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MAD DASH

The 40 has become the most trusted measurement of speed in football, even though it's totally unreliable

Football scouts are addicted to the 40-yard dash, and like all junkies, they sometimes do very stupid things. Gil Brandt, former personnel director of the Dallas Cowboys, recalls scouting a receiver from Mississippi Valley State in 1985 named Jerry Rice. The Cowboys, who had the 17th pick that year, loved his hands but were concerned about his feet, so they had Rice run the 40 12 times over a three-month period. "We kept thinking this guy played faster and looked faster," Brandt says, sounding wistful, "but he still ran in the 4.6 range. That's why he was drafted 16th. Nobody realized his playing time wasn't his 40 time."

Despite horror stories like that, the 40 remains the gold standard for most NFL scouts. A fast time--4.4 seconds for running backs, receivers and cornerbacks, 4.6 for linebackers and 4.8 for defensive ends--will make a coach more forgiving than wide-leg jeans. A guy who can't run a fast 40 might get a chance to prove himself; a guy who runs a fast 40 will always get a chance, even if he can't play, because as Indianapolis Colts president Bill Polian puts it, "Speed is the one thing you can't coach." Which is why every NFL coach is pushing a stopwatch button like a racehorse trainer does.

What's most surprising about all this is that nobody's sure how 40 got to be the magic number. It was not carved into stone tablets by Walter Camp, and there is no proof that a player's time in the 40 is any more indicative of speed than his time for 50 yards--or 39, for that matter. The 40 evolved the way most things do in football--one successful coach used it, so others followed suit. All of which is remarkable because as objective gauges of reality go, 40-yard-dash times fall somewhere between a Chinese election and a World Wrestling Federation decision. "If you have 50 guys timing a player, he will have 50 different times," says Seattle Seahawks coach Dennis Erickson. So it would make sense to entrust the timing to one person, right? Wrong. NFL coaches don't trust any time they get from college coaches, who in turn dismiss every time they get from high school coaches. Even at the annual NFL combine in Indianapolis, where an electronic timer has been in use since 1990, coaches still bring their stopwatches. "Nobody trusts anybody," Erickson says. He cups his hands as if hiding a stopwatch, then

casts a furtive glance. "It's like everybody is a damn spy. You'd think we're in the CIA."

Although the Olympics have been using electronic timing since 1932, football clings to the stopwatch. "This is one case," Polian says, "where technology might not be a benefit." Part of the reason is logistical. NFL scouts travel all over the country to time players, and an electronic timing system won't fit in the overhead bin. The more important--and appropriately illogical--reason is that electronic timing is too slow. To be precise, electronic timing is too precise. It starts the moment an athlete moves, not when a coach standing 40 yards away sees him move and clicks a stopwatch. It doesn't anticipate a runner crossing the finish line, it waits until he gets there. The result of all this damnable precision is a slower time, .20 of a second by most estimates. And no one in football wants to see slower times. Pro scouts have years of data based on their handheld times. While conversion tables exist, it's easier, says Polian, to compare apples to apples.

Those aren't the only variables. A 40 run on artificial turf generally is .10 to .15 faster than one run on grass. Track shoes with rubber nubs on the soles are typically worth .10. Some scouts are considered slow timers, others fast timers. Some are fast timers only when they're touting the player who's running. "The prejudices come out," says Cincinnati Bengals president Mike Brown. "The guys they want to be fast are fast."

The development of the 40 as the definitive measure of speed is attributed to the late coaching legend Paul Brown, who also invented the face bar, the draw play, the 4-3 defense, the two-minute offense, the playbook and the Saturday-night hotel stay for the team. That list is taken from profiles of Brown written late in his life, but none of these stories mentioned the 40, and Brown never brought it up in his 1979 autobiography *Paul Brown Story*. However, Dante Lavelli, the Hall of Fame end who played for Brown at Ohio State in 1942, remembers being timed in the 40 while with the Buckeyes and later while in Cleveland. "In a training camp with the Browns," Lavelli says, "a guy from North Carolina named Earthquake Smith, a big tackle, never made it in the 40. He fell down a couple of times. Brown sent him home." Brown's son Mike says the distance was not an arbitrary designation. "He did it because he thought that was as far as a player would run on any play," Mike says.

