell, the energetic head speed and strength coach at D1. There’s no evidence of this, but I think he knocked back four energy drinks before we started. The next time Russell trains with Peyton Manning he’ll tell the All-Pro quarterback that Brown was here working out so he can pounce on him during the season.

“That,” Cameron says, “will motivate Peyton.

“I hear a lot of people saying, ‘Peyton is slow.’ Come out here and race him one day. Go through the drills with him.”

Danita Hill, Tony's mother, is also in attendance. She is not working out.

"Oh no. I'm here to get lunch with Tony," she says, laughing.

She is the smartest person here.

The workout

We are performing drills specifically constructed for defensive tackles — lots of work in small spaces, short sprints, drills to test reflexes and build strength in the legs and the core. I am 5-11 and 185 pounds. I do not project well as a defensive tackle.

This becomes painfully obvious over the next 90 minutes. Tony glides through the ladder, rarely even jostling the cords on the ground. I'm stumbling, tripping, missing squares, and I wouldn't even consider myself that uncoordinated. I feel like the last kid picked for football. In this facility, that is precisely the truth.

On another drill, we attach a bungee cord around our ankles and shuffle while Cameron rolls tennis balls toward us. The goal is to shuffle toward the balls so they can go through our legs. Tony explodes from side to side, anticipating the next throw. Cameron starts mixing in some tosses that we have to knock down. This prepares Tony for an offensive lineman's attempts to lock up his arms.

"A lot goes on during a play that's hard to see," Brown says. "It's such a small area you're working in at tackle, like a phone booth."

We use a medicine ball to perform some ab work that I will still be feeling when Brown and the Titans play at Indianapolis on Dec. 28.

"I've got some abs under here," Brown assures me with a laugh, patting his stomach.

I do not.

The training concludes with 20-yard sprints. This does not mean, as I found out, you start easing up when you approach the cone. Brown goes all the way through the cone. I don't. I am in trouble.

"Look at where Tony is and look at where you are!" Cameron screams. "You're not going all the way through!"

Sorry. I am now determined to beat Tony in a sprint, not a very lofty goal since he's 100 pounds heavier than me. Still, I cannot beat this man. I just can't. He explodes off the line too fast. Cameron says to run one sprint at 80 percent. I go 100 percent and still can't beat Tony (sadly, they think I'm going 80 percent).

And that's what you have to realize about NFL players, particularly very good NFL players like Brown — they are simply a different kind of human being. They defy all logic when you consider their size and speed.

"Those guys are born with an extra gear that the average guy doesn't have," Cameron says. "Again, watching it on television, you get no type of respect for how fast those guys are actually moving and how big they are. Each one of those guys is the biggest, fastest, strongest guy at his particular school."

The person

This must be said about Tony: he was incredibly helpful. He took the time to explain each drill, encouraged me when I stumbled and congratulated me when I didn't mess up, which was at least twice.

"A lot of guys aren't that nice," Cameron says. "Remember when he was helping me out with you? Some guys, all they want to do is come in, get that work and get out of here. Tony is probably one of the easiest to work with."

About an hour into the workout, it strikes me that this is Tony's offseason. He already finished Tennessee's organized team activities. And here he is, on a day trip from Nashville, sweating in a training facility with a goofy reporter.

"To do this kind of thing for four or five months during the offseason when you can be in Jamaica or Fiji or somewhere tells you about him," Cameron says. "Guys like Tony stick around, find facilities like this — and he's fortunate to have one right here in his own hometown — and he can stay in shape and on top of things. His goal is to make the Pro Bowl."

Suddenly, mom feels bad.

"I call him about 5,000 times a day and he'll say, 'Mom, I'm going to go and lay down, I'm tired,'" Hill says. "I never knew the training that he does. I told him, 'Son, excuse me. I didn't know you were doing training like that.'"

Interjects Tony: "All she sees is practice and the games. This is really what you get paid for."

His mother laughs.

"I was amazed," she says. "I apologize. I'm still going to call, though."

