

men's health

Learn to Train From Professional Footballers

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WebMD Feature

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When you're an NFL player, rushing hundreds of yards while trying to block or tackle 300-pound guys is just part of the routine. To be a pro, you've got to be in top shape.

"They have to be strong and powerful. They have to be quick and fast. And they have to have great conditioning," says Barry Rubin, head strength and conditioning coach of the Philadelphia Eagles.

No two positions are the same. Each player on a team has different training goals.

Cincinnati Bengals safety Chris Crocker is focused on staying fast and light on his feet. "A combination of speed and agility is most important because as a safety, you have to be able to change directions at a rapid speed while covering wide receivers and tackling people who are bigger than you, such as running backs and tight ends," he says in an email.

As former defensive tackle for the Tennessee Titans, Torrie Griffin had to be flexible to stay low on the field. "Having a wide base and low center of gravity is real important when you're playing defensive line, because you have to hold ground and attack with great leverage," says the certified personal trainer and owner of TTrain Fitness Bootcamp in Atlanta.

NFL players like Crocker and Griffin stay in top condition by spending hours each week working out in the gym and doing drills on the field. "During the off-season, I work out at least five days a week," Crocker says. During the football season, he trains six days a week with a one-day rest in between.

Crocker's typical workout includes a mix of stretching, agility exercises, sprints, and weight training. "My workout during the season is modified because of the strenuous practice schedule, so I focus on maintaining my strength rather than building," he says.

Your NFL Workout

You don't need to be an NFL pro to train like one. All you need is to incorporate the right elements of NFL training into your routine.

To train like an NFL pro, "You've got to do plyometrics training, you've got to do strength training, and you've got to work on energy system development," explains Rob Livingstone, MS, CSCS, SCCC, a strength and conditioning professional in Norcross, Ga., who has trained many pro athletes.

The goal of plyometrics training is to decrease the ground contact time as much as possible, says Livingstone. That's why plyometrics involves doing lots of jumping and 'explosive' moves. "Energy system development involves training the body to become better conditioned to allow for quick recovery from different training activities of varying durations," he adds. When creating the ideal fitness program, whether you're a weekend warrior or an NFL pro, the goal is for each training element to complement each other, according to Livingstone.

Here are a few tips from NFL players and pro trainers to keep you at the top of your game, both on and off the field.

Techniques to Try if You Want To ...

Increase Speed

One of the best ways to increase your speed is by running 10-yard sprints, says Vince Gabriele, MS, owner of Gabriele Fitness and Performance in Berkeley Heights, N.J.

Gabriele, who has personally trained San Diego Chargers Luis Castillo and Quentin Jammer, and New York Jets running back LaDainian Tomlinson, says short sprints with full recoveries are a safe and effective way to improve speed. Start out with six sprints, and gradually increase the number every few weeks. Give your body a chance to rest for about 60 seconds in between

sprints. Keep changing your starting position -- standing with your feet wide, lying on your stomach, kneeling -- to improve your reactive ability and upper body strength.

NFL pros also lift weights to increase their speed. Olympic weightlifting techniques like the clean and jerk and snatch aren't just for bodybuilders. By lifting your maximum weight in short bursts you'll not only build muscle, you'll also improve your power. "Olympic weightlifting teaches the body to be explosive and stimulates a large number of muscle fibers at a fast rate," Livingstone says.

"As a lineman, one of the best benefits of the Olympic lifts is it's going to give you an explosive first step," Griffin says. "When the ball is snapped, those first couple of steps can decide whether you're going to win or lose."

Even off the field, the quick, intense movements of Olympic lifting can help keep you faster on your toes.

Improve Flexibility

Stretching is the old standby for increasing flexibility, but you don't want to do it the old-fashioned way. Your high school gym teacher probably told you to hold each stretch for 20-30 seconds, but experts say you'll actually reduce your performance and subject your muscles to micro-tears by doing static stretches before you're warmed up.

