

Darren McFadden  
Heisman Trophy Candidate

# Razorbacks

## Looking Sharp

A closer look at the University of Arkansas's unique and successful approach to becoming strong

by KIM GOSS

**T**he Arkansas Razorbacks' football team just kind of sneaks up on you. Last season all the attention went to the big showdown between the Buckeyes and the Gators. Meanwhile, the Razorbacks quietly went about winning 10 games and claiming the Western Division in the Southeastern Conference. Wow! They also had two running backs rush for over 1,000 yards, one earning the runner-up spot in the race for the Heisman. But hey, that's nothing new for the Razorbacks.



Houston Nutt  
Head Football Coach

With a rich history that started way back in 1894, the University of Arkansas has appeared in 35 bowl games and in 1964 went undefeated and was recognized by the Football Writers Association of America as National Champions. Success has been at an especially high level since Houston Nutt took over head coaching responsibilities on December 10, 1977. How high, you ask? Consider their 49-17 home record, seven bowl appearances, and 27 NFL draft selections. Again, wow! These accomplishments are all the more remarkable because Arkansas's opponents are some of the toughest in the country. For example, the teams that beat Arkansas finished the year ranked 1st, 3rd, 4th, and 7th in the national polls.

There's one aspect of the Arkansas football program that has gotten special media attention in recent years: their rushing attack. They have led the SEC in rushing for four of their last five seasons. And this year they have the frontrunner for the Heisman in Darren McFadden.

Just how good is McFadden? As a freshman he rushed for 1,113 yards (6.3 ypc average) and caught 14 passes for 52 yards. Last year the 6-foot-3, 215-pounder was even more unbelievable, rushing for 1,647 yards (5.8 ypc) and catching 11 passes for 149 yards. ESPN predicts that McFadden will gain over 2,000 yards on the ground this year, and many of the Heisman watch polls have kept him at the top of their lists since the preseason. He's that good.

### Trainer of Champions

Behind every football program is a great strength and conditioning program, and that's exactly the way to describe the program in Fayetteville headed by Don Decker – great!

In the often unstable profession of Division I college football, Coach Decker is truly a veteran: He's been with the Razorbacks for 15 years. Possessing book smarts with a master's in exercise science, Decker began at the highest level of the profession when he became the head strength coach at Kent State in 1991. Two years later he was back at Arkansas and never left.

One big question that everyone asks Coach Decker is what type of special treatment he gives his star running backs. The answer: Not much. "Obviously, when you have genetically gifted athletes such as Darren and Felix [Jones], you've got to be smart with your approach and find ways to challenge



Coach Decker  
Head Strength Coach

them without putting them at a high risk of injury,” says Decker.

“Darren adapts extremely quickly to workout programs, so we challenged him with special dumbbell exercises, weighted box jumps and contrast training – anything to create explosiveness in a resistive manner.” As for McFadden’s numbers, he has a 36-inch vertical jump, a 10-foot-10-inch standing long jump, a 400-pound bench and a 450 parallel squat. Jones cleans over 300 and squats over 500.” Decker adds that Razorback squats are deep and are performed without special supportive gear.

“My goal is not to get my players ready for a powerlifting meet.”

But it’s not just the starters who get such special attention from the strength and conditioning staff at Arkansas: *Every* athlete is evaluated to determine what type of workout would work best for them. “For example, Felix is extremely flexible, so we approached his training much differently from Darren’s even though the results were similar. Their success is proof that one size doesn’t fit all – there are obviously tons of ways to achieve good results

The strength and conditioning facilities at the University of Arkansas are unique and second to none. The weightroom is strategically situated above a full indoor training facility that overlooks an outdoor football practice field. The weightroom includes 24 power rack stations, two full lines of machines, a cardio area, twelve 42-inch plasma TVs wired with computer analysis, and a nutrition bar. Wow!





with athletes.” Decker is the first to acknowledge there are two nonphysical qualities that enable McFadden and Jones to achieve such impressive results on the field: hard work and positive attitude.

“Both of those guys are just phenomenal,” says Decker. “McFadden comes in and trains every day as if he hadn’t been runner-up in the Heisman, and Felix as if he hadn’t rushed for over 1,000 yards. And it’s gratifying to know they realize we coaches have their best interest at heart, trying to get them healthy and strong to play the game.”

## Beyond 40 Times

One of the unique aspects of the strength and conditioning program at the University of Arkansas is that they don’t time 40s. “We work a lot on speed, and we time our 10s and 20s, but hamstrings problems always seem to happen when you put a clock on the athletes for the 40,” says Decker. “It seems that in reaching for that all-important 40 time, football players have a tendency to throw running technique out the window, lunging at the end or doing something crazy that results in an injury. Another thing: the only 40 time that



counts is when they run it for the scouts on their pro day because they are going to draft from what *they* time them, not from what time them.”

