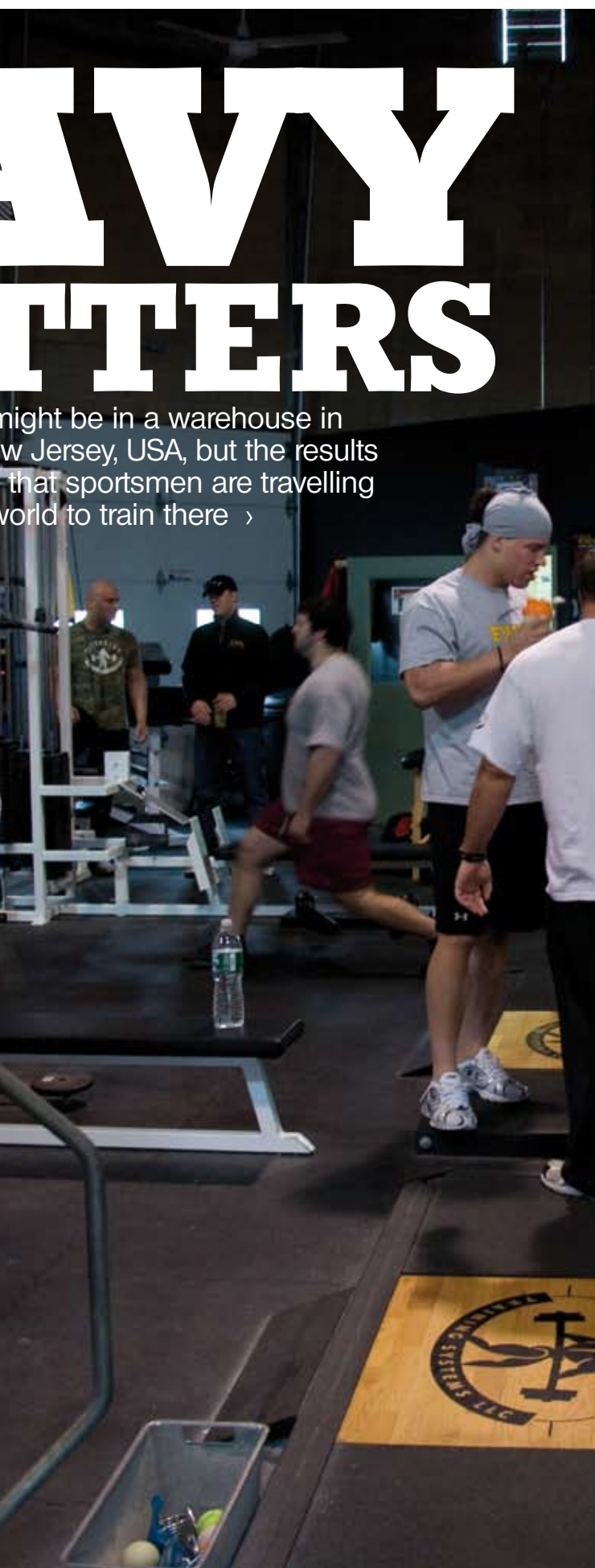



# HEAVY HITTERS

DeFranco's gym might be in a warehouse in unfashionable New Jersey, USA, but the results it produces mean that sportsmen are travelling from around the world to train there >



A man in a red t-shirt and black shorts is performing a pull-up on a black metal frame in a gym. He is standing on a white step. In the background, other people are visible, including a man in a white shirt standing with his back to the camera. The gym has wooden floors and various pieces of equipment like barbells and weight plates. A large quote is overlaid on the bottom right of the image.

Joe DeFranco (opposite)  
knows how to train  
athletes for the NFL

**‘One-on-one  
training is  
dead. The group  
atmosphere  
produces much  
better results’**



**F**riday is always a big day at DeFranco's gym, but this Friday in March is more intense than most. It's the last training day before some of the gym's most talented athletes head for the NFL draft, where they'll be haggled over, traded and contracted by America's top football teams. Some of them will make millions of dollars, at least partly based on how fast they can sprint, how high they can jump, and how much they can bench. Understandably, things are a bit tense.

Joe DeFranco, who founded the gym in 2003, understands the pressure well. He was a promising high-school athlete and was offered half a dozen college football scholarships before tragedy struck. 'My senior year, I developed a tumour on my spine and lost my scholarships,' he says.

Although DeFranco was forced to give up on his own football career, he was unwilling to abandon the game entirely. 'I couldn't achieve my own goals, so I decided to do the next best thing – which was to help other people achieve theirs.'

