

Scouting the NHL Scouting Combine

The NHL Scouting Combine takes place during the last week of May every year at a hotel in Toronto. It is conducted by the NHL Central Scouting Division. They bring over 100 of the top prospects from all over the world who are eligible for the entry draft. Throughout the week, all 30 NHL organizations are allowed to interview the prospects as well as evaluate them through the physical testing process. For the prospects, it can be a long, grueling week where they may have to visit with each organization. The testing part of the combine is the time when each teams' management, scouts, and strength and conditioning coaches get to observe the prospects complete physical tests. It is done on the last 2 days of the week (Friday and Saturday).

Although The NHL combine is definitely not as publicized as the NFL combine, I think it's important to highlight some of the key differences between the both of them for those who may not be familiar with the NHL combine. Unlike the NFL combine, the NHL combine is mostly made up of 18 year olds. Most of them are not fully physically developed because of the fact that they may have never trained before or they may be late bloomers who may not have matured yet physically. They could be high school seniors, underclassmen in college, or junior hockey players. NFL prospects are 4-6 years older and most likely have been through organized strength and conditioning programs in college. Another factor to consider is the number of days that the NHL prospects have been removed from their last game played. It is possible that some of the NHL prospects may not have played an actual game since March while some of the junior players may have played only a few days before. Some guys will be better prepared for the combine with several weeks of training for it while others haven't had the time to prepare due to them still playing. With the NFL combine being conducted in February; most of the NFL prospects get at least 2 months to train after their last game. NFL prospects also get the opportunity to prepare for the combine by participating in strength and conditioning programs that are geared to help them prepare for the specific tests at the NFL combine.

The challenge of each NHL organization is to take all of the testing data into consideration when comparing scores from one prospect to another. However, what is most important through it all is if the player can play. Each organization's amateur scouting staff has invested many hours and lots of money in observing these prospects play hockey. They know how good a player is or isn't. The strength and conditioning coach's job is to evaluate the overall fitness of the prospect and more importantly, try to predict where a player could be in a couple of years. Does he look like he could add a few more pounds? Can he get quicker? More explosive?

As the combine takes place in the hotel ball room, each prospect enters the testing area where all of the exercises and measurement stations are set up in a successive, almost circuit like fashion. Usually there are 6-8 prospects per hour. The stations include-

- Height and Weight
- Body Composition
- Hand-Eye Coordination
- Sit and Reach Flexibility
- Push/Pull Isometric Strength
- Maximum Number of Trunk Curl Ups
- 150lbs Bench Press repetition max test on a slow cadence
- Maximum Number of Push Ups

- Seated Medicine Ball Chest Pass with 4K Ball
- Standing Long Jump
- Vertical Jump with pause and Vertical Jump without pause with Vertek
- 4 Jump Elasticity on Just Jump Mat
- Hexagon Agility Test
- 30 Second Anaerobic Power Test (Wingate)
- VO2 Max Test on Bike

It usually takes each prospect about an hour to complete the full battery of tests.

Many times I am asked by personal trainers and/or collegiate strength and conditioning coaches, “How do I get one of my players/clients prepared for the combine?” My general advice is to help the prospect get as “fit” as possible. Work on their strength, power, and conditioning. Get them used to benching 150lbs on a slow tempo, get them used to jumping up to a Vertek, get them used to the Wingate and VO2 tests on the bike, etc. I will also usually tell them that I think it’s important for them to know that different NHL teams look at some tests more than others. While talking to other NHL strength and conditioning coaches who are at the combine over the years, many of them have a different area where they may focus on when watching the prospects go through the battery of tests. Some will watch anthropometric measurements, some will watch the bench press, some will watch vertical jumps, some will watch the Wingate, and some will watch the VO2. I guess it all depends on what test each strength and conditioning coach and/or organization values the most.

What I think maybe the most important measurement of what all organizations look at is the effort level and the character of each prospect. Here I am not just saying “work hard” and be a nice person. They will need to work as hard as they possibly can on each test. For example, I remember 2 years ago when a young defenseman came in and really looked like he dominated every test from his effort alone. His effort was outstanding and was the talk all over the room. He ended up being a top 5 pick and is currently a really good player in the NHL. He probably would have been picked that high anyways, but I think that his performance at the combine helped him move up a few spots. Also, each prospect should show good body language when being instructed on how to perform the tests and when completing each test. They should be nice to the people administering the tests who are college students that are doing it for free and are probably very nervous around the prospects.

I always look back at some of my notes and evaluations since I have been attending the combine to see if they make the NHL. Usually, the prospects on my note pad with “worked hard on this test” or “seems like a real good kid” next to their names are the guys who are playing professional hockey. The names of the guys who had “bad body language”, “wasn’t ready for the vo2 test when it was his turn”, or “ripped off the face mask during the VO2 max test” are unrecognizable.