



Neck and neck

By GEOFF HOBSON

Posted May 20, 2011



They are the Credence Clearwater Revisited of the football strength world, so it is quite fitting that "The Legends" jam next month in Cincinnati at the Clifton Cultural Center on the cutting edge of the most important problem in the game today.

Forget the lockout. Head and neck injuries and their relationship to concussions are spawning urgency and due diligence throughout a league grappling with safety issues. Bengals strength coach Chip Morton, who along with the University of Kentucky's chief strong man Ray "Rock" Oliver cut his teeth on similar conferences in Cincinnati in the mid-1980s, find themselves pulling back their roots in the effort to fight concussions.

Kim Wood, the NFL weight room and strength equipment pioneer who was with the Bengals for 35 years, spearheads the June 17-18 confab focusing on "facing up to the problems of head and cervical injuries." Headlining with him are two other three-decade-something gurus in Penn State and Redskins icon Dan Riley and the father of the University of Michigan power Mike Gittleson.

The neck is back and Morton is responding with a new regimen of workouts off "The Legends" playlist.

"Kim Wood was teaching all about the neck 25 years ago," Morton says. "Nautilus was the one that had the machines and I'd drive to the conferences that were here. These guys were on the cutting edge of neck training then and they're on the cutting edge of it now. Ray and I are lucky in that our family tree that taught us always emphasized the neck."

The NFL is coming off a season where officials took a harder line on concussions, making it mandatory for the first time that players that have been concussed must leave games and pass a battery of tests before being allowed to return. The belief now is that a stronger and bigger neck, along with a developed Trapezius muscle, is a must in cutting down the head and neck trauma that leads to concussions.

"The neck is under the microscope more because of the tie-in with concussions," Morton said. "With the way the brain sits in the skull cavity and it bounces on the inside of the skull, one of the ways to hopefully reduce that is to

strengthen the thickness or strength of the column that supports the head so the absorption of the force is that much better."

Morton calls neck strength a lost art and a lost emphasis. "It's just not glamorous," he says. Oliver, the former NBA coach who assisted Morton in the Bengals weight room for six years before heading to Lexington, says everyone lately has been caught up in the pretty numbers game of bench press, power cleans and squat thrusts.

"Remember looking at athletes 30, 40 years ago?" Oliver asks. "You could tell they were athletes because they had the big necks. Now the legs are bigger, arms are bigger, chests, but not necks. I remember one of the first things Kim Wood teaching me was that the neck is the number one priority.

"Now we spend all this time developing faster guys with bigger bodies and train them for these huge collisions. Then we stand there and gulp and can't breathe when one of them can't get up for five minutes."

Morton and Oliver had their own confab last week at Paul Brown Stadium and one of the discussions was the neck. Unlike Morton, Oliver has had the luxury of working with his players this spring and he told Morton that the before and after pictures of the UK football players show a visible and significant increase in neck size.

Because he came out of the Wood-Riley-Gittleson School, Morton has always emphasized the neck and it was easier in the last couple of years when he had a weight-room helper in Carlos Woods. Like Morton, Woods is a product of Riley's Penn State regimen of manual resistance with partner exercise. Now he'll add some of the new exercises Wood and Co., have been promulgating.

"Penn State still has a great handle on that and we'll continue to do that," Morton said. "Now we're going to have different variations on how you position the body to maximize the neck. Different variations of the shrug. Different variations of neck flexion and neck extension. As you look deeper into muscle function and muscle movement, you can work on a different angle of pull for the shrug. One arm versus two-arm shrugs. Different ranges of motion for the neck, protraction and retraction, as opposed to just flexion and extension."

But along with the physical work of the neck also has to come a change in mindset. Oliver fears what is going on at the high school level because he sees a lack of technique in tackling and regard for the neck or head. When he speaks at conferences, he emphasizes the youth.

"An NFL player hurts his neck or head and he's going to be taken care of," Oliver says. "What happens to a 16-year-old kid just starting out in life?"

Morton sees where neck strength could become a priority in the numbers game. Neck circumference may not become as heralded as the bench press at the scouting combine, but it could in the physical exams.

"Think about it," Morton says. "If you're missing games or practices because of a concussion, what's best for a team? A guy that can bench press 400 pounds, or he's out because of a concussion? What impacts the thinking more? It's fascinating."

Maybe even more fascinating is the return of The Legends. Wood is as active as ever in his mid-60s with podcasts and just his sheer, flat-out research. Morton and Oliver sound like a couple of kids at Christmas as they talk about getting ready for the clinic with their mentors. One of the classic strength stories involves Morton's annual drive from Penn State to watch Wood work the Bengals training camp and Wood stopping by head coach Sam Wyche's cafe table to joke, "Hey Sam, this guy drove nine hours just to see me."

Now, he'll just be next door and there'll be a lot of smart guys with him. From the neck up.

"It's not a panacea," Morton says. "But we know its part of the puzzle."

URL: <http://www.bengals.com/news/article-1/Neck-and-neck/bb7d6bca-4d04-40b4-a45a-15470bce699f>

© 2011 Cincinnati Bengals. All rights reserved