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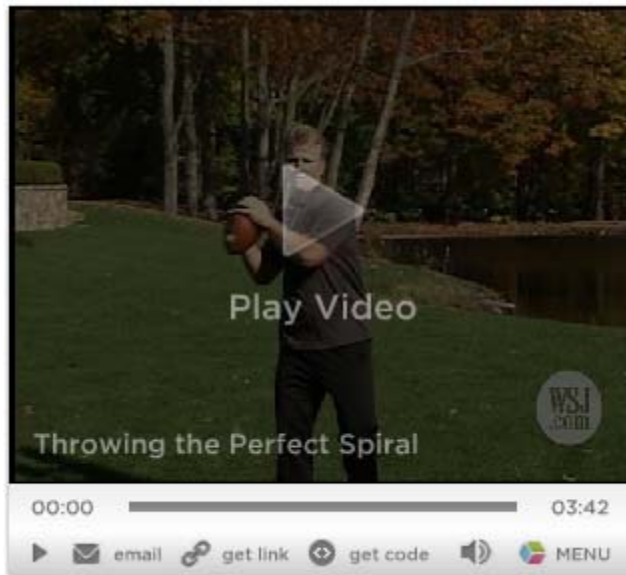
How to Throw Like a Pro

Former NFL QB Phil Simms on the secret mechanics of hurling a football

By **REED ALBERGOTTI**
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Take a kidney bean, blow it up to the size of an eggplant, shave both ends to a point, cover it with slick leather and fill it with 75 quarters.

Now go outside and try to throw it accurately.




Former New York Giant Phil Simms instructs WSJ's Reed Albergotti on throwing the perfect spiral.

aerospace engineering at the University at Buffalo.

For those who want to master the skill, Phil Simms, the 52-year-old former New York Giants quarterback, agreed to share his secrets on technique at his home in Franklin Lakes, N.J. Though he won a Super Bowl with the Giants in the 1986-1987 season, Mr. Simms says it wasn't until about 1993, when he retired and started teaching his two sons to throw, that he immersed himself in the mechanics of passing. Since then, Simms has become an NFL color commentator for CBS and emerged as an expert on passing technique. He has written a book called "Phil Simms

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This is, in rough terms, the challenge millions of Americans will face this holiday season during ritual backyard football games. Never mind that footballs weren't meant to be thrown in the first place (the sport was derived from rugby, a game with no forward passes) or that no two coaches seem to agree on how this skill should be taught -- the ability to throw a spiral remains one of the most unforgiving litmus tests of American manhood.

It's also one of the toughest to fake. Physicists say a football needs to spin to be gyroscopically stable, but as soon as it's airborne, wind and gravity will try to knock it from its axis and make it wobble like a slow bicycle. That a quarterback can throw one of these things 60 yards and hit a moving target "is just amazing," says William Rae, professor emeritus of



Daredevil Frisbie, \$16. As ultimate Frisbee and Frisbee golf gain in popularity,

on Passing" and tutored several promising quarterbacks (at no charge) from nearby schools. If he'd known what he knows now while he was still playing, he says, "I would have set records."

manufacturers are filling more niches. The Frostie's soft rubber is good for playing in cold.

LESS ROUND, MORE OBLONG



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Until 1906, football was a running game. The forward pass was foisted upon it when university presidents became outraged at the number of deaths on the field, which hit an estimated 18 in 1905. College football's rules committee, which included legendary coach Amos Alonzo Stagg, created the pass to spread the game out. It didn't become popular until the 1930s when the NCAA and the National Football League adopted a standard ball size.

Since then, the popularity of the forward pass has grown to the point where it's hard to imagine football without it. Today, about 56% of NFL plays involve passing.

Current NFL quarterbacks aren't always the best passing role models. Among the league's 32 starters, there are 20 different ways of throwing the ball, Mr. Simms says, few of which approach anything close to perfection.

Mr. Simms says he first started to rethink his own passing technique when Jim Fassel came to the Giants as an assistant coach in 1991. Under his tutelage, Mr. Simms says he started clasping the ball with two hands, which reduced fumbles. He held the ball low at his chest instead of up near his shoulder, which improved his release time. By keeping his arm and body relaxed, his throws became more accurate. After retiring, he took his study further and created drills that reinforce specific aspects of his passing technique.



Passback football, \$24.99. Throw this thing at a wall, and it bounces back in a tight spiral. The company improved the "sweet spot" so it doesn't take an NFL quarterback to make it work.



Aerobie Football, \$7.99. The curved fins on this football make it possible for anyone to throw a spiral.

The first thing he tells students is to take a deep breath and relax. Tension and a too-tight grip on the ball can be the downfall of a passer. Tight muscles inhibit movement at the joints, he says, causing the arm to work as one object, like a catapult. When it's limp and the joints move, the arm acts as a whip.

Ball grip is a matter of preference, he says. Holding it over the laces helps add spin, but holding it without using the laces is OK, too. One grip has the middle and ring fingers over the laces and the index finger just behind them. But someone with smaller hands can grab the ball closer to the point, where the circumference is shorter.

WHIP, NOT PUSH

Most people throw by drawing the football back behind their ear and pushing it forward. But pushing the ball makes it difficult to impart spin,

Mr. Sims says. Instead, the arm should whip, with the help of torque created at the waist.

Another misconception is that a spiral can be achieved only by launching the ball as hard as possible. Softly thrown balls can have spin, too.

Some of the drills Mr. Simms has come up with to teach these principles are unorthodox. So much so that a few coaches have refused to let their young quarterbacks train with him for fear he'll ruin them.

Tom Martinez, who began coaching New England Patriots quarterback Tom Brady when he was 13 and now heads up the quarterbacking branch of an invitation-only camp for gifted players, says he doesn't share the Simms philosophy. Instead of teaching one rigid technique, Mr. Martinez says he works with a thrower's existing style and tries to make it more consistent and repeatable.

Those who think they have a good handle on the spiral would be well served by standing on the receiving end of the Simms version. After licking his fingers to get a better grip and setting his feet, he uncoils a series of identical passes that cover 40 yards with alarming speed, delivering a sting to the palms of anyone not wearing oven mitts. "I've thrown over a million," Mr. Simms says, modestly.

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Delicate Arch SE, \$32.95. Boomerangs are even harder to throw than footballs. The Delicate Arch SE, in right- and left-handed versions, can go 65 yards and stay aloft 20 seconds.

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