Old-school coaches of the time didn't believe in the 40. A young Marv Levy, then the coach at California, asked Green Bay coach Vince Lombardi in the early '60s how fast Paul Hornung ran. "What the hell difference does it make?" Lombardi boomed. "He gets to the end zone, doesn't he? Fourteen seconds, I don't know."

Well into the '50s, most NFL teams used the 100 or the 50. Veteran scout Bucko Kilroy, now with the New England Patriots, attended the 1957 East-West Shrine Game in San Francisco. "Hornung ran the 50 against Abe Woodson, the Big Ten hurdles champ from Illinois," Kilroy says. "When you think of Hornung, you don't think of him being that fast. Hornung beat him by five yards."

The Cowboys revolutionized scouting in the 1960s and '70s. No detail was too small for Brandt. He sent all of the team's coaches and scouts to Stanford, where track coach Payton Jordan taught them how to properly use a stopwatch. Dallas is believed to have been the first NFL team to go to collegiate spring practices and time entire squads in the 40.

Penn State coach Joe Paterno was another early proponent of the 40. When Richard Nelson, a biomechanics professor on campus, expressed interest in the late 1960s in doing some research on runners, Paterno put him in touch with Brandt. The Cowboys provided a grant of \$4,950, and Paterno provided the subjects: 24 freshmen football players.

Nelson tested all the players in 40- and 10-yard dashes, which is now routine for linemen. "The Cowboys used to run players two at a time," Nelson says. "When possible, the two were competing for the same position. The assumption was they were faster when competing. We learned that when they run in pairs, they were slower. Track athletes run faster that way, but it was assumed football players were not used to running alongside somebody."

Two of Nelson's research subjects--Franco Harris and Lydell Mitchell--went on to become All-Pro running backs. "Lydell would beat Franco in the 40. He couldn't beat him at the 10," Nelson says. "You'd have thought it was the world championship. Lydell was so frustrated."

In the study Nelson used a new timing system that was activated when the athlete lifted his hand off a touch pad at the starting line. "We had a problem with Franco," Nelson says. "He figured out how to rock backward and come forward with his hand still on the pad."

The technical term for the move Harris made is a rolling start. Another name for it is cheating. With so much at stake, prospects will try anything to put up a fast time in the 40. The most common way to cheat in the early days was to shorten the distance. In 1968 the Cowboys drafted wide receiver David McDaniels of Mississippi Valley State in the second round after they'd timed him at 4.5 in his campus workout. When McDaniels came to camp and didn't run any better than 4.8, Brandt sent a scout back to Mississippi Valley State. He measured the distance McDaniels had run at 38 1/2 yards, although there is no way of knowing whether the discrepancy was intentional or not. "That's when we started taking a tape measure," Brandt says. These days most schools

conduct "timing days" so that all NFL scouts can come in at the same time. If all 30 teams have scouts in attendance, the track will be measured at least 30 times. "Our yard markers are inlaid," Ohio State strength and conditioning coach Dave Kennedy says. "You can't move that stuff. But every year they measure our field."

The NFL combine in Indianapolis is a marvel of efficiency. It has saved teams a tremendous amount of time and money that they used to have to spend on travel. Unfortunately it also has curtailed the number of oddball-40 stories. Not that they don't continue to pop up. Brandt recalls sending scout Bill Taylor to Jacksonville to time a prospect. After it rained for three consecutive days, Taylor brought the player to the airport, marked off 40 yards in a corridor between gates, got his time and got on a plane.