As for his overall training philosophy, Decker says that his goal is for every athlete to walk out of the weightroom or practice field every day and be able to say, “I got better today.” To be able to say that, says Decker, players must challenge themselves in five areas: linear speed, lateral speed, plyometrics, strength and nutrition (in the sense of have they gained the muscle they needed to gain or lost the weight they needed to lose). “So at the University of Arkansas, an athlete has five areas that they need to work on to be able to say that they improved today.”

For their running program, Decker says that every day his players work on their mechanics to give them the best opportunity to run fast. “If an athlete is in the right body position for sprinting, if they are strong in those positions, and if you’ve worked them over and over, when it’s time to play they are not going to have any problems turning on the speed.”

In the area of testing, Decker believes that two of the biggest indicators of football speed are the vertical jump and the broad jump. “But the greatest indicator of speed is when a position coach comes up to you and says, ‘Hey, my players are really moving better and looking fast.’ You can put whatever number you want down on a piece of paper, but if they are not getting the feedback from the coaches that there’s

improvement – if what you’re doing in the off-season is not translating out there on the field – then it doesn’t matter what a piece of paper says.”

## Good Advice

Asked what advice he would give to high school coaches responsible for training athletes, Decker replies, “Remember, even though the media guys who watch high school athletes toss around a lot of big numbers about certain athletes, I don’t see those numbers when the athletes come on campus. This is certainly true with the squat, because everybody has a different definition of what parallel is; and a 600-pound squat to them is not what I would consider a 600-pound squat.” And as evidence that the Razorbacks know talent when they see it, consider that they were the only college to offer defensive end Jamal Anderson a scholarship out of high school; Anderson was taken eighth in the draft.

Another problem Decker sees is that in trying to achieve big lifts in the weightroom, “other areas of flexibility and conditioning may be neglected.” As a general rule, high school coaches often need to slow their athletes down. If a lineman is trying to gain weight, make sure it’s good weight and not fat. When they do power cleans, be more concerned about good technique and increasing bar speed rather than just trying to lift as much weight as possible.”

With those suggestions being made, Decker has the



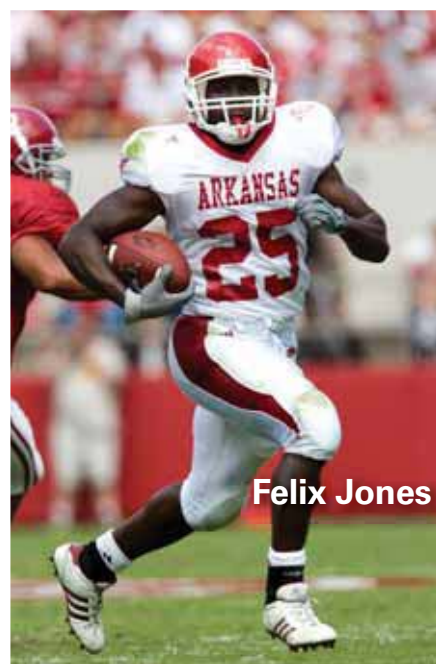




Dick Casey



Peyton Hills



Felix Jones



Marcus Mont



Antwain Robinson

utmost respect for high school coaches and understands the challenges they face. “High school coaches do a great job of trying to get their guys strong, and they have a tremendous thirst for knowledge. But I understand that they have a lot on their plate, trying to teach classes and coach and be in the weightroom. Compared to them, strength coaches in college have it easy because this is what we do every day – it’s our only focus. We aren’t trying to train 70 or 80 athletes at once and get them out of the weightroom in a time-efficient manner. High school coaches have to do that, and I have a lot of respect for what they have to do.”

Because Decker frequently deals with high school coaches, he is very familiar with *Bigger Faster Stronger* magazine. “The thing that always jumps out to me is that you are always trying to provide knowledge to the high school coaches so they can make good decisions. I like the fact that you’re trying to make a difference at that level. *BFS* provides a great service to your readership.”

Those who aspire to follow Coach Decker’s career path will be happy to note that he sees a bright future for the profession. “Most Division I colleges have two full-time assistants, if not more; there are also graduate assistant positions that often are paid positions. There are now more strength coaches in smaller colleges, in high schools, and in sports training centers, and I believe this is due to a greater awareness out there of what we do. I believe our profession is extremely healthy and will continue to grow.”

