

M&F goes into the jaws of Gator Nation for the exclusive on why the University of Florida has the best strength and conditioning program in the country





By dawn the moisture on the field of The Swamp is equal parts dew and sweat. By sunrise that ratio has shifted in favor of sweat. Once the sun peeks over the scoreboard at Ben Hill Griffin Stadium in the heart of the University of Florida campus, the football team is working so hard the grass needs Gatorade. At this early hour, when the only people awake in Gainesville are the football players and the newspaper delivery personnel, two sounds are heard amid the heavy breathing and the cleats clawing at the earth: a whistle, and the voice of Florida's Head Strength and Conditioning Coach Mick Marotti.

**"YEAH! YEAH! YEAH! DOMINATION! YEAH!"**

His shouts ricochet around the empty stadium, each word spoken like it was fired out of a machine gun. The players drive their feet through agility drills, 40-yard dashes and wind sprints with parachutes tied to their backs. They've been at it for almost an hour, and despite the fact that many players are struggling to breathe, not one of them doubles over in exhaustion because Gators don't do that.

Standing there, fighting to stay upright and lungs screaming, many of the players glance up at the huge national champions sign that spans the south end zone. Three years are painted beside it, representing championship seasons for the Gators: 1996, 2006 and 2008.

"I want to see fight!"

Officially, the Florida Gators will begin defending their title 100 days from now in the first game of the 2009

season. Unofficially, the title defense began months ago in the one place that matters most: the weight room.

### Champion Facility

As part of the brand-new \$28 million Heavener Football Complex, the Gators' gym looks like it was designed by the combined efforts of Vince Lombardi and the architects behind the Bellagio resort and casino in Las Vegas. Part health club, part motivational tool and part museum, the complex has enough weights to fill an airplane hangar and enough quotes on the wall to fill a Bartlett's. "The more one sacrifices, the harder it is to surrender." "Championships are won by those who embrace hard work and have the discipline to tolerate discomfort." "The grass grows green with blood spilt from wounds of effort."

All the heavy hitters are quoted,



from Winston Churchill to Michael Jordan to Eleanor Roosevelt. Some quotes are only a few inches tall while others soar 10 yards around the room. And if none of them light a fire under your ass, there's always Coach Mick.

» **"If you can't do it, you're either not tough enough or not strong enough!"** he hollers to a group of linemen performing deadlifts as part of their leg-day circuit. "Which is it?"

Of course, there's no satisfactory answer to this question, which is why it's so perfect. It leaves only one option: Train harder.

"You always have to push players into uncharted water in their training," Marotti says. "It's the only way to keep them progressing."

The same can be said for designing a weight room: If you want to stay on top in the recruitment game, you need

to continually raise the bar. In this case the bar was set by the University of Notre Dame (Indiana), where Marotti worked before joining Head Coach Urban Meyer's staff at Florida.

"I designed this weight room based on what they did when I was at Notre Dame," he says. "When I got here, it was a shock [how much] we needed to upgrade. I hated this weight room."

Marotti shakes his head in disgust, as if having a subpar workout facility is a violation of the Bill of Rights. As a result, he had final say on the design of the Griffin-Oakley Strength and Conditioning Complex, which now houses what appears to be every cutting-edge piece of exercise equipment known to man, each with the university's name or mascot stamped on it.

The Gator insignia is as ubiquitous here as Mickey Mouse is at Disney World. From the dumbbells to the



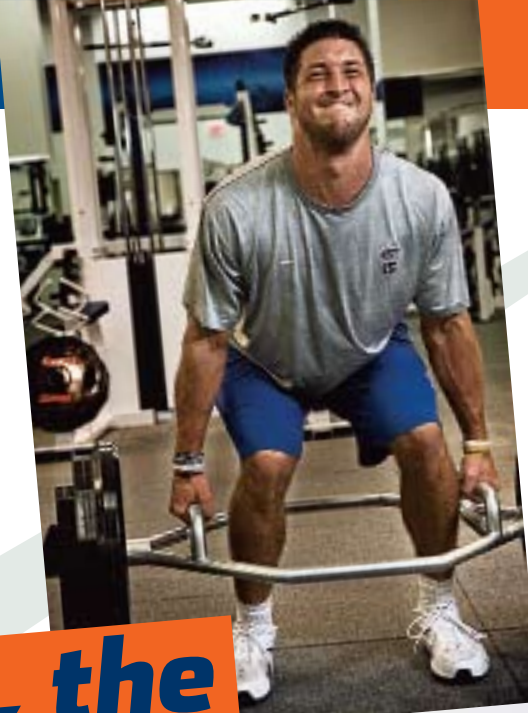
platforms on the squat racks to the waxy surface of the slide board, the famous Bull Gator mouth is everywhere. But while the room is as much a marketing tool as a muscle factory, without the top-flight athletes who train here the gym would be just another expensive exercise-equipment showroom.