### Father figure

DeFranco had plenty of experience to draw on. His father, a New Jersey state trooper who won numerous powerlifting contests in the 1980s, was briefly ranked third in the world at armwrestling and owned his own gym. 'It was on top of a factory in a pretty bad town,' says the younger DeFranco. 'A lot of cops and prison guards trained there. It was a great place for a 12-year-old kid to work out.'

It was also a place that emphasised getting fast and strong over looking good, and had a zero-tolerance policy to steroids – both attributes that DeFranco junior took to heart. He built on his dad's training experience with the latest in sports research, taking a degree in exercise science alongside certifications in biomechanics and strength and conditioning. Without much cash, he started training athletes in a garage, then bought space in an industrial

park in Wyckoff, New Jersey (about 15 miles from New York City), where he's still based.

What's evolved since is a gym that combines the latest training science with a seriously hardcore attitude. 'I like to think I've brought the new school to the old school,' says DeFranco. The music is loud and the atmosphere is intense. It doesn't matter how much you can bench when you come to the door, if DeFranco thinks you aren't serious about training you won't be allowed inside.

Most importantly of all, training takes place in groups – everyone tries harder that way. 'It's a big sell for a personal trainer to say, "Well, it'll just be me and you," but the group atmosphere produces much better results,' says DeFranco. 'If an athlete's resting in between sets and can watch other people, that's a great way to learn technique –



and if he's got other people encouraging him, that's a great way for him to push himself. One-on-one training is dead.'

### Combine your efforts

DeFranco's speciality is preparing high-school football players for the NFL Scouting Combine, an event at which the country's top prospects are put through a battery of tests to help talent scouts decide how much they're worth paying for. These include a vertical jump, 40-yard sprint and doing as many repetitions as possible of a 225lb (102kg) bench press – on the latter, anything under 25 is considered sub-par. DeFranco has produced two books

and a DVD devoted solely to performing well on the tests, and regularly coaches athletes on the right techniques to use.

Scouts complain that this is cheating the system, but DeFranco disagrees. 'Running a tenth of a second faster in the 40-yard dash might mean literally millions of dollars to one of my athletes,' he says. 'So you'd be crazy not to train specifically for it. They put these tests together and say, "This is what we're going to test you on", so whether I agree with the testing method or not, I'm showing them the most efficient way to perform on the test.'

### On the prowl

A large part of training for the tests involves doing the gym's gruelling workouts. A favourite is Triceps Death, in which athletes bench press 70 per cent of their one-rep max 20 times, using a series of wooden boards on their chests to stop the bar higher and higher every five reps. The decreased range of motion makes it just about possible, but it still fries even elite athletes' arms. Another regular is flipping a 600lb (270kg) tyre six times, as fast as possible. 'Most of our athletes can't flip it once when we start,' DeFranco laughs.

The most feared tool in DeFranco's arsenal is the Prowler, a weighted metal sled that the athletes push across the car park, either in relay races or to try to break their own record. Sprinting with it is brutal, but it's better than slowing down or stopping – once the momentum's gone, getting it going again is a herculean feat. 'It's one of the worst things I've ever done,' says amateur boxing champ Duchant Johnson, who trains at DeFranco's as part of his preparation for going pro. 'I feel like I'm giving birth every time I push it.'

Saturday is strongman day at DeFranco's, when the athletes compete in events such as the Farmer's Carry and (metal) Log Lift. 'That's true functional training,' says DeFranco. 'Your average trainer thinks functional training involves a Bosu ball. What's great about strongman exercises is that there's no perfect way to move or countermove the object. You're trying to move objects around >

## The NFL Scouting Combine

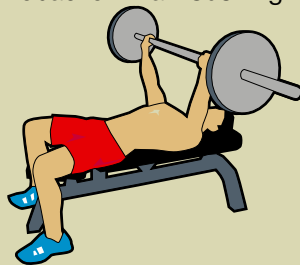
Improve your performance with DeFranco's tips on American football's toughest tests – and see if you can beat star linebacker Brian Cushing



### 40-yard dash

'Breathing may be the most overlooked component of running the 40-yard dash,' says DeFranco. 'You want to take a huge breath on the line, then use a series of little exhalations every ten yards. Your final relaxed exhalation at the 30-yard mark should take you over the finish.'

**Cushing's best: 4.68 seconds**



### 102kg max-rep bench press

'As far as reps are concerned, I coach my athletes to think of the test as multiple sets, as opposed to just one long set,' says DeFranco. 'For example, if you're aiming to do 25 reps, you might do ten reps, then pause – then another ten, another pause, and then several singles with a pause in between.'

