

# Training: Athletes come from all corners of the country

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inside a former warehouse that serves as the spartan confines of Speed Strength Systems Inc. They are sweating away in a building that houses 18,000 square feet of basketball and volleyball courts, a turf running track, batting cages and a 15,000-square-foot weight room. There's even an enclosed transparent chamber where air pressure can be altered to simulate cycling or jogging at altitudes of up to 12,500 feet.

Still, the brick walls, concrete floors and tangles of exposed valves, pipes and vents speak volumes.

"If you want the aesthetics of Bally's and other froufrou fitness places, don't come here," concedes co-founder Tim Robertson Jr. "When people come here, they know they're going to work."

Mr. Robertson and Eric Lichter started Speed Strength in November 2000, through a series of events that could hardly have been more serendipitous.

Mr. Lichter hails from Arizona, but found himself in Columbus because his mother, Linda Lichter-Witter, has been Ohio State's synchronized swimming coach for more than a decade. When he turned his sports-training background into a career as

a personal trainer, Mr. Lichter moved to Howland, north of Youngstown. And when he began looking for a place to open his own facility, his uncle, real estate developer Stuart Lichter, told him about the old warehouse he owned in Euclid.

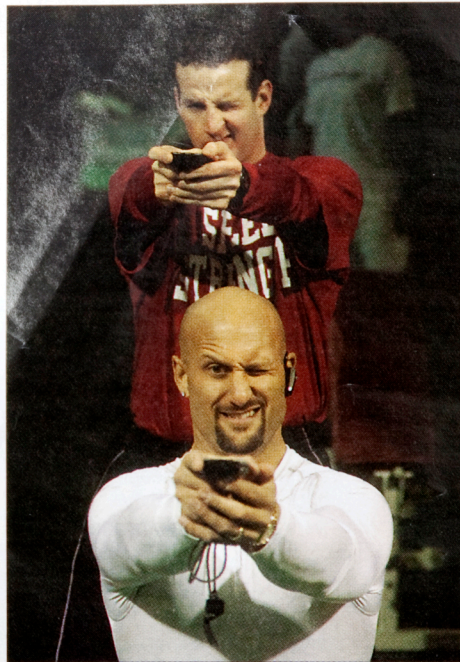
All Eric Lichter needed was a local partner.

Enter Mr. Robertson, a Cleveland native who shared a background in training college athletes. He had taken a job at the Cleveland Clinic but was looking to get back into personal training. His credentials came Mr. Lichter's way, and Speed Strength was on its way to reality.

Without a customer to their name, Mr. Lichter said, "We took out credit lines, we financed our equipment. We financed the build-out with basically credit. (Because) we knew there was going to be a market for it."

Not that the clients came pouring in, despite the six-figure investment. Mr. Lichter laughed while recalling the effort it took to land their first customer — a Beachwood high-schooler.

"Tim and I spent two hours to make a \$200 sale," Mr. Lichter said.



JASON MILLER

**Tim Robertson Jr. (top) and Eric Lichter look down the barrel of their stop watches as they wait for a speeding football player to run past.**

## Pride of the Buckeyes

Things are a little different these days. The likes of former Buckeye

footballers Mr. Salley and Mr. Sims are among several NFL prospects training at Speed Strength for the league combine. The pre-draft scouting and workout camp starts Feb. 22 in Indianapolis.

In preparing players for the combine, Speed Strength trainers look to teach their clients how to shave tenths of seconds from their times in the 40-yard dash and the agility drills that are used by coaches and general managers to gauge a player's athleticism.

Given the players' existing abilities, much of the work focuses on the incremental details that can make a difference — things like explaining how to run a slightly shorter path through a set of orange cones, or tweaking a sprinter's starting stance to spur a more explosive start.

Speed Strength has hosted NFL combine training sessions for four years, but word about the place really started to spread after the New York Knicks made former Speed Strength client (and current Denver Nugget) Nene Hilario their first-round NBA draft pick in 2002.

said. "Eric is the motivator (who gets) up in your face; Tim's on the quiet side. It's definitely (about) the energy they bring."

## Shabby chic

Arriving at Speed Strength in January, former Penn State defensive end Matthew Rice wondered just what his agent had gotten him into.

"I thought, 'This has got to be a setup,'" Mr. Rice recalled with a wide grin. "A couple of these buildings look abandoned."

Yet while the NFL and NBA pre-draft training sessions draw high-profile names and faces, most of Speed Strength's clientele is home-grown.

"Seventy percent of our business is high school (athletes)," Mr. Lichter said. "That's the bread and butter." Those customers, he added, usually pay in the range of \$200 to \$350 per month for their training.

Speed Strength's Avon location, which will expand to a two-level, 13,000-square-foot center in April, opened in 2004, and the company has added three more trainers to its roster.

## Home field advantage