

INDEPENDENT COVERAGE OF THE MINNESOTA VIKINGS



VIKING

UPDATE

VIKINGUPDATE.COM
SEPTEMBER 2011 • \$4.95

Christian Ponder

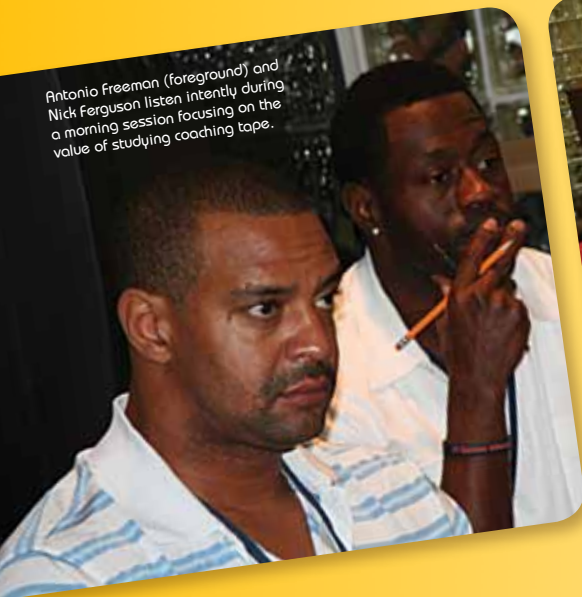
Joe Webb

ARMS RACE

PONDER, WEBB TO COMPETE FOR STARTING SHOT
ALSO INSIDE: HISTORY OF ROOKIE QB STARTERS
FACTORS TO SUCCESS • ALUMNI ON THE LOCKOUT
RANDELL ON THE UNDRAFTED DREAM



BROADCAST BOOTCAMP



Antonio Freeman (foreground) and Nick Ferguson listen intently during a morning session focusing on the value of studying coaching tape.



Greg Cosell, senior producer at NFL Films, makes his point to participants, including Caleb Miller (left) and John Fina.



FOX's James Brown and former NFL quarterback Drew Henson listen to feedback from studio personnel.

PHOTOS BY JIM DOUGHERTY

More than a dozen former players, including former Viking Drew Henson, took a stab at improving their on-camera presence, at the NFL's annual broadcast bootcamp.

BY TOM SPEICHER

Sweat is nothing new for Drew Henson. As one of the few individuals who has appeared in both the Major Leagues and the National Football League, Henson has perspired through numerous uniforms, whether it be the famed pinstripes of the New York Yankees or the iconic blue star of "America's Team," the Dallas Cowboys. But the sweat today is different.

On this June afternoon, the former University of Michigan quarterback is not running on a sweltering field. Instead, he is sitting on a cushy chair in a spacious, air-conditioned room. Rather than shoulder pads, he is sporting a nifty dark gray suit with a burgundy tie. Eye black has been replaced by makeup, lots of it because he is sweating up a storm. Henson is about to encounter something possibly more unforgiving than a blindside, bone-clattering hit—the red light of a television camera.

The light illuminates. Renowned studio host James Brown sets up Henson to discuss Tim Tebow and the Denver quarterback situation. Fortunately, they quickly go to a short taped segment analyzing one of Tebow's passes from his rookie year. This allows a staffer to quickly run on the set and dab the sweat off Henson's forehead. Moments later, the camera returns to Henson and for the next two minutes or so he gives his take on Tebow. The verdict? Henson doesn't believe that Tebow will be a championship-caliber quarterback in the NFL. Proving the validity of that assessment could take at least a couple years. The assessment of Henson is immediate.

Glenn Adamo, vice president of production and operations for NFL Media who is directing the segment, tells Henson that he needs to slow his rapid delivery and "play to J.B.," rather than forcing himself to continually look at the camera. Adamo announces that this was just a rehearsal. In a few minutes comes the real thing. Henson's segment will be taped and dissected. However, before the camera rolls, a timeout is required ... for makeup.

This experience will be repeated numerous times on this day. Henson is one of 16 former NFL players participating in the four-day NFL Broadcast Boot Camp, conducted at NFL Films' sprawling complex in Mt. Laurel, N.J. The fifth-annual event brings the ex-players together with top professionals from the league's various broadcast partners: CBS, ESPN, FOX, NBC, NFL Network, SiriusXM

Radio and Westwood Radio. The 12-hour days feature hands-on workshops that cover topics such as show and game preparation, tape study, editing, radio production, field reporting and analyst prep.

"You cannot get any closer to the industry. You cannot get any better teaching and coaching. This is a world-class program," says Troy Vincent, the five-time Pro Bowl cornerback who is now vice president of NFL Engagement, the entity directing the boot camp along with the NFL Broadcasting departments. "We have decision-makers from all the networks here. How many internships or job shadows exist where you have the true decision-makers in the room with you watching you audition?"