### Champion Attitude

Will Hill was named to the 2008 *Parade* All-America team as a high school senior, giving him carte blanche over

his choice of where to play college ball. When asked why he chose UF, he gestures to the facility he's standing in. "I'm self-driven, and when I was being recruited by Florida, I thought, *This is where the best people are working out, so that's where I have to be.* It played a big part in my coming here," Hill says. "I was strong when I came here, but I wasn't as tough. We train for mental and physical toughness. They push us so hard in the weight room that we have no choice but to get tougher."

Like soldiers trained to repeat name,



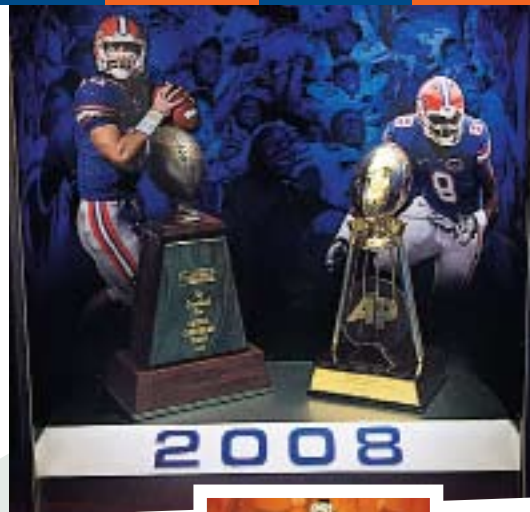
**"On this team, the leaders in the weight room are also leaders on the field"**







Championships are won long before the season starts. With every rep, Gator players think about defending their title



rank and serial number if captured by the enemy, to a man all Florida players describe their training using the same words — intense and tough, tough and intense. Paul Wilson, a redshirt freshman receiver, says he knew from his first visit that the training sessions would be grueling.

“When you’re being recruited, they let you know the level of intensity expected of you in the weight room. They make it clear that this is the hardest lifting program in the country,” Wilson says. “It’s tough. Even with the weights they try to back you into a corner to see how you’ll react.”

» **All of this is part of the master plan** devised by Meyer and Marotti to make sure that when the Gators step on the football field, they’re stronger, faster and tougher than their opponent. Case in point: the fourth quarter of the ’08 SEC Championship game against Alabama. With ’Bama leading 20–17, the Gators put the clamps on the Crimson Tide with two clock-eating drives. One was 11 plays and the other eight. In a post-game interview, Alabama Head Coach Nick Saban could

only acknowledge what everyone who watched the game witnessed: “We ran out of gas in the fourth quarter. We didn’t finish and [Florida] did.”

Quotes like that are music to Marotti’s ears.

“Coach Meyer and I believe that everything should be done with high intensity,” he says. “For the most part, I don’t care about the actual weights the guys put up; I care about effort and attitude. I want to see intensity in every lift.”

But this is still a weight room, and numbers still matter. In fact, in a back corner a chart lists the Florida Gator Physical Standards of Excellence. It features about a half-dozen exercises with the corresponding weights players are expected to lift. There are only two categories: competitor and cham-





pion. Under most circumstances, being a competitor would be acceptable. Not here. Gators are expected to be champions, and the difference between the numbers is striking. On the bench press, linemen in the competitor category are expected to bench 385 pounds, champions 420. For big skill positions, the difference is a little wider: 350 for competitors and 400 for champions, with 50 pounds separating the top dogs from the rest of the pack.

“On this team, the leaders in the weight room are leaders on the field,” Marotti says. For the Gators, it all starts with superstar quarterback Tim Tebow. But for Tebow, who became the first sophomore to win the Heisman Trophy in 2007 and led the Gators to the national championship in 2008, it all starts with Marotti.

### Champion Leadership

“Coach Mick was a big reason why I came to Florida,” Tebow says, drenched in sweat after having just finished a Marotti one-on-one training session. “I thrive on the hardest workouts. I love it. That’s why I came here.”

Said in a press conference or in the locker room after a game, that might sound like an athlete just trying to say the right thing, but when said after grinding out five deadlift reps of 435 pounds at the end of a one-hour nonstop gauntlet of strength work and conditioning, the quotes hold water. How else do you explain that the strongest guy on the team might be the quarterback?

