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NY Jets medical staff laid foundation for modern-day NFL Combine

By **Jenny Vrentas/The Star-Ledger**
February 28, 2010, 7:00AM

In 1965, the Jets signed a draft pick to the biggest professional football contract at the time.

Twenty-three days later, he had knee surgery.

The player was, of course, Joe Namath. And the eventual Hall of Fame quarterback and Super Bowl III MVP would, of course, work out famously well for the team.

But Namath's pre-existing knee injury still triggered a thought among the team's medical staff: If you're going to dole out big bucks for a player, shouldn't you make sure he passes inspection?

"He immediately needed huge surgery and, at the time, the decision was made," said Kenneth Montgomery, the head team physician on the Jets' current medical staff. "If you're going to sign a guy to a big contract, you need some kind of medical checkup to make sure he's physically fit and able to play."

That's now routine at the NFL Combine, where this weekend more than 300 top draft prospects are being screened and scouted in Indianapolis. But it wasn't custom four decades ago when, according to the Jets, they pioneered a practice that would morph into this modern-day mega-event.

In the winter of 1970, then-team physician James Nicholas -- who operated on Namath's knees four times -- began inviting the best potential draftees to the Jets' Long Island practice facility for an exam. Several other clubs followed suit, meaning top college players would spend their spring crisscrossing the country for the same joints and injuries to be checked and rechecked.

Eventually, the burdensome routine was replaced by a united summit first held by one scouting organization in 1982, with 163 players attending, and league-wide starting in 1985. Today, players, teams, agents and close to 400 media members descend on the live-televised, six-day event in Indianapolis.

"What was initiated by Jets team doctors wasn't really a combine -- it was inviting prospective draft choices to the facility to examine, before you had a draft," said Andrew Willis, the associate team orthopedist on the Jets' current staff and partner at Tri-County Orthopaedics. "But once all the teams were in one spot, they also wanted to check things like speed and strength. So they combined those events with the medical evaluations."

Those events -- particularly the 40-yard dash -- have overtaken the public



Tony Tomsic/US Presswire

"Broadway" Joe Namath had legendary career despite playing on two bad knees.

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perception of the Combine. But for the team doctors dispatched to Indianapolis this week, their primary objective is in line with the original roots of the events.

For four days, Montgomery, Willis and colleagues will inspect each one of the invited athletes. They'll examine bones and joints, as well as internal organs and the heart, to make sure the players can handle elite physical stress. Just outside of Lucas Oil Stadium are trucks with four MRI machines for joints to be evaluated 24 hours a day.

The doctors work in groups of five NFL teams at a time, so each player isn't examined 32 times over. Teams review test results together, but keep their individual reports and score sheets confidential.

"We are looking at the players simultaneously, but we all make our own decisions as to what we feel a player's risks are," Montgomery said. "We're all looking at the same information, but how we interpret it in the context of our team is individualized."

After player evaluations, the doctors convene for forums to discuss trends in injury prevention and treatment. Last year, one major topic was how ACL knee reconstruction affects career longevity. This year, Jets team orthopedist Elliott Hershman will present his research on how injury rates differ on grass versus artificial playing surfaces.

Hershman, who began working with the Jets in 1976, is responsible for relaying the history of the Combine's origins from Nicholas, who passed away in 2006, to the younger staff members.

"It's interesting to us, being Jets physicians, that it really did start out with the New York Jets wanting to look at athletes ahead of time to make sure they're fit," Montgomery said. "It is actually quite interesting to see how much of an event it has become."

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