Besides Brown, the host of "The NFL Today" on CBS and "Inside the NFL" on Showtime, experts include Curt Menefee, host of "FOX NFL Sunday;" TV analysts Ron Jaworski (ESPN), Mike Mayock (NFL Network), Solomon Wilcotts (CBS and NFL Network), and Brian Baldinger (NFL Network); studio show producer Greg Cosell (NFL Films); game producers Fred Gaudelli (NBC), Bill Brown (FOX), and Victor Frank (CBS); and executives Steve Cohen, senior vice president

of sports programming at SiriusXM Radio and Howard Deneroff, senior vice president/executive producer of Westwood One Sports.

"There are a lot of great things about this week," says Henson during a brief break. "We all want to get into the business, but the hardest thing is not having direction. As athletes, we are so used to getting coached up. When we are not getting coached up, we're kind of hanging. We want to improve and want to know how to improve. Getting tangible feedback from the best in the business will give us so many answers in a short amount of time. It can give us confidence as we go our separate ways after this week."

Confidence is needed, according to Nick Ferguson, who played 132 games as a special teamer and safety for the Jets, Broncos and Texans.

"I think broadcasting is harder than football because now we are asked to do something that we are not naturally gifted with," he says. "With football, we were using our God-given ability to run, jump, do whatever. But with broadcasting, we have to learn. It's like college all over again. If you want to master calculus and take that test, you have to do the research and study. This is no different."

The importance of study is stressed in a morning session with Cosell of NFL Films. Known as one of the most astute evaluators of coaching tape in the business, Cosell is the creator and supervising producer of the long-running "NFL Matchup" program, which NFL Films produces for ESPN. Last fall, readers of USA Today voted it as the best NFL studio show.

Just above Cosell's head on a whiteboard are his main points for his 55-minute tape-study presentation: knowledge, preparation/study, continuing education and substance/content. The four members of "Group B" attending the session—Ferguson, former Packers All-Pro wide receiver Antonio Freeman, longtime Bills offensive lineman John Fina and ex-Bengals linebacker Caleb Miller—seem to be paying close attention if the jottings in their red notebooks are a true indication.

Cosell's message is a blunt one.

"You have to start out in this business by humbling yourself," he says. "If you have the attitude that you're an ex-player and you're just going to show up, you'll be out of the business in a heartbeat. It may work for a bit if you are a Hall of Fame quarterback because you have the name, but eventually those guys get weeded out, too. Jaws (Jaworski) will tell you that he works harder now than when he played.

"Don't go in with the idea that you know all because you're an ex-player. There will be a lot of things you don't know. You have to broaden your scope right off the bat because you have to talk about anything that involves the game."

To illustrate, Cosell recalls a former standout defensive lineman who had the opportunity to appear on "NFL Matchup" several years ago before longtime hosts Jaworski and Merrill Hoge were selected. After two weeks, the ex-player pleaded with Cosell for help.

"He said, 'I know how to rush the quarterback. I know how to play the run. I don't know anything else,'" Cosell says.

That message hits home for former Saints and Browns center LeCharles Bentley, whose four-person group met with Cosell earlier in the morning.

"It's time for me to put the fact that I'm an ex-player away and think about and treat the game differently," says the two-time Pro Bowler. "I have to expand my understanding of the game. I'm a former offensive lineman. O-line is my wheelhouse. I can talk about that all day. But I want to understand receivers. I want to understand quarterbacks."

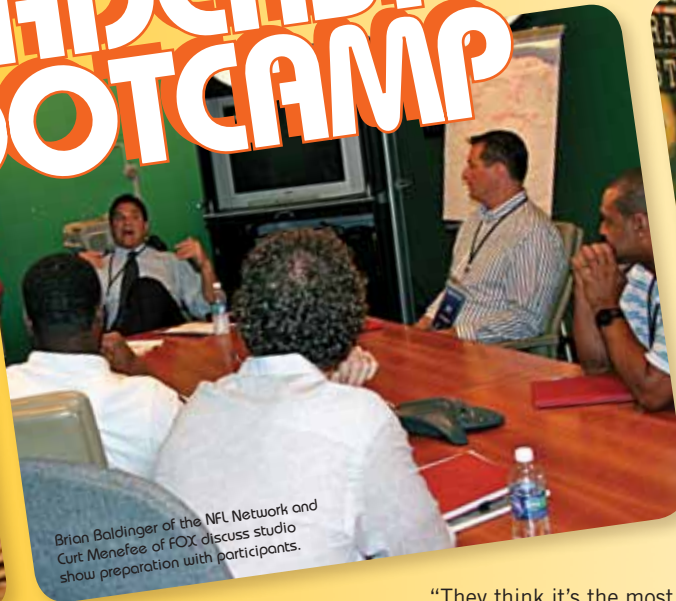
According to Cosell, "knowledge is the foundation of everything" in broadcasting. He tells the nodding group of participants that knowledge helps one appear comfortable and natural on-camera, another essential ingredient for success. Enhanced knowledge also



BROADCAST BOOTCAMP



Former NFL quarterback Drew Henson has makeup reapplied during a brief break in the studio.



