

IGNORED BY THE NFL BUT UNWILLING TO GIVE UP THE DREAM, THESE GUYS GET THEIR LAST SHOT AT A SPECIAL COMBINE
BY CHAD NIELSEN

Long shot... but their best shot

Alonzo Spellman wants one last shot, and he's not the only one. For the 246 athletes gathered in the RCA Dome in Indianapolis for the Elite Combine, this is their slim chance. None of them were invited to the main event—the NFL combine, held last February—but they did emerge from the 2,500 participants at nine events held across the country by an independent scouting company called **ELITE PRO FOOTBALL COMBINES**. On this June day, it's them against the hard truth of the stopwatch and the subjective eye of 15 pro scouts (11 from the NFL, one from the CFL, three from the AFL). Drew Rosenhaus is not in the building—he doesn't represent firefighters or Air Force enlistees. But these players are still hoping for a miracle: a pro contract.

Stephen Austin, addressing the hopefuls, specializes in finding the "best of the rest." Since 1989, the former agent and **Elite Combines** founder has sifted through the talent pool, meeting with and testing more than 24,000 players. His events are "a safety net," says Austin, who has helped players like Saints WR Joe Horn, Jets WR Wayne Chrebet and Skins WR David Patten find work. More than 2,200 **Elite Combines** alumni have signed with pro teams, 441 with the NFL.

James Taylor was just out of tiny Georgetown College in Kentucky when he landed with the Ohio Valley Greyhounds in the United Indoor Football League for a year. He briefly tasted glory with six weeks as a Packer in the summer of 2004. Now, at 25, he wants back in. "The NFL draft is the easy way," says Taylor. "This is the hard way. It makes you respect the game a whole lot more." Five days after running a 4.43-second 40, the DB is signed by the Jets—

After three years out of the league, during which he struggled with bipolar disorder and spent 16 months in federal prison, Alonzo Spellman, now 33, wants to prove he can still play. "I really, truly owe it to myself," says the former Chicago Bear. Running a pass-rush drill, Spellman shows off the moves that helped him rack up 23.5 sacks from 1994 to '96. "He made a cut that nobody else here made," says Mike Goebbel, Midwest scout for the CFL's Montreal Alouettes. "Physically, there shouldn't be any question," Spellman says. "Mentally, they would have to bring me in and see that everything is fine. I think the league can be forgiving, if they want to be."

Mind-numbing waits can be draining, but former Penn State defensive back Yaacov Yisrael (leaning on the fence, far right), who's making the switch to receiver, stays focused by watching Matthew Cutaia's technique in the three-cone drill. Both receivers trained for the event at professional training club TEST Sports, with impressive results. Yisrael, 23, who was at Steelers training camp in 2004 as a safety, finished in just 6.57 seconds—which would have been good for second-best at the 2005 NFL combine. At 6.87 seconds, Cutaia, 23, would have placed in the top five for his position. "It's all technique," he says.

Position drills like this one—where former Michigan running back David Underwood, 22, catches a pass on a crossing pattern—are key to separating the players from the workout warriors. "Some of these guys, standing there, look great," Goebbel says. "Then you put them out on the field and if they have to run, if they have to move laterally or if they have to move in space, they can't play."

There is no typical résumé at the last-chance combine. While Nebraska and LSU are represented on the **Elite Combine** roster, so are Mankato State and Charleston Southern. Steve Smith (above), 24, works nights as a personal trainer. Wide receiver Rocky Lanz, 32, splits time between a sales job and a spot on the U.S. men's World Cup bobsled team. Safety and former Cal linebacker Christopher Ball, 27, just made his acting debut as—what else—a football player in *The Longest Yard*. The numbers usually tell a hard story. Most just need someone to tell them it's time to hang up their cleats. "Football is really tough to walk away from," Austin says. "So we close that dream with dignity and facts."

