



“Your body finally
recovers about a
week after a game.”
—Danny Amendola,
Patriots receiver

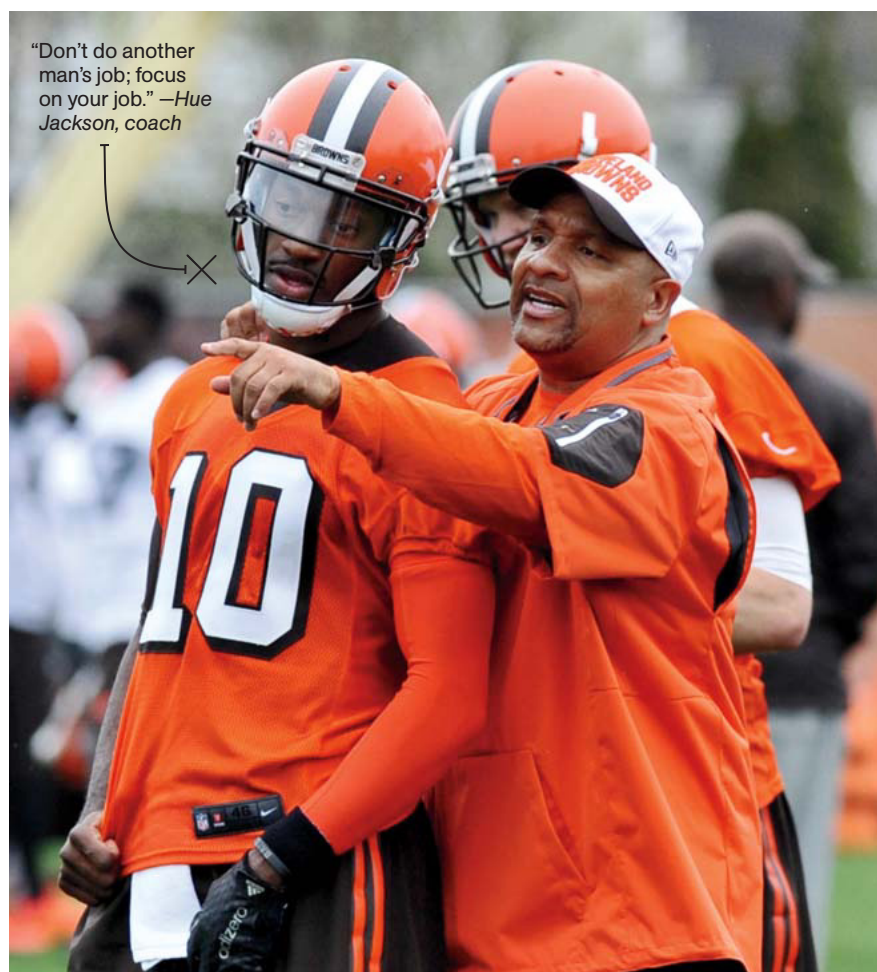
7 DAYS TO SUNDAY

You don't spend your weekends sprinting, cutting, pushing, smashing, and gasping like the NFL's warriors. But take a close look at how these athletes spend the week recovering and getting ready to do it all again next week. You'll form your own game plan for peak performance. Let Danny Amendola and Greg Olsen show you how.



MONDAY

FOR NFL PLAYERS, Monday morning can feel like waking up after being in several car crashes. What's more, they have to be ready to rumble again in six days. The banged-up players start treatment, while the rest of the guys begin with gentle lifting and movement drills to start the recovery. "As much as it hurts to work out after a game, it helps that much more," says Danny Amendola, the 5'11", 190-pound, 30-year-old Patriots receiver. After that it's film review of the previous game. Each player has a specific role on each play, and he's graded on whether he fulfilled it. "If guys know exactly what they need to do, for the most part they will go get it done," says Cleveland Browns head coach Hue Jackson. That's the first takeaway, and it applies to any job. To succeed, first you need to know and understand your specific mission.