“I’ve never seen anything like him,” Marotti says. “He’s on a whole different level. He’s a once-in-a-generation type of guy. He trains every day measuring himself against everyone,

everywhere who might be training, and he tries to train even harder. That’s the attitude we want everyone to have.”

» **To foster that mind-set,** Marotti’s workouts are as mentally demanding as they are physically challenging. He uses the term “work capacity” to describe what he expects from his players, meaning he wants to improve their strength, power, explosiveness and speed with every workout. He accomplishes that by mixing traditional strength training with new philosophies.



“The conventional exercises such as the bench and squat have produced a lot of success in the past,” he says. “I’ll have the guys do a total-body strength workout and superset it with conditioning, then mix in some strongman training stuff. We’ll work the core with medicine balls. Whatever it is, it’ll be a challenge they have to earn their way through.”

Tebow echoes: “With every rep, you have to decide whether you’re going to give in to the pain. I know that mental toughness we build up going through our workouts helps us push through in the fourth quarter. Working as hard as you can on one more rep translates to working as hard as you can on one more play. It all starts in the weight room.” **M&F >>**



From left: Will Hill, safety; Paul Wilson, wide receiver; Tim Tebow, quarterback; Emmanuel Moody, running back; Lorenzo Edwards, linebacker

From the conventional to the unconventional, UF Strength Coach Mick Marotti uses everything in his lifting arsenal to get the Gators ready for the 2009 season



# THE GATOR GAUNTLET

YEAR IN AND YEAR OUT, THE GATORS GO TOE TO TOE WITH THE STRONGEST TEAMS IN THE COUNTRY. HERE'S THE LEG WORKOUT THAT KEEPS THEM STANDING TALL OVER EVERY OPPONENT



## SPEED/LOWER BODY

Dynamic Speed Warm-Up  
Walking/Skipping/Running Dynamics

| EXERCISE                       | SETS | REPS/TIME |
|--------------------------------|------|-----------|
| <b>WALL MOBILITY DRILLS</b>    |      |           |
| Flexion/Extension              | 1    | 10        |
| Abduction/Adduction            | 1    | 10        |
| Straight-Leg Flexion/Extension | 1    | 10        |
| Internal Rotation              | 1    | 10        |
| <b>WALL SPEED DRILLS</b>       |      |           |
| March and Hold                 | 1    | 2/3 sec.  |
| Fast March on Command          | 1    | 5         |
| Triple Exchange                | 1    | 3         |
| <b>SPEED DRILLS</b>            |      |           |
| Speed Knees to Run             | 2    | 10        |
| <b>STARTS</b>                  |      |           |
| 2-Point Staggered Starts       | 2    | 10        |
| 3-Point Stance/Starts          | 4    | 10        |
| Resistive Starts               | 4    | 10        |
| <b>RESISTIVE RUNS</b>          |      |           |
| 50-yard run with parachute     | 1    | 6         |

## PREHAB STATIONS

| EXERCISE                           | REPS/DISTANCE |
|------------------------------------|---------------|
| <b>HURDLES</b>                     |               |
| Forward Over/Lateral Under         | —             |
| Forward Lunge Under/Step-Through   | —             |
| <b>PLYO PROGRESSION</b>            |               |
| Multi-Planar 180-Degree Hop Sticks | 1             |
| Linear With Bounce/Mini Hurdles    | 2             |
| Lateral Bound Stick                | —             |
| <b>GLUTE MED</b>                   |               |
| Band Shuffle                       | 15 yards      |
| Clamshell                          | 20            |
| Lateral Reach                      | 5             |
| <b>SQUAT PROGRESSION</b>           |               |
| Stick Monster Walk                 | 5             |
| Banded Abduction                   | 5             |
| Banded Pull                        | 5             |

## STRENGTH WORKOUT

| EXERCISE                       | SETS | REPS         |
|--------------------------------|------|--------------|
| Medicine-Ball Half-Squat Clean | 4    | 5            |
| Medicine-Ball Squat/Press      | 3    | 5            |
| Deadlift                       | 5    | 5            |
| Neck Extension, front/back     | 2    | 6 (each way) |
| Glute-Ham Raise                | 3    | 10           |
| Walking Lunge                  | 2    | 10           |
| One-Leg Romanian Deadlift      | 2    | 12           |
| One-Leg Slide Board Adduction  | 2    | 15           |
| Donkey Calf Raise              | 3    | 15           |

## FINISHER 6" PROGRAM

Flexibility Plan/Rollers/Bands/Sticks