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## Trainer of Eric Berry, Jahvid Best, and Jacoby Ford Talks NFL Combine

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The NFL combine begins tomorrow. NFL personnel folks will be riveted to see just how fast, explosive and strong the top draft prospects truly are; millions of dollars potentially hang in the balance. With so much money on the line, many of the prospects have spent weeks training at specialized combine prep facilities to get ready for this week.

I spoke to Tony Villani, a trainer who is the founder of XPE Sports (Explosive Performance Enhancement) in Boca Raton, Fla., about this kind of training. Villani has generated quite a buzz in recent years for his work with some of the fastest-rising talent at the combine. This year he has (among others): a possible top-five pick ([Eric Berry](#) from the [Tennessee Volunteers](#), whom I [profiled for ESPN The Magazine this year](#)) and two candidates with a good shot at being the fastest man in Indy this week ([Jacoby Ford](#) from the [Clemson Tigers](#) and [Jahvid Best](#) from the [California Golden Bears](#)).

Villani also spoke about the challenges of training a track guy for the 40-yard dash, what separates Berry from other super-athletic safeties, and the viability of someone actually running a 40-yard dash in 4.1 (the fastest at the combine in recent memory is Chris Johnson of the [Tennessee Titans](#), who ran a 4.24, [video of which is here](#)).

**In addition to Eric Berry, Jahvid Best, [Eric Norwood](#) and [Dan Williams](#), how many players will you have working out at the combine this year?**

We have 16 guys invited to the combine this year, which is more than I've ever had. I was hoping to have about 12 this year, but I wasn't expecting this many because I just moved to Florida. And because of the move, I couldn't really market what our facility was.

**Why do you think there has been such an increase in the number of top prospects coming to you this winter?**

Normally what I would do is talk to a handful of guys myself. This year I talked to about a dozen. I'd go through the pitch as most companies do: "This is our facility. You'll eat this. You'll do that." Out of those 12, I figured about six would come and then agents would fill in another six spots. Well, this year I really couldn't talk about the facilities, so all I talked about was the published results from the combine in 2008 and 2009 and how my guys did. Every guy I spoke to, I said, "These are the exact results from Indianapolis

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. Look into them." And all 12 guys I talked to ended up coming. And then some agents filled in another six to eight spots. I have 16 combine guys and about 20 total. The results really helped sell some of the big-name guys, which was good.

Last year, we had a safety that the [Miami Dolphins](#) drafted in the fifth round named Chris Clemons. From the safety position, he ran faster than any of the 60 or so DBs in attendance there. Sherrod Martin was a safety who was supposed to go in the fourth or fifth round, and he worked out so well in that he had the second-fastest shuttle and 3-cone time that they looked at him at DB and he went second round. The year before that we had three guys go in the top 15 that were all projected to go second or third round before they came to Indy.

Jerod Mayo went to Indy ranked as the fourth or fifth inside linebacker. He ran the fastest 10-yard time for inside linebackers of all time in Indy and had the fastest 40 that year for inside linebackers. He had an amazing vertical and short-shuttle time, and he skyrocketed up the boards. Leodis McKelvin was a guy some people had as the fourth or fifth DB, but then he ran the third-fastest 10 for any position ever in Indy, and also ran a 4.3 electronic 40. He ended up being the first DB taken. Branden Albert went there being the No. 1-ranked guard and was seen as a late-first round/early second-round guy. He had the fastest 10-yard dash of all the linemen, guards and tackles. He also did real well on his position drills and they drafted him as a tackle with the 15th overall pick. I was able to show all of these guys the results of how my picks did, but I also told them "Don't just look at the first-round guys. Here are 10 guys who went to Indy, and here's how all 10 did" instead of "Hey, he had four first-round guys, but he actually trained 20 guys and he can't tell me about the other 16."

We had Jason Allen from Tennessee a few years ago. He was supposed to be a third- or fourth-round pick if he had a good workout as a safety. He went to Indy and just blew it up. He set records for safeties there in the shuttle. He had the fastest 3-cone time ever for a safety. Had a great vertical jump. And when he did that, we're like, "Wow, he can play DB." And that's what I sold to guys. "If you're a safety, we've got to have better workouts than [cornerbacks]. If you're a guard, we've got to have better workouts than tackles." One year before Jason Allen, I had Gerald Sensabaugh. He ran faster than any safety there. He had a vertical jump of 46 inches, which is a record that still stands. He also broad-jumped over 11 feet, which is farther than any free safety had ever jumped there.








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## What did Sensabaugh jump before you started working with him?

He was jumping 39 inches at first.

## How do you get those kind of gains with someone who is already a great athlete?

He was explosive, but we had to work a lot of flexibility with him so he could sink low and have that reaction off the ground quicker. Everybody is a little different. He already had a lot of power in his legs, so we wanted to react on how quick could he get low and how quickly could he explode up. That tremendously improved his vert. With other guys it's different.

## What is unique about the way you train athletes for the combine?

The training is unique to each individual. Not everybody here goes through the same type of training. We're in big groups on Mondays when guys have to learn how to get timed and tested in big groups, and we're in big groups on Fridays when guys compete in position drills. The other days we're in small groups of four to six athletes. That way me and my training staff of three or four people can get everybody the attention they need. Two guys can each be trying to improve their speed, but they can be doing it in different ways if you do it right. A lot of other companies have these schedules overloaded with all of this stuff they have to do every day. With our program, nothing is set in stone.

Our system has stayed the same every year, but we do tweak it here and there. I learn as much from these athletes as they learn from me. The outcome is still the same. You've got to sprint through that 10 fast, then open up your stride to run the 40 fast. Honestly, we have guys who set up their start differently, because you have to figure out what works best for each guy.