"Don't do another man's job; focus on your job." —Hue Jackson, coach

SPARK A RESPONSE

Pro football players don't lack for ego, and coaches can use that to their advantage in film review of the previous game, says **Cleveland Browns head coach Hue Jackson**. "I have a red laser pointer, and you normally don't want to be the guy who gets the red dot—that means you're not doing something as well as you need to." Singling out prideful men in front of their peers gets guys on the same page—fast. Corrections are sharp and forward-looking: It's about being brave and honest enough to point out flaws, even to star players who may be the best at what they do. It's a challenge that a professional will respond to. And sometimes, if it's a more serious problem, a coach sits down individually with a player. "If there's some fundamental or skill that he needs to improve, you need to make sure that he truly understands it," says Jackson.

REST AND RECHARGE / How J.J. Watt, Houston Texans linebacker, unplugs to recharge. J.J. Watt chills out and even naps in his home flotation tank. "I love it. Sleep is something people overlook." Minimizing your sensory arousal allows you to relax more deeply and alleviates stress. A long soak in a bathtub with the lights off can work too. Watt also speeds his recovery by preloading his diet with anti-inflammatory produce. "I hate the texture of vegetables, so in the morning I'll throw every vegetable I can find into a blender with some apple juice and just choke it all down at once so I can be done with vegetables for the day."



"A lot of guys respond well after a loss. To refocus after a win is more challenging." —Greg Olsen, Carolina Panthers tight end

MAKE MOTION YOUR LOTION

"You have to flush the crap that built up during the game out of your system," says Greg Olsen, the Panthers' 6'5", 255-pound, 31-year-old tight end. "Stiffness, soreness, and tension get worse if you just sit around. We say 'motion is lotion.' Typically Olsen does gentle lifting, exercises with a TRX suspension system, and drills like walking lunges, relaxed running, and various static stretches and balances for stability. For example, he says, "we'll do front squats, focusing more on depth rather than how much weight is on your back."

"Breakfast: An omelet (four eggs, cheese, spinach, turkey sausage); sweet potato hash; fruit smoothie with Greek yogurt and whey protein; and water."

—GREG OLSEN

GAME CHANGER

Eat Food That Fights Inflammation

Jennifer Brunelli, R.D., dietitian, Carolina Panthers



1/ Spinach



2/ Salmon



3/ Walnuts



4/ Tart cherries



5/ Olive oil

GAME CHANGER

Deal with Pain

Football, it's been said, isn't a contact sport—it's a collision sport. And those collisions can have the force of a car accident, suggests research by Robby Sikka, M.D., of TRIA Orthopaedic Center, who works with the NFL. By Tuesday, delayed soreness has fully kicked in.

Ice for a Nice Start

Some players, including Amendola, use an ice bath after games to ease inflammation. You need to allow at least 10 minutes for it to work, says Thom Mayer, M.D., medical director of the NFL Players Association. Olsen likes massage and acupuncture.

Drip, Drip, Drip

Like you, NFL players will pop OTC painkillers like acetaminophen, ibuprofen, and naproxen. Amendola and others sometimes take a hydrating saline solution (which can include a painkiller) through an IV before, during, or after games, says Dr. Mayer.

The Big Guns

Some players can perform on opioids, says Dr. Mayer, but athletes and doctors are very cautious—just as they'd be with possible concussions. "Is the player able to protect himself and perform at an adequate level?" It's not for weekend warriors, he says.



Amendola on the rocks: An ice bath helps with muscle soreness, and one adult beverage can't hurt. Shrinkage? What shrinkage?

KNOW-HOW FOR HARD KNOCKS

Amendola calls Tuesday "Chooseday." For players, it's a day off to do what they want. If they got through the game healthy, maybe it's ping-pong and prehab. If not, it's rehab with physicians. Take a look below at how often the three most common NFL injuries occurred last season, and how to deal if you fall victim.

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Concussions

Despite rule changes, guys still get their bells rung often.