**Cushing's best: 30 reps**



### Vertical jump

'Start with your arms over your head, looking up, back slightly arched and standing on your toes. Throw your arms down to your hips. Your hands should be slightly behind your hips, trunk flexed forward and your knees bent at 15-20°.

Now you're ready to explode into a record-setting jump.'



**270kg tyre**

Flipping the tyre end over end trains every body part. Do it six times or more at speed and it becomes a punishing workout.



**Log lift**

Cleaning and pressing the metal log, as demonstrated by Minnesota Vikings linebacker and DeFranco's veteran Vinny Ciurciu, is more functional than using a bar because the awkward shape requires you to develop new techniques to shift the weight.



**'Running a tenth of a second faster in the 40-yard dash might mean millions of dollars to one of my athletes'**

**Chain bench press**

Athletes frequently bench with chains on the ends of the bar. As the heavy chains come off the floor, they add to the bar's weight in the part of the movement where the athletes' arms are strongest.



**Weighted pull-up**

DeFranco incorporates a wide variety of pull-ups into his training programmes, including chin-ups (that's with your palms facing you) and mixed grips. For pure strength, though, try adding enough weight so you can only manage five or six reps a set – either with a weighted vest, a rucksack, or a dumb-bell held between your crossed legs.





a field that is stable. It's incorporating your legs, your arms and everything in between.'

### Scrum on over

Unsurprisingly, this style of training has attracted attention – DeFranco's website ([defrancostraining.com](http://defrancostraining.com)) gets four million hits a month. He has around 300 regular clients, but if you're prepared to make the trip – and put in the effort once you're there – there's always space. British brothers Craig and Dean Miller, former players for Saracens' amateur rugby side, recently attended. They shared a bed and walked two miles to the gym every day to save on living expenses. Craig was forced to lose 7.5kg before being awarded the coveted DeFranco's T-shirt. 'I always get picked on,' he shrugs.

DeFranco says that supremely testing sports such as rugby require as much mental training as physical. 'On the rugby field it's a tough, intense atmosphere and you need to be mentally tough. That's about the atmosphere you train in and your training partners. If you're training with guys that aren't serious, that's going to rub off on you.' DeFranco is impressed by the Millers' commitment. 'They made my regular athletes think, "Hey, I've got to step up my game and train like those guys."'

The Millers are planning further trips to New Jersey, but in the meantime they've built their own Prowler and plyometric boxes and Dean is working on his own warehouse gym. They're not the only UK admirers of DeFranco. Jack Lovett, owner of Durham-based Spartan Performance gym, attended one of DeFranco's 'mentorship' seminars, which cover everything from exercise physiology to gym locations and music.

This style of training has produced excellent results with all our competitive athletes says Lovett. 'The surprising thing, though, is how our approach is radically different to current UK ideas. For example, our rugby players came to pre-season last year with club-approved programmes. These included absolutely no lower-body resistance training of any kind – max efforts and dynamic lifts were totally alien. Lower-level teams had nothing! And our MMA fighters' methods went no further than "push-ups, pull-ups and them kettlebell things".'

### Turning pro

DeFranco has big plans in the pipeline, including a new premises, but for now he is dealing with an influx of calls prompted by *Strong*, a documentary shot at his gym. And the NFL draft this spring could provide the ultimate vindication of DeFranco's training philosophy. Brian Cushing, a linebacker at the University of Southern California who DeFranco says is one of the best athletes he's ever trained, is expecting to land a giant contract in the NFL draft.

'I've known him since he was 15,' says DeFranco. 'He was in my first ever online feature about weight training, "Westside For Skinny Bastards". To go from working with him when he was a thin little kid to potentially seeing him become a multimillionaire is really something special.'

DeFranco walks among the tools of his trade



**'You need to be mentally tough. Training with guys that aren't serious will rub off on you'**



#### Band reverse fly

For advanced shoulder training, try a reverse flye with exercise bands, gymnastic rings or TRX bands. It'll fry your rear deltsoids.



NFL prospect Brian Cushing works his lower back on the deadlift machine

#### Wrist roller

Lifting kettlebells by twisting a band around a barbell is a sure way to develop a bone-crushing grip.



Watch the *MF* team tackle the infamous Triceps Death at [mensfitnessmagazine.co.uk/tricepsdeath](http://mensfitnessmagazine.co.uk/tricepsdeath)