Brian Baldinger of the NFL Network and Curt Menefee of FOX discuss studio show preparation with participants.



Former Cleveland and New Orleans offensive lineman LeCharles Bentley prepares to enter a session.

PHOTOS BY JIM DOUGHERTY

facilitates insightful comments and the avoidance of dreaded clichés.

“You have to think stuff through and figure out a way to say it to separate yourself,” he says. “You have to own your own message.”

Moments after the session concludes, Cosell has a new disciple in Antonio Freeman.

“It’s all about content. You can’t make broad statements,” says Freeman, who led the NFL with 1,424 receiving yards for the Packers in 1998. “You have to supply evidence with whatever statement you are trying to get out. You want to sound and look like you are comfortable. You have to find a level where you can relax and be yourself.”

For the past few seasons, Freeman has appeared on Comcast SportsNet in Washington, D.C., covering the Redskins.

“Just like being a player, even though you have a position, you still have to work, learn and do more,” he says. “I want to better my craft. I’ve heard this program is the turn you need if you are really seriously considering broadcasting as a post-football career. This is the place you need to be.”

This is the second year in a row Freeman applied for the boot camp. He didn’t make the cut last year, which is not that unusual.

“This is the most competitive program that is offered through the Player Engagement office,” says Vincent. “We see over 100 applicants. We ask for a lot in the application process. You have to write an essay, submit recommendations. We look for some prior media experience. This is as close to real life as most of our athletes have ever seen.”

Usually boot camp is a mix of current and former players. The labor impasse has kept current players away from this year’s program, opening up additional seats for retirees.

“In past years, we had nine or 10 ex-players and this year we have 16,” Vincent says. “Some of the individuals here probably would not have had the opportunity if there was labor peace.”

Common post-football careers include coaching, scouting, sales, real estate and franchising, but Vincent believes broadcasting is the top choice for most players.

“It keeps them closest to the game as possible,” he says.

“They think it’s the most natural fit because they see their former teammates and counterparts doing it.”

And more players see the boot camp as the critical first step to success in the business. Of the 90 players who participated in the first four camps, 36 have earned broadcasting jobs. “That is what raises the popularity of the program,” Vincent says. “When you can say that over one-third have landed jobs, that’s a pretty good success rate.”

One of those successful graduates is back to share advice with this year’s attendees as they explore radio broadcasting. Ross Tucker was an offensive lineman for five different teams during a seven-year NFL career before attending the first bootcamp in 2007. Now he hosts a weekday talk show, “The Morning Kickoff” on SiriusXM NFL Radio.

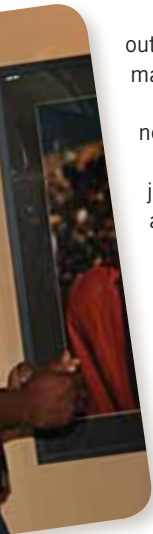
“It opened up my eyes to what was out there, how competitive it was and what my competitive advantage might be,” says Tucker, who also writes about the NFL for ESPN.com. “I was able to see the different facets of radio and television and what I thought would be the best fit for me. The other thing is you are in front of a lot of decision-makers. That’s how I got hooked up with Steve Cohen and SiriusXM. You form relationships that really help.”

Tucker uses his experience as a host to stress that prep work is just as important in the unscripted world of radio as in the television industry.

“There will be people who will call into the show and say, ‘Ross, what do you think about the Seahawks’ nickel-back situation?’ And I have to know that,” he says. “I have to know that it’s probably going to be Walter Thurmond or Roy Lewis. If I don’t, they will be able to tell and it’s bad. They won’t respect me.”

The theme of hard work continues as the ex-players meet with Curt Menefee of FOX and Brian Baldinger of the NFL Network to discuss studio show preparation. The focus of the session is how to effectively articulate clear opinions on current topics in the NFL. In a while, the four-man group of Freeman, Fina, Ferguson and Miller will join Henson and the other participants for their shot in front of the camera. For now, they huddle around a long conference table and listen intently to Menefee’s advice.

