

The Myth of Speed

Michael Boyle
www.michaelboyle.biz

Speed is the stuff of urban legend. Deion Sanders supposedly showed up at the NFL Combine, ran a 4.2 and went home. We routinely hear of high school kids who purportedly run 4.3's and 4.4's. The stories of "reported" speed have gotten out of control. This would not be a problem in and of itself. Most of us could look at it and say "so what" people lie or people embellish. The real problem is that the lies seem to be setting the standard. One of the reasons that I no longer train athletes for the NFL Combine is the unrealistic expectations of athletes and agents based on these "urban legends" or the occasional freakish performance like Vernon Davis this year. Davis measured out at 6'3" and 263 lbs., ran a 4.38 forty and vertical jumped 40 inches. Those are insane stats. We won't see that again for a long time in my mind. Every year it seems like there is some freakish performance by an athlete that raises the bar of expectation. I would have less of a problem if these expectations were not trickling down to high school kids. My intention is to set the record straight with facts. In order to prove this I pored over the NFL Combine results for the six years that I had on file. The following statistics are taken directly from the Combine results. It should be noted that although the Combine times are considered "electronic", they are closer to handheld than electronic. There are three potential timing options:

- 1- Electronic start- electronic finish. This should be the standard but, unfortunately is not. The start is done with a touch pad and the finish with a photocell. This is the most accurate and as a result yields the slowest times. An electronic start/ electronic finish time has been shown to be .22 seconds slower than a hand held 40 yard dash. (Brown, 2004)
- 2- Hand Start- electronic finish. This is a system used uniquely at the NFL Combine. A hand start-electronic finish will be approximately .1 seconds slower than a hand held 40 yard dash. In the combine the use of hand start will be particularly evident in the faster ten yard dash times. Athletes will run 10 yard times much closer to a hand held but, times at each following split will be closer to the electronic time.
- 3- Hand Start- hand finish- this is the fastest and least accurate. Handheld times tend to be faster but are clearly more prone to human error. Many of the legendary times I believe were hand-held timing combined with human error or human expectation.

At the NFL Combine in 1996, 97, 98, 2001 and 2003 and 2006 no one ran a 4.2. No one. Not one person. In 2001 Ladainian Tomlinson ran one 4.36, five in the 4.4's and vertical jumped 40.5. 2003 was a fast year, yet still produced no 4.2's. Ten athletes ran 4.3's in 2003. The heaviest was a 223 pound running back. The Combine track is always said to be slow but the truth is it is simply accurate. All of these supposed fast times seem to be run at times when no independent verification is available. Seems a bit curious doesn't it.

Here's another angle on the whole "speed" thing. Ben Johnson and Carl Lewis ran split times of 4.67 for 40 meters (Bryan, Rose-Hulman) The split times are below.

1.84	10 yd
2.86	20 (1.02 split)
3.8	30 (.94 split)
4.67	40 (.87 split)

40 meters is 43.74 yards. This would make the distance approximately ten percent further. This means we could reduce the time by approximately .36 seconds to account for the additional 3.7 yards. This would mean that in constant acceleration mode the best sprinters in the history of the world, using blocks, ran 4.31 for 40 yards. Does it seem plausible that high school football players can run faster times without blocks.

The table below shows some of the athletes who ran below 4.4 at the NFL Combine. Obviously the athletes are getting faster but, we still don't see the dreaded 4.2's we hear so much about. In 2005 I believe one athlete actually ran a 4.2 although I did not have those stats available. One athlete in a decade.

1996 Bryan Still	Wide Receiver	4.36	@ 176
1997 Yatil Green	Wide Receiver	4.38/4.39	@ 199
1998 John Avery	Running Back	4.37	@ 184
Tony Simmons	Wide Receiver	4.31	@ 203
Clarence Love	Cornerback	4.37	@ 186
Duane Starks	Cornerback	4.38	@ 170
2001 Chris Taylor	Wide Receiver	4.35	@ 183
Derrick Blaylock	Running Back	4.34	@ 194
Jon Carter	Wide receiver	4.33	@ 180
L. Tomlinson	Running back	4.36	@ 221

2003 – ten athletes ran sub 4.4 in 2003.

In 2006 of nineteen running backs listed in the internet report (unofficial) Maurice Drew of UCLA was the only 4.3 and he ran a 4.39. In other words one running back ran under 4.4 and, he did it by one one-hundreth. Four wide receivers out of thirty-one ran under 4.4. In fact five ran over 4.6. This means more wide receivers ran over 4.6 than under 4.4. 2006 was an exceptional year for defensive backs with nine sub 4.4's. The key, again in 2006 was that there were no 4.2's in the results I saw.

As coaches, we need to stop perpetuating the myths. We need to tell our athletes what the average at the NFL Combine was and not what the best "freak" times were. We need to further explain to them that it is unrealistic to expect to even meet the NFL averages. As

with everything in our society, we have raised the bar unrealistically high. Let's be honest with ourselves and with our athletes.

Bibliography

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Rose-Hulman Institute of Technology, Terre Haute IN 47803 USA.
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Rose-Hulman Institute of Technology, Terre Haute IN 47803 USA.

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NFL Combine Results- compiled from various sources.

Michael Boyle is a one of the world's leading authorities on the training of athletes in all sports. To learn more about Boyle's techniques go to www.michaelboyle.biz or to www.functionalstrengthcoach.com