

Pro Football Training with *Mike Bystol*

A look at the real world of a strength coach for pro football players

BY KIM GOSS, MS

It's always been a bit of a mystery what pro football players actually do to strength train. An occasional demo from a strength coach showing some unique exercise that he or she used in training a pro doesn't provide much evidence. Is the current training of these athletes simply a continuation of what they were doing in college? Do NFL linemen bench press 100 pounds more than their college counterparts? Do they still squat and power clean? Do running backs and corners still do ladder drills and continue to shave fractions of a second off their 40? Or are they content to do only what it takes to stay healthy for Sundays? Mike Bystol can answer these questions.

A former defensive tackle at East Carolina, where he obtained a degree in exercise physiology, Bystol is owner of the Poliquin Performance Center – Chicago (PPC-C). Working with Bystol is Dr. Stuart Yoss, who specializes in sport injuries. PPC-C can best be described as a strength coach's dream. It offers 13,000 square feet devoted to providing the best training programs for athletes of all levels, along with many supporting functions such as nutrition, massage, physical therapy and other sports medicine services.

Bystol's specialty is training

professional football players, and his client base of over 20 athletes and a format of one-on-one training keeps him busy year-round. In this exclusive interview, Bystol describes what it takes to succeed in working with these elite athletes. His answers may surprise you.

BFS: *Generally speaking, are the players you see coming out of college in great shape?*

MB: A lot depends on the college they go to and the quality of their strength and conditioning program in high school. I have coached athletes who had a better vertical jump, bench, squat and clean in high school than they did later when they graduated college. A few years ago a guy from one of the top schools in the nation came to me for training for the combine. He'd had a great strength and conditioning program in high school, but after five years of college his squat, bench and vertical jump were much lower than in his senior year of high school. This guy still went first round in the draft.

The difference is that for five years this kid practiced six days a week, three hours a day, against the best players in college football. Four of his teammates that he practiced with, day in, day out, went in the first and second rounds.



Bystol (right) is owner of a state-of-the-art gym called the Poliquin Performance Center – Chicago, located in Chicago, Illinois. He is shown here with Dr. Stuart Yoss, a soft-tissue specialist who is currently employed by the Chicago Bears, Chicago Blackhawks, and the Chicago White Sox.

The point is he became a better football player because he practiced against the best. Would he have been better if he'd had a better strength program? Of course. Although he has been a starter in the NFL for two years, he is now plagued with injuries. Do I believe the training he had in college contributed to the current long list of injuries he is battling now? Absolutely. On the other hand, I have had several college drafts who are really strong, but way out of structural balance. So they are not quick or explosive and are at a high risk for injury.

BFS: *Do you have to address a lot of chronic injuries with the players drafted out of college?*

MB: Basically every athlete I see is like a Lamborghini with its front wheels out of alignment and running on only two cylinders. These athletes are still fast, but they have the potential to be much faster. However, because everything is out of balance, they are wearing through parts really fast and shortening their careers.

BFS: *From a strength and conditioning standpoint, what is lacking in many college strength training programs?*

MB: It's surprising, but many of

the college programs in this country still won't have their players do squats or deadlifts or cleans – in fact, a guy I'm training now who is from a Big Ten school says they trained legs only once a week! I've also found that many of the college players who do these basic lifts have poor form, and it's difficult to correct these bad habits.

BFS: *Do you find that most of the athletes coming out of college are fairly knowledgeable about how to eat well?*

MB: No, not at all. Maybe five percent of the people we see at our facility know how to eat well. Mostly these guys have been living on cafeteria food, and often what they know about supplements is what they've been reading in muscle magazines. I have tested dozens of athletes who are gluten intolerant. For years they have had chronic injuries and inflammation caused by the high-carb diet their strength coach told them to eat. The fact is some athletes can tolerate carbs and some can't. Before you tell your athletes what to eat, you'd better know what you are talking about or else you can cause serious damage to an athlete's health and performance.

BFS: *Do you put your athletes on a general workout program, or do you get very specific with each position?*

MB: We usually have to start off our new athletes with a program of structural balance training because they were using poorly designed programs. But after that, we do have specific exercises for each position. As a general guideline, the more movement a position entails, such as a lineman versus a cornerback, the more exercise variety that is needed.

BFS: *Who is your most physically impressive player?*

MB: One of my stronger athletes is Roberto Garza. A previous knee injury almost ended his career. Doctors and trainers told him to avoid squats, deadlifts, and so on. Although we never max out Roberto, he can full squat over 700 pounds. His deadlift and cleans are equally impressive. For a guy who was told never to perform these lifts again, he sure impresses me.

