

Limited by  
his club, this  
Philadelphia  
Eagle flies  
south every  
summer to  
train



In the high-stakes world of pro sports, even something as simple as training can be a source of politics. Because of the tremendous amounts of money invested in their players, professional teams, particularly in the NFL, are becoming more and more restrictive on what exercises players under contract are allowed to perform. The thought of a player with a contract worth \$35 million injuring his back while lifting weights has many owners taking the toughness out of training.

# Welbourn's **CORE** Is the Center of His Success

Many NFL teams, including the Philadelphia Eagles, have banned Olympic-style lifting and other lifts such as squats and deadlifts—at least in their facilities. So many players seek outside help for training. Obviously an athlete's stock can rise significantly if he or she can get an edge in strength, speed, and explosiveness.

By Al Thompson

**E**agles starting left guard John Welbourn, a chiseled 6-foot-5, 310-pound fourth-round draft pick out of California, has raised the concentration of his off-season training program to a level that would rival his game day intensity. Welbourn started as a middle-round draft pick whose future was shaky after he ruptured a patella tendon in his left knee in his regular season debut in 1999. He believes that the level of training he does in the off-season has turned him into one of the better guards in the NFL. In 2000, Welbourn signed a contract extension through 2008 worth \$12.1 million. Welbourn played a key role in the Eagles setting a franchise record for scoring in 2002.

Prior to his injury, Welbourn was your typical power-style lifter. He trained like most football players—squats, bench press, cleans, deadlifts, and dumbbell work with an old-school max-out mentality. Like many athletes on the mend from a serious injury, Welbourn discovered he would have much more potential as a professional football player if he changed his philosophy toward training. “I was always a guy who chased numbers,” Welbourn said. “You know, like...what'd he bench? What'd he squat? What'd he clean? I've gotten away from that in a lot of ways.”

For the record, Welbourn lists his personal best performance on the bench as six reps of 465 pounds. His PR in the squat is 610 pounds. Welbourn says he has done 505 pounds in the Olympic-style back squat and 405 for five reps on a front squat. He lists his clean and jerk best at 396 pounds. All his lifts were performed raw (without the use of supportive equipment like knee wraps, bench shirt, and squat suits).

### FINDING THE RIGHT TRAINER

During his rehab, Welbourn discovered a trainer who would change everything. Raphael Ruiz, CSCS, owner of Fitnecessity in the Tampa area, opened the 27-year-old's eyes to the idea that to gain the



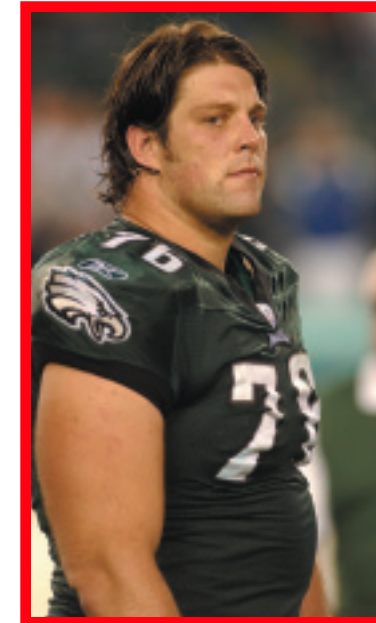
explosiveness required to be among the best linemen in the NFL, his training would not start at the top or bottom, but in the middle.

Welbourn realized he was still very strong when he didn't have to rely on the core section of his body. “The thing I really found, especially when I was rehabbing my injury in 1999, is I was really, really strong—I could leg press a lot of weight and I was real strong on my bench,” Welbourn said. “But I wasn't real strong in my midsection because I wasn't able to move and

run. I was one of the strongest guys in terms of leg press, but I couldn't back squat 135 or 225 pounds for reps. I just didn't have the stability in my midsection...or the balance or the flexibility. It really showed me that...what good is it if I can lie on a flat plane and just be able to push this weight? I mean that's not really transferring to football.”

### STAYING WITH THE PROGRAM

For the third consecutive off-season, Ruiz has put Welbourn through a regime that goes in stages. Ruiz, the former strength and conditioning coach at Sam Houston State University, starts with a process of training that is designed to rehab any movement restrictions that may have occurred as a result of injuries during the season. It should be noted that virtually all NFL players—with the exception of



kickers—finish each season with some kind of injury.

“The rigors of football, you get beat up and you develop a couple of biomechanical imbalances,” said Ruiz. “You start playing toward the injuries so we start working on fixing some of those. There are certain habits

that you develop to try and compensate for an injury. We try and get rid of those...If someone was limping...over time that limp becomes a bio-mechanical imbalance; it becomes a muscle imbalance. So we try to get rid of what the limp leads to.”