YOUR PLAY Recovery should be like a foreign movie: gloomy and slow. Doctors typically recommend rest (no film room, no computers, no texting). When you start to feel more like yourself, emerge to do gentle activity and stretching.

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Hamstring Strains

Most occur without contact—many during practice.

YOUR PLAY If it's a mild strain, lay your leg out straight and ice the muscle every day before performing a gentle hamstring stretch: Put one foot on a bench, keep the other leg straight, and lean in. Stay away from heated pads, which inflame the muscle.

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High Ankle Sprains

They're usually from stepping on a foot or catching a cleat.

YOUR PLAY Think RICE: rest, ice, compression, and elevation. Once the injury calms, strengthen the ankle and lower-leg muscles to support the damaged ligaments. Do simple balance and foot-strength exercises, such as single-leg calf raises, daily.

AUDIBLE



SERIOUS HEAD GAMES

The NFL's Sideline Concussion Assessment Tool includes these five revealing questions.

- ▶ What month is it?
- ▶ What day?
- ▶ What's the date?
- ▶ What year is it?
- ▶ What time is it?

Part of the assessment: Ask the injured person to recite the months of the year in reverse order in less than 30 seconds.

FUEL YOUR MIDWEEK WORKOUTS

Try these "power balls" from Panthers dietitian Jennifer Brunelli, R.D., owner of Sports RDpro in Charlotte, NC.

The How-To

Mix all the ingredients with your hands and roll golf-ball-size nuggets. Refrigerate for at least an hour. Makes 14 to 16 balls

2	cups granola
1	cup peanut butter
½	cup ground flaxseed
½	cup dark chocolate chips
⅓	cup honey
2	tsp vanilla extract
2	scoops vanilla whey protein powder

Per ball: 274 calories, 11g protein, 25g carbohydrates (5g fiber), 16g fat

PREPARE

WEDNESDAY



GLUG FOR GROWTH / Greg Olsen's preworkout muscle cocktail Before every workout, Olsen drinks this cocktail from a recipe created by Panthers athletic performance analyst Brett Nenaber.
THE MIX 6 ounces Gatorade, 1 scoop Monster Amino 6:1, 5 grams creatine, 2 tablespoons BeetElite, 50 milligrams caffeine
WHY IT WORKS Creatine boosts muscle power, while beet and caffeine work together to increase your physical strength and endurance.

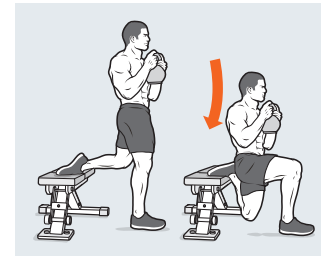
"I need to be able to run my route as well on the 10th play of the drive as the first."
—Greg Olsen

"I run intervals that mimic the game, so it's 5 to 85 yards."
—Greg Olsen

JOIN THE SINGLES CLUB

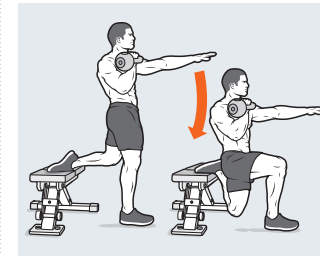
Most players lift on Wednesday, and Greg Olsen does a workout that includes single-leg exercises (squats and lunges) and functional movements (sled pulls and pushes). "When I cut or jump in a game, it's usually off one leg, so this is a sport-specific way to train," he says. **Carolina Panthers athletic performance analyst Brett Nenaber** likes combining slow eccentric heavy lifts—Olsen holds 100-pound kettlebells in each fist when doing rear-foot-elevated split squats—with single-leg box jumps. Nenaber recommends this progression for regular guys. Do each exercise 3 days a week for 4 weeks, using a weight that makes completing 3 sets of 10 reps challenging. Then switch to the next exercise. (Also, try Nenaber's body-weight circuit on page 141.)