In the fall of 1989, after Tennessee tailback Reggie Cobb had been thrown off the team for failing a drug test, Tampa Bay director of pro personnel Jerry Angelo flew into Knoxville to put him through his paces. "He came out for the draft at his lowest point, and he would do anything for anybody," Angelo says. "Because of inclement weather, we timed Reggie in a hallway of the Holiday Inn. We were in the room at the finish line. Can you imagine? Some guy says, 'Honey, I'm going out to get some ice,' and runs into a train weighing 220 pounds."

Players view the combine with the joy they typically reserve for final-exam week. Angelo describes what a player faces when he steps up to run his 40: "You got everybody in the NFL sitting in those stands. They're not your fans. They are there to judge you. You see Al Davis and Bill Parcells and Jimmy Johnson at the starting line. Al Davis has his chair. Jerry Jones is there. That's pretty intimidating. They are looking at you. There's no smiling going on. In the bleachers there are rows of scouts at the 10-, 20- and 40-yard marks. Every row for 30 rows up is filled. On the track there are three timers at the 10, three at the 20 and three at the 40. They are the only ones allowed on the track. There are 300 people, and all eyes are on you.

"A lot of guys tighten up and don't run well," he says. "Every muscle in your body tenses up, and you freeze. Ever been so scared that you freeze? They'll sit in their stance for five minutes before they'll say they're ready to go. You will see kids running, going across the finish line so fast that they do head dives into the turf."

"Truth be told, there aren't a lot of guys who like that situation," says Ohio State's Kennedy. "A lot of people say they want [to take] the last shot [in a basketball game]. The 40 is a lot harder than a last shot. How many guys would like to make a free throw that is going to determine whether they play in the NBA?"

In recent years the Muhammads who expect to be among the top draft selections blow off the combine and make the mountains come to them, although Tennessee quarterback Peyton Manning surprised the NFL this year when he attended the combine. Some players believe the track used at the RCA Dome is too slow. Cowboys director of college and pro scouting Larry Lacewell arches an eyebrow and says, "I notice it didn't slow Deion Sanders down." Sanders ran the fastest 40 timed in Indianapolis in the last decade, a 4.29, before the 1989 draft. The controversy simmered to the point that combine officials asked Colts tailback Marshall Faulk to write a letter this year to all invitees assuring them they wouldn't be running uphill on his home field.

Nevertheless, the advantages of running on your home campus are unmistakable. Some schools are noted for having a larger fan turnout than others. Kevin Steele, a former assistant at Nebraska, says more people would come to spring-practice timing sessions than would attend Husker track meets held nearby at the same time. Some campuses are noted for being faster than others. Coaches and scouts mentioned Miami, Florida State, Michigan, Michigan State, Indiana and Tennessee as being notably quick. Sometimes it doesn't matter. When the NFL came to Oklahoma State in 1989 to see Heisman Trophy winner Barry Sanders, the first two picks already had been spoken for--Dallas planned to select UCLA quarterback Troy Aikman, and Green Bay knew it wanted Michigan State offensive tackle Tony Mandarich. Detroit, which had the third pick, sent a delegation led by coach Wayne Fontes. Atlanta owner Rankin Smith, whose Falcons owned the No. 5 pick, led his coaching contingent.

"We hadn't put a watch on Barry in a while," says Pat Jones, a Dolphins assistant who coached Oklahoma State from 1984 to 1994. "It was hard to tell how fast he was. No one ever caught him." Some players show up in track shoes, trying to pull a fast one, but Jones says Sanders wore cutoff jeans and hightop sneakers, and warmed up by doing little more than shooting baskets. He ran a 4.49. "Wayne jumped up, pulled a cigar out of his pocket and said, 'Fellas, y'all can go home now,'" Jones says.