“When you are prepared, you are more comfortable. You can say it with a lot more confidence,” he says. “You are also capable of a lot more brevity. In television, time is of the essence. When they say you have 15 seconds, that means 15 seconds, not 25. You have to know the way to do that. That way is to know the subject inside and



out. You have to know what the main point is that you are trying to make. Not five or six points, but the main point.”

Adds Baldinger, “You’re expected to have opinions and you need to express them with energy and conviction.”

For the next 45 minutes, the group has the opportunity to do just that. Menefee and Baldinger direct topics around the table to allow each man time to hone his opinion and delivery on subjects that he might have to discuss on camera after lunch. Whether the subject is the viability of Tim Tebow, the promise of the Detroit Lions or the potential impact of new kickoff rules, all of the campers equip themselves well. Most impressive, though, is Ferguson, who seems adept at stating an opinion and quickly backing it up with the requisite passion.

While offering praise, Menefee and Baldinger don’t allow Ferguson time to bask in the glow of a job well done. Menefee believes he’s packing too much information in his statements.

“One or two great points is much better than three or four OK points,” Menefee says after Ferguson identifies the Lions’ quarterback, offensive line and defensive secondary as reasons the team will not contend in 2011.

Baldinger wants him to emphasize the personal nature of his analysis when discussing how special teams play could be minimized in the league since kickoffs are being moved to the 35-yard line.

“You just stated, ‘I would not have made it in the league unless it was for special teams,’” Baldinger says to Ferguson. “That was good, but lead with that.”

As the contingent heads for a quick bite to eat before rushing to wardrobe and makeup for their in-studio shot, Menefee takes a minute to discuss the realities of the business for Ferguson and the others.

“It is more difficult to make it without great name recognition,” he says. “It’s a longer path, but not an impossible one. We’ve seen many guys do it, and we’ve seen guys go the other way. Joe Montana was the greatest quarterback ever. He was on television for one year and they decided he couldn’t do it.

“If you look at this business, every five years there is 50-percent turnover. It’s harder for guys to get in and stay in. But if you get in and work hard and you establish a name for yourself, then you can make it. It’s like being a player. If you get in and you’re good enough, you will stay until your time is up.”

That sentiment is echoed by the man who will momentarily share a TV studio with the campers: three-time Emmy-winning host James Brown.

“There are no substitutes for preparation and hard work,” he says. “Any of the people you look at who are successful in this business are the grinders, those who are willing to pay the price. John Madden, who is iconic in this business, had a favorite question to ask his colleagues to ensure they had all they needed in preparing for a broadcast: Is your bucket full? If your bucket is full of all the information you need, then you can stop.”

As Drew Henson looks to his right at Brown and takes a deep breath moments before taping begins on his two-minute Tebow segment, it seems obvious the former Cowboys, Lions and Vikings quarterback knows his subject. It’s just a matter of how he delivers the information.

Like his earlier run, though, beads of sweat appear on his forehead a few seconds before the camera light turns red. However, this time it is a more confident Henson, sweat notwithstanding. His fundamental message is the same—Tebow won’t be a Super Bowl quarterback—but his delivery has slowed and he sounds more relaxed and self-assured. He still needs to engage with Brown more than the camera, but Adamo, the director, gives Henson a big thumbs-up.

“That was dramatically better,” he says.

Henson smiles, dabs his forehead, thanks Brown and heads for a break.

“When that light comes on, you have makeup on your face, you start to sweat and you are out of your comfort zone,” says Henson, who worked a half dozen college football games last year for ESPN3.com. “You really can’t prepare for it until you get in front of the camera and practice your craft. It’s definitely different than anything else that I’ve done.”

Perhaps sensing the most stressful part of his day is behind him, Henson takes a moment to embrace the true purpose of boot camp.

“We all have anxiety when we are done playing with what is next in life because all that we have known has been sports,” he says. “To try to find what that next project could be and dive into it is a good feeling to have. We will see where this leads.” ■

2011 NFL BROADCAST BOOTCAMP PARTICIPANTS

Tony Banks	BAL, DAL, HOU, WAS
Anthony Becht	ARI, NYJ, TB
LeCharles Bentley	CLE, NO
Rocky Boiman	IND, KC, PIT, TEN
Barrett Brooks	DET, GB, NYG, PHI, PIT
Rob Davis	CHI, GB, KC, NYJ
Nick Ferguson	BUF, CHI, DEN, HOU, NYJ
John Fina	ARI, BUF
Dustin Fox	BUF, MIN, PHI
Antonio Freeman	GB, PHI
Drew Henson	DAL, DET, MIN
Dan Klecko	IND, NE
Caleb Miller	CIN
Tony Stewart	CIN, OAK, PHI
Amani Toomer	NYG
Maurice Williams	DEN, JAX