Goblet Split Squat



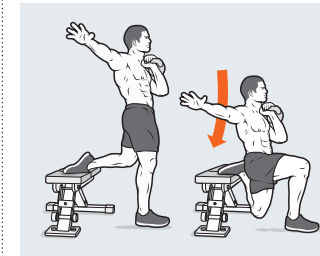
Hold a kettlebell by the horns in front of your chest and place your rear foot on a bench. Bend your front knee and lower your body.

Offset Split Squat



Hold a kettlebell in the rack position on the opposite side of your elevated rear leg. Bend your front knee and lower your body.

Onset Split Squat



Hold a kettlebell in the rack position on the same side as your elevated rear leg. Bend your front knee and lower your body.

GAME CHANGER

Create a Winning Game Plan

Teams study the plan on Wednesday. *The NFL Today* analyst Bill Cowher, the coach who led the Steelers to the 2006 Super Bowl title, explains why any game plan needs to be flexible.

1/ Find Favorable Matchups

You try to identify your collective and individual strengths and weaknesses versus those of your opponent. Then use analytics and intuition to predict the opponent's tendencies and run plays. You find schemes and players you can exploit, and also account for your opponent's strengths.

2/ Be Firm but Flexible

Players study the plan and walk through it; then they practice on the field. It's like speed chess: move and countermove. You prepare adjustments. The players need to have a good idea of what you're trying to do conceptually so they can deviate from the actual application but not the concept.

3/ Win the Situation

Pay special attention to the critical stuff: the last minute of the half and the game, third downs, and the red zone (inside the 20-yard line). We practice those areas on Thursday and Friday, creating as many different scenarios as possible for the offense and defense. It gets competitive!

4/ Toss the Plan...at Times

After all this, you have to be unpredictable. Surprises win games. Often they result from a quick adjustment, and it comes down to trust. The players have to trust the plan, and to do that they have to understand it. Communication is key. It's about asking questions and understanding your role.



THURSDAY



GAME CHANGER

Master Any Playbook

John Urschel knows all about complex strategy. The 300-pound Ravens offensive guard has undergraduate and graduate degrees in mathematics from Penn State (4.0 GPA). NFL playbooks and math textbooks alike are “thick and can be overwhelming,” Urschel says. Here’s how he crams for Sunday exams.

1/ Forget Memorization

To learn something new and to get excited about learning it, says Urschel, “I need to understand the ‘why’ behind it.” And you do that when you ...

2/ Go Macro

“It’s crucial to understand how my part fits into the whole and then to understand what the goal of the whole is,” he says. “I ask myself: ‘What is the larger theme? What’s the overall purpose of this?’” But then you need to go a step further.

3/ Don’t Know It; Own It

“You need to reach a level of comfort where you don’t have to look things up or think things through,” Urschel says. “You want things to flow, for the knowledge to be second nature. That’s where practice comes in. And that’s key not just for learning football or math, but for anything in life.”

“Coach says, ‘If you’re not getting better, you’re getting worse.’”

—DERRICK JOHNSON

ANTICIPATE AND OVERCOME

“Everybody in the league is physically gifted and can run fast and jump high,” says **Kansas City Chiefs four-time Pro Bowl linebacker and defensive captain Derrick Johnson**. “What sets you apart is anticipation, knowing where a play is going.” Johnson, who’s 33, ruptured his Achilles tendon in 2014; yet he’s still often the first to the tackle. He credits film study and a decade of experience. “Along with team film sessions, I watch film every night at home,” he says. “I’m looking for tendencies I can exploit and that my whole unit can exploit, especially on third downs. In the game, I’ll tell the coach what I’m seeing and suggest blitzes to call. You make adjustments on the sideline, and then on the field.” Whoever adjusts better has the upper hand. It’s high risk and high reward, and each team member has to do his job. “When you blitz, you have to get the QB because you’re leaving big holes,” says Johnson.

