

BY ROB FITZGERALD, NSCA-CPT

IRON CRUSADERS

An inside look at how one of America's premier high-school football programs prepares for the grind

» "How can football have evolved from single-wing offenses to the no-huddle spread yet still be stuck in the Stone Age in the weight room?" asks Bergen Catholic's strength and conditioning coach Dave Cavalluzzo. You wouldn't think a team boasting 16 state high-school championships in football-rich New Jersey would need to adapt to much. But Bergen Catholic (Oradell) — long known for producing monsters such as 2009 NFL Defensive Rookie of the Year and Pro Bowl selection Brian Cushing of the Houston Texans and Baltimore Ravens wide receiver Isaiah Williams — is changing with the times and it all starts in the weight room. Along with partner Ben Tonon, Cavalluzzo has gone to significant lengths to change the team's physical-preparation culture, building perhaps the country's best high-school strength and conditioning program, and producing numerous college and NFL players along the way.

> BUILDING A FOUNDATION

"With the history this program has, we're not exactly after moral victories here," Cavalluzzo says. "But when a team filled with sophomores and juniors can beat some of the best teams in the country, we know we're doing what we need to do to prepare."

The way Cavalluzzo and Tonon have kept Bergen Catholic on top is a total unification of their team around the school's weight room, with programs and exercises designed to transfer directly to the football field. "We're raising their preparation levels so they're never outworked on the field," Cavalluzzo explains. "I used to think you couldn't do that in the weight room, but now I believe you can."

> STRENGTH DEVELOPMENT

Bergen Catholic's strength program is rooted in variations of the bench and squat, posterior-chain development and football-specific drills that mimic the moves players make during the game. The overriding consideration with Cavalluzzo and Tonon's program design, however, is the notion of *transfer*.

"Strength doesn't carry over to the football field by itself," Tonon points out. "You win and lose games based on which team has better football players, so you have to make sure everything has transfer: that if you improve something in the weight room, you can see a direct correlation to improvement on the field. That takes time."



8/32

The number of 2009 NFL first-round draft picks who hailed from New Jersey

ASSOCIATED PRESS. PG. 65: COURTESY BERGEN CATHOLIC (3)

COACH'S CLINIC: BERGEN CATHOLIC



Moral victories are for other schools



A perfect example, says Cavalluzzo, has been the program's focus on posterior-chain development. "We use the glute-ham raise to build each kid a set of hamstrings. At this stage, most athletes are completely quad-dominant. We've found that if you give them hamstrings and teach them how to get away from that quad-dominance, they almost instantly get faster."

> CONDITIONING FOR FOUR QUARTERS

Bergen Catholic's success at the highest level of hypercompetitive New Jersey football — eight of the 32 players selected in the 2009 NFL first-round draft played high-school football in Jersey — is a testament to the Crusaders' ability to hit the ground running and keep coming, play after play, for all 48 minutes. Cavalluzzo credits a mix of moderate-intensity tempo runs and HIIT-style conditioning drills done at football intervals — 4–6 seconds of work followed by 20–30 seconds of rest — for the program's renewed success.

"Our offense gets a snap off every 15 seconds and we're on the move all the time, so we pay a lot of attention to the heart," he says. "By monitoring our players' heart rates and cardiac development, we've seen incredible progress in both practices and games. Our kids' anaerobic thresholds are so high that when the coaches try to punish them with gasser runs, they never go lactic and they think it's a joke."

> FEED FOR SPEED

You don't see multiple NFL players produced by a single high school in a short time span — several in less than a decade, in Bergen Catholic's case — unless the coaching staff has a formula for making athletes faster. Cavalluzzo says it's all about monitoring his athletes' body compositions. Crusader players keep detailed food logs and undergo frequent body-composition tests to gauge their progress.

"Not a lot of high-school programs do this," he says. "I don't know why, because it's a painless way to get your kids faster. Our guys get lean and that makes them fast; a lean kid will always be faster than a kid with poor body composition at the same weight. The testing keeps them honest, and those who don't do the right things get left behind and eventually find their way to the bench."

16 THE NUMBER OF STATE HIGH-SCHOOL CHAMPIONSHIPS WON BY BERGEN CATHOLIC