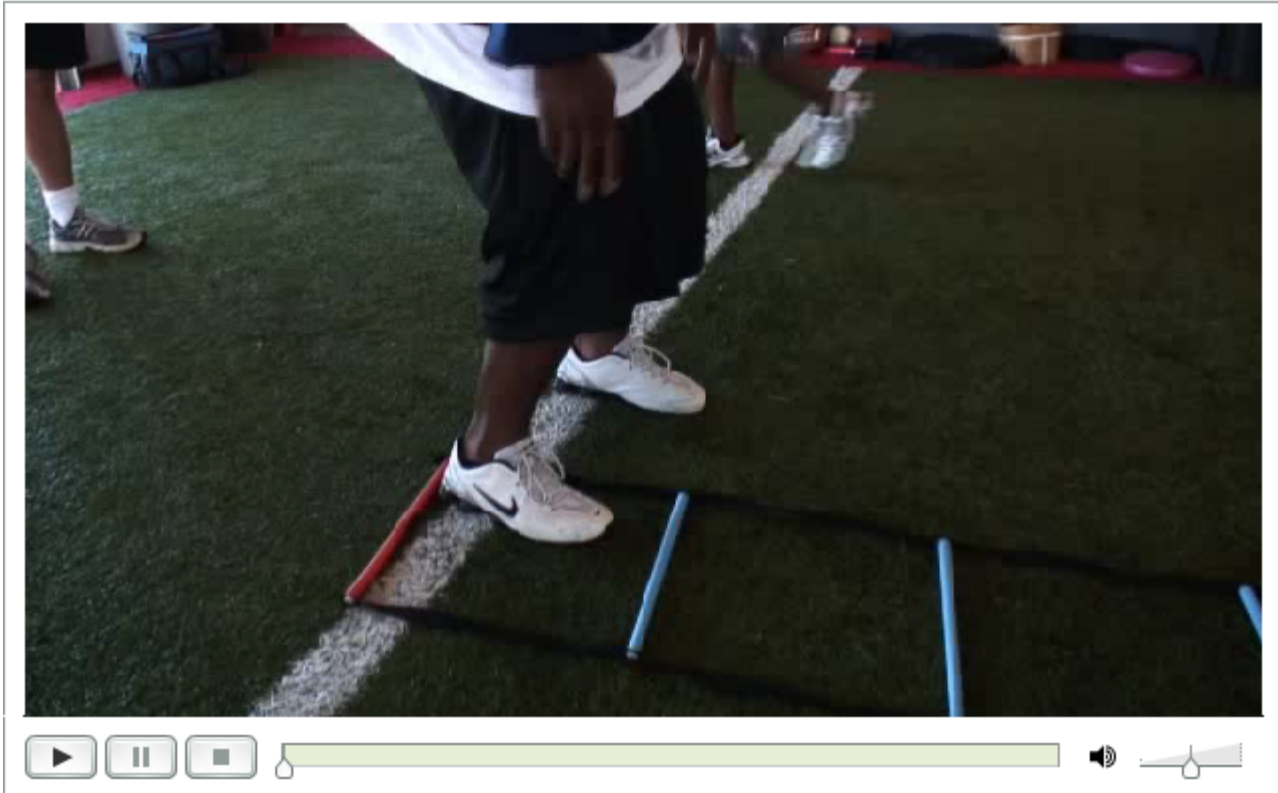
The critique

Despite getting blistered in the sprints, my reviews aren't bad.

"You did good, man," Cameron says. "Most guys get intimidated. Not from the fact that Tony's an NFL guy, but the fact you lay all that stuff out in front and you're like, 'Aw, I don't know if I can do that.' Nobody gets 'Ickey Shuffle' right on the first time. We got to get you on YouTube — best journalists with footwork."

Adds Tony: "You did a good job. Honestly, you really did. A lot of people fall on the 'Ickey Shuffle.'"

Ha! The joke's on them. They don't know I will be unable to walk, or move, today. Instead, I will curl up on the couch and eat my bagel with cheese and eggs in peace.



NFL defensive tackle Tony Brown visited his hometown of Chattanooga to workout at D1 Training before the Titans training camp, which starts next week. Watch as Times Free Press sports columnist Darren Epps gets a first-hand experience of an NFL workout.

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