Once Ruiz feels Welbourn is ready to train without feeding into an old injury, he starts to build his athlete's strength back up again. “We start developing strength, we start developing growth, muscle endurance, muscular power,” Ruiz said.

Ruiz gave an example of the exercise he considers most important to core training, or the training of the midsection. “We have an exercise, its technical term is called iso-stability,” Ruiz said. “But our athletes have nicknamed it the dead bug. It's the very first thing that we do. We teach the guys how to initiate spinal stability. Most people, when they think ‘core,’ they want to do sit-ups. And they want to do v-ups and things of that nature. Well, the rectus abdominis is a spinal flexor. Its main job is to flex the spine. When you do a sit-up, you flex the spine. What we want to try to teach our athletes is how to control spinal stability by keeping it rigid. And that is not by flexing it. There are a couple of muscles in there and the two we try to keep a lot of importance on is your transverse abdominis and your multifidus. Between those two muscles...it's almost as if your spinal cord has a natural weight belt around it. When

these muscles contract, and when they properly contract, they squeeze around the spinal column. Once we feel comfortable with them in their ability to draw in, we start incorporating all that into the rest of the program,” Ruiz continued. “So as they do overhead lunges, as they do overhead lunge to press, as they do standing presses, as they do anything, we emphasize keeping their belly button drawn in and teach them how to stabilize their spine.”

Welbourn said strengthening his midsection gave him the most recognizable results. “When I got to the point where I was able to do walking lunges, step-ups, squats, and more athletic movements, I noticed I was a lot more explosive, a lot stronger, and a lot better than if I was just lying in a leg press pushing,” he said.

### IT'S ALL ABOUT SPEED

The last stage is all about speed. Today's NFL guard must not only have size, strength, and endurance, he's got to be able to move. The Eagles employ the complicated West Coast offense, which consists of a seemingly limitless number of formations with lots of short passes and timing plays. To stay on top, a lineman must always search for the means to give him the edge.

“The goal of every sports training program that we can possibly develop is speed of movement,” Ruiz said. “We look for joint stability as well as the development of speed. So all of it comes into play when the athletes, through the beginning of the program, can develop joint stability; that way they



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can handle the forces that are being placed upon their body more adequately.”

Ruiz, who has trained the likes of former NFL great Deion Sanders, slugger Gary Sheffield, and NFL wide receiver Bert Emanuel, says his speed training is a combination of Olympic

lifting and plyometrics. “We do a lot of jump training,” Ruiz said, when asked what specific exercises he enlists to work on speed training. “We teach the guys to go from an absolute position. We teach them not to load. Not to say that loading is bad. There is a phase in the program where we teach them not to load where it goes...I want to see how fast you can go from zero to 60; in other words you don’t take a step back. I want to see from no movement to as fast as you can go.”

Ruiz’s typical speed day will include several rounds of Olympic lifting after a session of jump training. He will run Welbourn through several sets (4 to 6 reps each) of snatches, power cleans, and dumbbell work at 80 percent of 1-rep max. He will then go through the same routine at 30 percent of 1-rep max. He will then run his athlete through jump training again to see how much he loses after lifting.

Welbourn says his workouts have become very specific and timed to the second. “A lot of my focus is high-intensity type stuff,” said Welbourn, who checks in with just 12 percent body fat. “I don’t take a lot of rest periods; no longer than 35 to 45 seconds in between each set. In a way it is more like circuit training. I would say one of the biggest gains I’ve made on my bench and my upper body strength was when I started doing a lot of pull-ups and dips. We got to the point where we did a lot of weighted pull-ups...using a 45-pound plate placed like a backpack around my waist and doing that for reps. When I started that, I really saw my bench jump through the roof.”

## PHILOSOPHY FOR SUCCESS

Welbourn credits his success to Ruiz’s training philosophy. Showing up for mini-camps and eventually training camp in the most outrageous shape he can get into translates into confidence on the field. “I’ve actually looked at my biggest measure, the way that I know I’m strong, which is by how many pull-ups I can do,” said Welbourn, who lists his best performance doing pull-ups as 20 reps with a 45-pound plate hung from his waist...and 30 without a plate. “At 310 pounds, I don’t know many guys who can do that. When I was able to do that it was the strongest I’ve been in my whole life. Just being able to physically move your body like that, to do a certain amount of push-ups or different balancing exercises...they’re movements where you’re controlling your whole body.” 📺