It's not impossible to overcome a poor time in the 40, and the list of players who have done so is impressive: Rice, Emmitt Smith, Sam Mills, Andre Reed and Zach Thomas, among others. But for every player who makes it in spite of his time, there are dozens and dozens who don't. The NFL has a place for players who run a poor 40. It's called the NFL Europe League. "You see a guy who can play, and he doesn't run a 40 well, you kind of wish you hadn't seen his time," says Lacewell.

Florida State defensive coordinator Mickey Andrews, who played for Bear Bryant at Alabama in the early 1960s, says his coach didn't care about the

40. "He was more interested in how fast you ran to the ball." Bill Curry, one of Bryant's successors at Alabama and now an ESPN commentator, puts it this way: "The fast guys get in the NFL, and the coaches put them on the kickoff coverage unit and then they look at the film. The coach says, 'Please explain to me why there's a 4.5, a 4.5, a 4.6 and a 4.9 guy, and the 4.9 guy is hitting the wedge five yards ahead of the 4.6?' You find out that one guy will smash into everything with what he has, which is 4.9. The 4.6 guy turns his head ever so slightly and just misses the tackle."

Monte Kiffin, defensive coordinator for the Tampa Bay Buccaneers, says his best example of a player who couldn't run but could play was former Vikings middle linebacker Scott Studwell. "When I got to Minnesota, it was Scott's 10th year," Kiffin says. "I thought he might be on his way out. He probably ran a 5.2 40. He played four more years and made the Pro Bowl twice. He didn't get faster. He got slower. But he was smart." Steele, linebackers coach for the Carolina Panthers since 1995, says the recently retired Mills played the same way. "He's going to see things so much faster that he doesn't need to run as fast."

Steele cut off his reverie with a dose of coldhearted clarity. "You can't have too many guys who can't run, or the offense is going to exploit it," he says. "Maybe one or two, but when you have seven or eight guys who can't run, it's going to change the way you play."

Whereas the NFL builds a dossier on a prospect that is as thick and orderly as a government report, the information that comes to colleges about prospective players is more like stuff you read on the Internet. It might be true, but it probably isn't. "It's all bull----," says Bill Meyers, an offensive line coach for the Seahawks and a former college coach. "I never heard a high school coach who didn't lie to me about a 40."

The NCAA doesn't allow its members to test high school prospects, so there are only two ways to get an accurate time: if the player runs track or if, prior to his senior year, he attends a college coach's camp. Otherwise, there is no such thing as a slow college prospect. According to The Forrest Davis Recruiting Annual--which bills itself as "the most accurate and complete football recruiting guide anywhere!"--there are 24 high school senior football players across 10 Southern states who have run the 40 in under 4.4. In the last 10 NFL scouting combines only 18 players have run a sub-4.4 40. Bill Buchalter, a reporter for The Orlando Sentinel, has been covering Florida high schools since, oh, shortly after Ponce de Leon arrived in the 16th century. "Just remember one thing," he says. "In 1988 in Seoul, South Korea, Ben Johnson ran 100 meters in 9.79 [a time that was disallowed after he tested positive for steroids]. Over the first 40 meters he ran 4.69. Someone told me that 40 meters is about 44 yards, so Johnson ran a 4.26 for 40 yards." In other words those 24 high school players were

purported to be nearly as fast as the chemically enhanced fastest man in the world.

High school coaches aren't the only ones fudging the numbers. Florida State announced in March that wide receiver Laveranues Coles had run a 4.16. "If so," Buchalter asks, "why was he the fourth-best sprinter on the 4x100 relay team?"

In the summer of 1984 a representative of Japanese football came to the Bengals camp as a guest of coach Sam Wyche. Kaoru Kubota was asked to compare Japanese football to what he knew of the U.S. game. Kubota said the Japanese lagged about 100 years behind the Americans and gave as one of his reasons the fact that the fastest Japanese players ran only a 4.8 40. His answer proved his point. If he exaggerated the Japanese times the way most U.S. coaches do, his players were barely breaking 5.0. If he hadn't exaggerated the best 40 times, he knew nothing about how the American game is played.