Stretching actively, with lunges or squats, is better for improving range of motion, research has found. Crocker starts his workouts with a series of plyometric stretches: quick, powerful movements. Save the static stretches for after your workout when your muscles are already loose. Only after he's finished a full routine does Crocker cool down with some light stretches.

Build Muscle

To improve your muscle tone, plan to hit the gym three to five times a week. Focus on the big muscle groups with exercises like squats and bench presses.

You don't need to lift as much weight as a football player to build muscle. At the peak of his NFL career, Griffin was bench pressing about 485 pounds. A more realistic goal if you're not a pro is probably in the range of 150 to 175 pounds, Griffin says.

Go for 1 to 3 sets of 6 to 15 reps each, but don't kill yourself. "Don't train to failure," Rubin advises. "When you get through with a set, know that you've got maybe two to three reps left in you." If you train too hard, it can take a week or more for your body to recover, he says.

Build Muscle continued...

Rubin recommends gradually increasing your weight and reps each week for three weeks until you reach your limit. Then back off with lighter weights and lower reps during the fourth week to give your body a chance to recover.

Building lean muscle doesn't just happen in the gym, it also happens on your plate. If you eat nothing but fast food, the empty calories will bulk you up, not build muscle. "You can lift all the weights in the world, but if you're not putting the right fuel in your body, that muscle mass is not going to come," says Gabriele.

To build lean muscle, get most of your calories from lean protein, fruits and vegetables, and good carbs like brown rice and whole-grain bread.

Boost Endurance

Chances are you're not going to have to do as much sprinting, squatting, tackling, and throwing as an NFL player. But everyone could stand to improve their endurance, and one of the best ways to do it is with interval training.

Gabriele recommends pedaling hard on the bike for 30-second sprints, alternated with slower 60-second rides. Do three of these sprint sets to start, and then work your way up to more. If you don't like the bike, you can run sprints on the treadmill instead.

Get Lean

To burn fat, incorporate some kind of aerobic training into your routine. Running on the treadmill or track, or riding the elliptical is a great way to do it.

Alternate aerobics with compound strength training, like squatting with barbells. Working several muscle groups at a time will keep your metabolism high, Griffin says.

Rubin also uses medicine ball drills for conditioning, where players throw the ball against a wall for 200 reps or more. "It's great

for core training, it's great for total body conditioning, and it's great for your heart," Rubin says.

Watch Your Form

Trainers know a benched NFL player can cost his team a big game, even the Super Bowl, so their focus is on injury prevention.

"The main goal of football players when I train them is to keep them injury-free," says Livingstone. "If NFL players are injured, they can't stay on the field and they can't play."

Even if you're not a pro, injury prevention should be one of your top priorities.

You can avoid getting hurt by learning how to train the right way. "The first thing that people should do is get an assessment ... from a qualified trainer," Gabriele says. Have a trainer test you for flexibility, mobility, and strength, and design a program that works best for your body.

Then you need to work on form. "When I walk into a commercial gym and I see people working out, I know many of them are not aware that their poor exercise technique ... will eventually lead to injury," Gabriele says. Have your trainer watch you while you lift to make sure you're using the proper techniques.

Don't overdo it. As you incorporate these NFL pro tips into your workout, do them at your own pace. "A lot of people think that you have to push it to the limit every time. I disagree with that. That's how you end up getting hurt," Rubin says. Tailor your training program to your body, lifestyle, and goals. Start off easy, and only increase the weight and intensity when you feel ready.

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SOURCES:

Rob Livingstone, MS, CSCS, SCCC, strength and conditioning professional, Norcross, Ga.

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Vince Gabriele, MS, owner, Gabriele Fitness and Performance, Berkeley Heights, N.J.

Torrie Griffin, former defensive tackle, Tennessee Titans; certified personal trainer, TTrain Fitness Bootcamp.

Barry Rubin, head strength and conditioning coach, Philadelphia Eagles.

Chris Crocker, safety, Cincinnati Bengals.

Reviewed on September 07, 2010

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