GET INTO A TIGHT SQUEEZE / How Cowboys wide receiver Terrance Williams strengthens his hands

To snag a football flying at 45 miles an hour requires Hulklike hand strength—the kind an average guy needs in order to get his bags to Gate A in time for the shuttle, or to give a good massage. A study in the *Journal of Hand Therapy* found that men younger than 30 have a significantly weaker hand grip than their counterparts of 25 years ago. Williams does grip-strength exercises at the end of his workouts. Try this: Toss a tennis ball between your hands, squeezing it as hard as you can for 10 seconds between tosses. Repeat 10 times with each hand. The farmer’s walk (walk for a minute while carrying heavy dumbbells) also builds grip strength.



"I feel really good the day after I do yoga."
—Danny Amendola



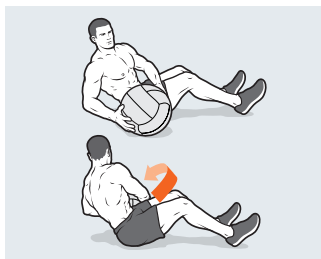
AWAKEN YOUR WARRIOR

Like many NFL players, Amendola turns to yoga as a therapeutic counterbalance to the physical violence of the game. "It keeps my muscles pliable." It's part of his preparation process for game day, he says. Yoga is low impact; yet you're shredding your core, sharpening your balance, and potentially expelling stress. On three: Namaste!

FORGE YOUR OWN ARMOR

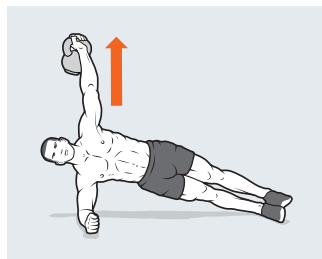
When you make your living running crossing patterns and diving for balls with your ribs and solar plexus exposed, you need a rock-hard core. **Patriots wide receiver Danny Amendola** trains his core five days a week with an ever-changing mix of three to 10 exercises, performed sitting and standing. "It's not for any aesthetic reason," he says. "Without a strong core, I wouldn't be able to perform on the field—or be durable enough to stay on it." The big hits that make crowds gasp aren't always so bad, Amendola says; it's the little clips and dings that really hurt. Try this circuit, doing the exercises back-to-back for 1 minute each and then resting 60 seconds. Repeat for 4 rounds and build up to 6 or 8 rounds.

Russian Twist



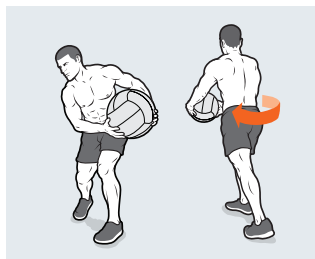
Sit (or raise your feet and balance on your butt), and rotate rapidly, alternating sides as you touch the medicine ball to the floor.

Kettlebell Side Plank



Rest on your forearm with your top arm holding a kettlebell. (Amendola uses 45 pounds.) Switch sides every round.

Standing Medicine Ball Twist



Stand sideways holding a medicine ball at your hip; rotate and throw it hard at a wall. Catch it and repeat. Do 30 seconds per side.

GAME CHANGER

Score at Night

A rested player is faster and sharper, says former NFL sleep guru **Charles Czeisler, Ph.D., M.D., of Brigham and Women's Hospital.**

1/ Score a Perfect 10

Logging 10 hours of sleep nightly for a month can help athletic and mental performance. Not sleeping? Just lie there. You'll sleep more if you stay in bed than if you get up.

2/ Lock in Bedtime

Inconsistency in your bedtimes creates a kind of jet lag that's as destructive as not getting enough quality sleep hours. Set an alarm to mark your bedtime—and stick to it.

3/ Block Blue Light

The blue light from electronic screens suppresses production of melatonin, the "drowsy hormone." Must watch or read? Wear a pair of \$10 Uvex Skyper Blue Light Blocking glasses.

Players lose as much as 5 pounds of sweat during a game.