## How much does it cost for the entire training program for each athlete?

It's normally between \$1,000-1,500 a week, and that covers all of their training, the food, their supplements, and if they need physical therapy and massages. It covers everything but their housing. The total costs of the training experience ends up being up between \$10,000 and \$15,000, but if you can get them to jump up a round, and even if you jump a few spots in the first round, it's such an investment. We'll see what happens. I'm excited.

## Who have you seen make the biggest gains since arriving with you this winter?

I'd go with three guys. First is Eric Berry. He came in phenomenal, but he's gonna leave really phenomenal.

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He's going to be bigger than people think, and as fast as people hope. Then there's Jahvid Best. He's coming off injuries with the concussions and the herniated disc. I think he's going to surprise people. The other guy is [Ricky Sapp](#) from Clemson. He had an ACL tear his junior year. He rehabbed it for eight months and then went right into his senior year. His knee was 100 percent, but I don't think his muscles were. Now his legs have really responded to two months of this body movement and explosive training we're doing.

### How skeptical are you when you've heard about what someone supposedly runs?

Whenever I hear about guys' 40-yard dash times when they're in college, you can add two or three tenths onto it, because all through high school they're told they run something. It's the same for college. Then when they get here and you do time them, they're typically two to four tenths slower than what is published they run. That's why a lot of cornerbacks will go to Indy and run 4.5s and 4.6 when you've heard how they were supposed to run 4.3s and 4.4s. Well, they never actually were 4.3 guys.

### What do you think NFL people will be most impressed with when they work Berry out?

He's gonna be explosive. He's gonna be fast. He's going to do his safety drills like a [cornerback]. I think they'll look him and say "This guy could be a 210-pound CB." Or he could be a 210-pound free safety. He could be a 210-pound strong safety. At Indy, they're going to say this guy is a DB in a safety's body.

The fastest laser [40-time] at Indy for a safety is 4.37 and the fastest hand-time ever was Chris Clemons from last year who ran a 4.33. Honestly, that's what we're going after. But he'll have to put it all together. The other safeties I trained who all ran fast and jumped high and did great at everything at Indy -- Sensabaugh, Clemons and Jason Allen -- not to knock them, but they don't have the hips and the change of direction that Eric Berry does.

### How much of the speed improvement is usually technique work and how much is the added power and explosiveness?

It's a lot of technique and a lot of explosiveness, and it's being able to sequence the 40 together in the right way so you don't just get up and run it. A lot of times when guys start with me, they just put their hand down and run as fast as they can. There is a progression that they all have to put together. If they're trying to do it fast, they have to hit that progression:

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first-step explosion, right into acceleration, right into getting top speed, right into maintaining top speed. They have to hit all four of those things in four seconds. All of these guys are great athletes, but it's about focusing on one thing with every drill. Then after they go through a few weeks, you start working on two things with every drill. Then after a couple more weeks, you start working on three things with every drill.

### Jahvid Best versus Jacoby Ford. Who's faster?

Jahvid's coming off his injury at the beginning, so Jacoby was running faster at the beginning. And with Jacoby we're [going to break the NFL record for the combine](#). But to be the fastest guy ever, he's got to run 4.2s on lasers. We'll see if he can do it. He's running some times now where I think he could do it.

I don't think Jahvid is going to run quite as fast as Jacoby, but Jahvid is going to run fast. People will be impressed how big he is. He is a legit 200-pound back, and he's all muscle. We had a longtime NFL running back coach come through here, and that guy had coached LaDainian Tomlinson, Darren Sproles, [Michael Turner](#), and when he saw Jahvid Best go through our drills, he said "That's the best running back speed I've ever seen." He just has that great football speed.

**It's easy to be skeptical whenever you hear about really fast 40 times. People have examined world-class sprinters to try to figure out whether a sub-4.2 is really possible. Is that humanly possible for someone to run in the 4.1s?**

Maybe Usain Bolt could. But this is a story I like to tell. Justin Gatlin, who was the fastest sprinter in the world at one time, went to the University of Tennessee Pro Day in 2008, the same year Jerod Mayo ran 4.5s on the laser. Gatlin got timed by scouts and I was standing there timing him, too. When he came through 40 yards, Justin Gatlin was flyin'. All of the scouts and me looked at our watches. It was between 4.48 and 4.55. When he came through the 40 he was flyin', but he didn't get up to top speed as fast as a football player would.

When you talk about football speed, they have to have more power and acceleration than a track sprinter. If Jerod Mayo had been running next to Gatlin that day, he would've gotten out faster through the 10 or 15, and then Gatlin would've started catching him by about the 30. By the 40, they would've been about even. Now, if they'd have gone 60, 80, 100 meters, Gatlin would've beat him by about 10 or 15 meters.

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Could Usain Bolt run a 4.1? Probably, but he would have to work on it and work on his explosion and acceleration [more] than the top speed he does in his 100 and 200. I don't know if there ever could be a 4.1, but if a true track guy worked on his start correctly and fixed his start mechanics to explode and accelerate to get to his top speed quicker, he probably could.

**How do you train Jacoby Ford differently than he's been trained as an elite track guy the past few years?**

That's what's hard. You've got to switch up his start, because he's used to coming out of a stance where he's got his feet far back in blocks with both hands down and he's going off a gun. So he gets to push off with both feet and react to a gun. Indy's totally different. You're coming from a split stance with one hand down and you definitely have one push foot and one pull foot, instead of both feet pushing. That's the first thing you've got to change on him. Then you work on can he get to top speed between 15 yards and 20 yards versus a 60-meter or 100-meter guy trying to get to top speed at 30 or 50 meters. If he runs that 40-yard dash the same way he runs a 60-meter run, he's gonna still be accelerating or just be getting to top speed at the end of that 40, and we need him to get to that speed much quicker.

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