BFS: *What is your take on the functional training methods that are popular now, such as strength training with Swiss*

balls and rocker boards?

MB: It keeps me busy as a strength coach! I know of one pro football team that has bought into that type of training, and we've picked up a lot of athletes as a result because they come to us with so many injuries. This type of training has no scientific basis, and its main purpose is financial gain for those who sell this type of equipment and give courses and seminars. The fact is that coaches who adopt this training philosophy have no idea how to get their athletes strong without injuring them. They adopt this "low risk, no gain" training program and point fingers at others when an athlete get injured or underperforms on the field. As long as no one gets injured in the weightroom, they think their job is secure. Believe me, these guys can only hide for so long.

BFS: *Who are the ones continually looking out for the best training information—is it mostly pro athletes or is it the coaches who are producing results?*

MB: The guys looking for the most training info are the veterans. These guys have seen it all, and they know what's nonsense. Many times they buy into



A few of Bystol's elite athletes: Roberto Garza, nine-year NFL veteran; Tony Pashos, eight-year NFL veteran; Robbie Gould, third most accurate kicker in NFL history; Corey Wooton, projected first-day NFL draft pick; and Olin Kreutz, a 12-year veteran and a six-time Pro Bowler.

the initial concept of functional training workouts. But after one or two years of this type of training they get more injuries and the field goal kicker starts throwing them around on the field. The smart guys are back in the weight-room a few weeks after season and train hard 11 months out of the year.

BFS: *How often do the players train in-season?*

MB: Training hard in-season is the only way a player can maintain their strength and muscle mass over a season that may last 20 weeks. My guys will work out four times a week during in-season training. I find this works better than just two total-body workouts.

BFS: *Are the workouts shorter in-season?*

MB: I do do the volume of training in-season, so during a workout in the off-season I may do 20-24 sets, but during the season I might drop that to 12-16 sets.

BFS: *When do you do your heaviest workouts during the season?*

MB: I do a very heavy leg workout Monday following the game so that they are completely recovered by Sunday. A lot of guys will say to me, "Oh, my legs are sore – I had 72 plays." I tell them that the option is to do that workout today or do it a day closer to the game and risk it affecting their ability to play. It's a very easy concept for the body to adapt to. Players are amazed how well they feel after they train like this for a few weeks. I would 100 percent guarantee the workouts my guys do during season are tougher than most off-season workouts. Working out with me is extra work and costs them extra money. If they weren't getting results,

they would not be here. It's a huge commitment for them.

BFS: *What is a common misconception about how pro football players train?*

MB: I think the biggest misconception is that we think the NFL guys have access to all the greatest training and medical equipment. I have learned in this industry that the grass is very rarely greener on the other side. Some of the rehab is very primitive. Cold lasers, frequency-specific microcurrent, hyperbaric chambers, nutritional supplements are things I see as standard for rehab. It's amazing how very few teams know about these. It's also amazing that some teams don't have squat racks in their weight-room anymore.

BFS: *It seems a lot of strength trainers are claiming that they train a lot of pro football players. Are these claims exaggerated?*

MB: For sure. If a guy has 10 professional athletes that he is working with, then he is going to be working 12 to 14 hours a day, unless he trains them in groups. Any pro guy who does all group training in my opinion is wasting their time, as these guys only have 16-20 weeks out of the year away from their team. They all have individual issues they need to address, such as injuries. If they're working in groups, that's



Bystol with two of the top coaches in their respective fields, weightlifting coach Pierre Roy (center) and strength coach Charles Poliquin.



Bystol met up with two of his colleagues at a recent seminar at the Poliquin Strength Institute in East Greenwich, Rhode Island. Here is Bystol with Ben Prentiss (center), who works with many NHL players, and Keith Albert (right), who trains professional basketball players.

impossible. NFL guys need specific workouts designed for them. Every minute of that 16-20 weeks has to be about them getting better.

BFS: *What advice would you give strength coaches who work with high school football coaches?*

MB: Learn how to teach proper form. Learn how to squat and deadlift, and train more posterior chain. Very few weightrooms that I've seen will have a back extension or glute-ham or a reverse hyper machine. If you're going to invest the time to take on the role of a strength coach, get outside help from experts in that field. So, for example, take a course in Olympic lifting from an Olympic lifting coach.

BFS: *Here's a loaded question. What do you think about the BFS program?*

MB: It's very good. They focus on the basics. I think they are goal-oriented as far as teaching those lifts that are very important to kids. They are not into the hocus-pocus circus training with functional types of training. I think BFS is a very strong company for not going the easy way with training – they are not just selling what everyone wants to hear. **BFS**