LIQUIDIZE YOUR ASSETS

Suffer even minor dehydration and your performance sinks. The Panthers are weighed before and after practice during camp to determine their sweat rates and hydration plans. Do the same. For every pound you've lost during a workout, drink 16 ounces of water. And use the urine test. The lighter the color, the better. Iced tea is trouble; lemonade, sweet, of course.



INNOVATE TO OVERCOME / Carson Palmer's high-tech helper

Last season, Arizona Cardinals QB Carson Palmer started using a virtual reality headset called Strivr, which shows film from the player's perspective. "I use it all week, especially on Saturday. The main reason is to get another look at the blitzes I will see and to force myself to redirect or change protections or react to the blitz by finding my hot receiver. It allows me to quiz myself with formations, protections, and route concepts just by hearing it and seeing it again."

WIN THE MENTAL GAME

"The natural state of your mind is like a drunk monkey," says sports psychologist **Michael Gervais, Ph.D.**, who works with the Seattle Seahawks. "It's curious, it's all over the place, and it's naturally distracted. A disciplined mind can bring it back to the present." A simple way to acquire that discipline is to pay close attention to daily activities, Gervais says, like putting your seatbelt on and listening for the click. Another trick: When you walk in your front door, have one thought and one breath. The idea is that you're clearing your mind to be fully present with your family, and breathing naturally helps you reset and prepare for the time with your loved ones. These small actions can help keep you in the moment.

1

Tap to the Top

Before a workout or a big presentation, use a physical act—like tapping a sign bearing your personal motto—to narrow your focus. Seattle Seahawks athletes tap a sign that reads "I'm In," before practice. "It's a physical action with a mental cue that says 'I'm all in right now,'" says Gervais. "The distractions fade away."

2

Connect Your Breath

By emphasizing breathing, you are priming yourself to become calmer. Set a timer for one minute, during which you inhale and exhale through your nose on a four count. Work your way up to 20 minutes a day. Daily meditation like this not only sharpens your focus but also can rewire your brain to be more efficient.

3

Optimize Your Team

Whether it's for work or your kid's T-ball team, success relies on building relationships and maintaining optimism. (Having Russell Wilson on your team also helps!) Do this exercise to boost your optimism: Every day for a week, research three things that fascinate you. Write them down. Your team will thank you.

"I watch the movie 300 the night before every game. It gets me jacked up. I also drink two Pedialytes to prevent dehydration."

—JUSTIN PUGH, NEW YORK GIANTS

AUDIBLE



What It Feels Like to Get a Check for \$12 Million

"You dream about it your whole life," says Greg Olsen, who received a \$12 million signing bonus last year. "Then that day comes, and your life doesn't just change." Something else had a bigger impact: Olsen's son was born with a heart disorder requiring surgery. "Nothing compared to watching him get cut open. It redefined terms like 'difficult' and 'challenge.'" Learn more: receptionsforresearch.org

SUNDAY



READY TO PLAY

By kickoff the players are primed to play at their peak. Everyone prepares differently: Some get hyped up, others calm down. Learn what works for you, then use it!

Conserve Your Energy

"I don't really listen to music pregame anymore," says Amendola, who is in his eighth season. "When I was younger, yeah, I used to dance around and burn all kinds of energy. Now it's just getting my mind focused for the game. I review film on my iPad and read the notes I made during the week's film sessions on different plays and how to react on the field."

Trust Your Process

"Getting ready is a gradual process: All of that work all week right up to kickoff prepares me," says Olsen. "The review and workout on Monday, the massages on Tuesday and Thursday, all the game planning and practices and training. It's about feeling that I'm physically as well prepared as I can be, and I know my role. I can go out and just play—and let the chips fall where they may."



GAME CHANGER

Create Your Own Luck

"On game day I always eat a PB-and-Nutella sandwich on wheat bread," says Amendola. The snack delivers slow-burning fuel with its protein and fat. And superstitions or lucky tokens can help you feel more confident.