

TOPIC OF THE MONTH FOR MARCH 2004

LOOK FOR NEW TOPICS EACH MONTH!!

COMBINES (AND OTHER COMPETITIONS)

A combine is a structured observation of specific athletic skills. For most players, combines provide "certified" times for the 40-yard dash and various shuttle drills. Each player is attempting to produce his personal best score. Much like taking the SAT or ACT tests, the individual is competing against pre-assigned standards of excellence, not with other participants.

If you are considering participating in a combine for kickers, punters, and snappers, keep in mind the following:

- Once your playing season ends in November or December, unless you are in an all-star game, no college coach can legally watch you practice or compete. A combine scheduled in January (a non-evaluation month) would have no college coaches present. A combine scheduled in May could have college coaches present, but graduating seniors could not participate.
- The results of a combine are valuable to college coaches only if the full slate of scores is transmitted to them. (You cannot apply to a college by providing your SAT score from memory; the official score must come from the testing service or from your transcript.)
- Combines should not be expensive. If the fee is high, the only participants will be athletes with the ability to pay. College coaches want to compare your skills to the standards of the best athletes. As a participant, you cannot truly appreciate your status unless the combine attracts a large number of talented players.
- A combine is a scientific test, administered to each participant under the same conditions. (Scores would have no basis for comparison if every participant furnished his own footballs or if some players used mechanical ball holders and others used live people.) Study the rules in advance. Be prepared to function well under the specified conditions. Regardless of success or failure on any repetition, feel confident about each new opportunity.

- You cannot "win" a combine. Scores should be expressed as rankings or percentiles, just as in standardized tests of academic skill. Because participants are grouped into flights, you will not know how well others perform. Scores are usually processed and "certified" several days after the event, just as SAT scores are transmitted to you later.
- If participating in a combine was a condition for securing a college scholarship, the college coaches would tell you which one to enter or would have devised a legal way to run it themselves. (Some college summer senior days attempt to be combines.) You are not losing consideration if you choose not to enroll.
- If you choose to perform under college conditions before you are ready, your scores will suffer. You may seriously harm your reputation and your recruiting status.
- Receiving a DVD/videotape of your combine performance might assist in the recruiting process. However, the logistics of shooting a large number of participants at various stations may be insurmountable. Unless specifically prohibited by the rules of the combine, your parent or coach can videotape you from the viewing area for use in your recruiting tapes.
- The officials are like monitors for exams. They cannot tell you how well you are doing; they do not know. They cannot "coach" you on how best to take the test. They only record observations. Do not distract them by asking questions after an event has started. Be prepared to ask questions before you start a set.

Participation in combines can be beneficial in ways you might not have considered. Few students seriously interested in admission to quality colleges take the SAT or ACT once and live with the scores. Having learned from the first experience, most people try again ---- after they practice test-taking strategies.

- At a real football game, the crowd makes noise. The emotions of the players and coaches fluctuate with the turn of events in the game. Regardless of these distractions, the kicker, punter, snapper, or holder must provide a quality repetition on the first try. A combine gives a rapid succession of opportunities to stay focused on the task.

- If you have a solid 3.0 grade point average, you probably do not consider 4.0 students worthy of your worship. If you want a 4.0, you know what actions to take ---- study more, study better, study with them, study with a tutor, etc. At every combine, someone will be better than you. Knowing what an "A" performance is allows you to establish better goals for yourself ---- practice more, practice better, practice with them, practice with a coach, etc. Hero worship is a spectator sport.
- Networking is important. You need to meet people who study kickers, punters, and snappers. Whether or not you actually participate, go prepared to distribute business cards or your resume' and statistics. Share phone numbers and e-mail addresses with the other participants and their parents.

The SAT and ACT tests are used to predict success in college academics. Can combines predict success in college athletics? Someone with sufficient skill to display 100% of punts with hang times greater than 4.5 seconds is likely to be successful, if he can play to his coverages. Someone who merely has a better showing than the other punters present for a combine has little evidence to predict success.

Remember that all competitions are artificial. The officials never stop a football game to let the kickers or punters compete against one another for points. Competing for trophies or titles has limited correlation to success on Friday nights (or Saturdays). Competitions lack the ingredients of "live" play:

- Helmets and pads
- 10 teammates and 11 opponent players
- Live snap and hold
- Random selection of play locations
- Clock-controlled timing

The bottom line here is that well-run combines can help you feel good about yourself and can provide more "evidence" which you share during the recruiting process. Expecting combines to play a major role in gaining you exposure is wishful thinking! Combines do a better job subjecting participants to equal test conditions. Comparing yourself to a pre-determined standard of excellence has merit. Producing punt-after-punt or kick-after-kick with similar timing and trajectory demonstrates maturity, the most significant factor to college coaches.