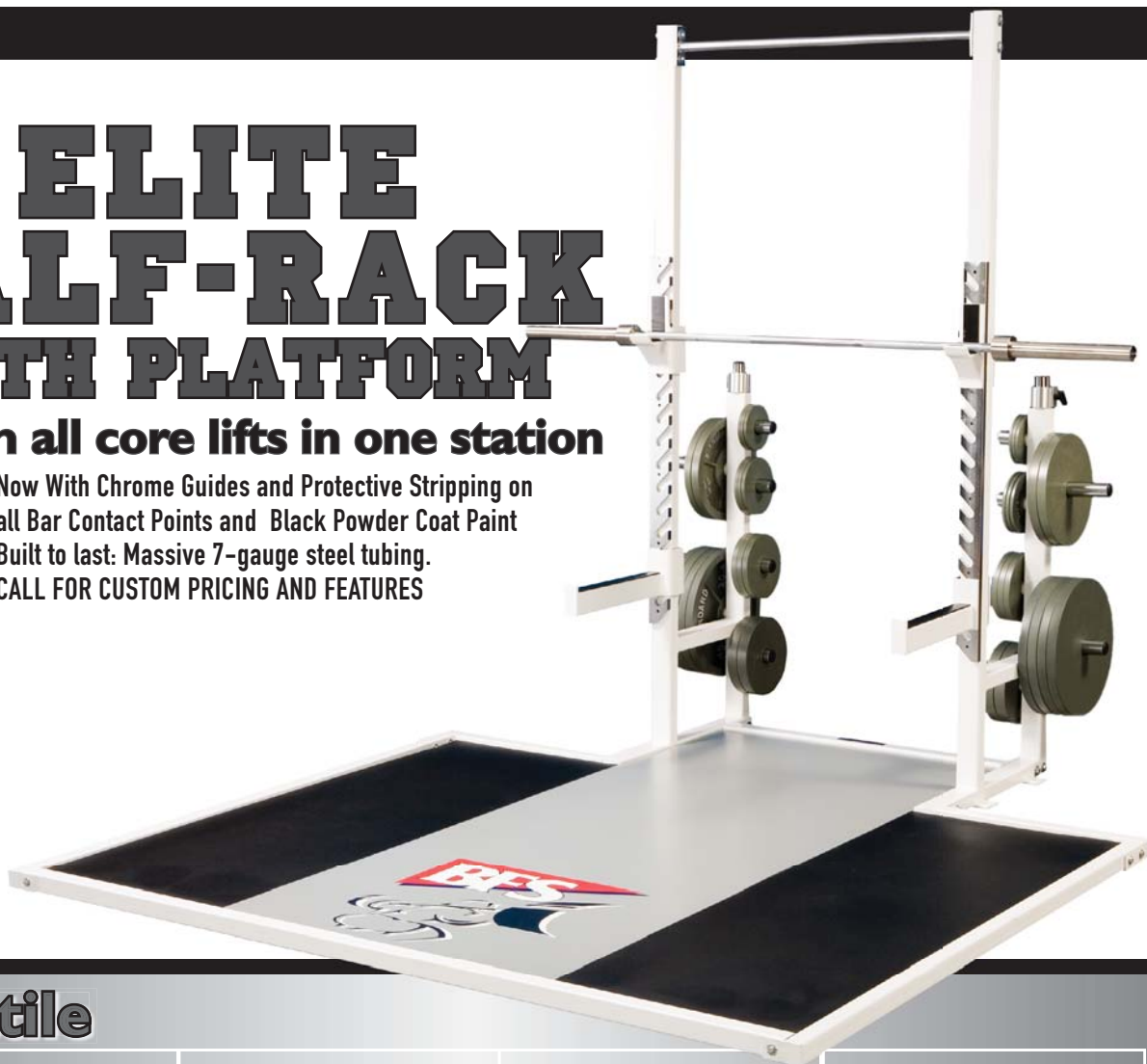
Decker experiences great satisfaction from having a strong, successful team; last year’s conference win and this year’s Heisman buzz are sources of pride for the Razorbacks. Nevertheless, Decker doesn’t let it go to his head. He says that he and his entire coaching staff don’t pay much attention to preseason hype and how many votes they get in the polls during the season. “We have a ‘taking care of business’ type of attitude here because, as they say, ‘If you win, all those things take care of themselves and you *will* get the respect you deserve.’ *BFS*”

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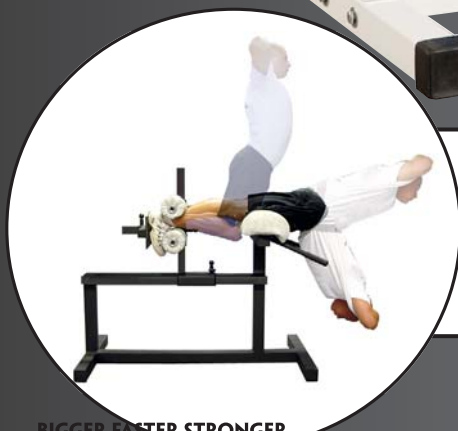
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