

THE BUCS STOP HERE

For its twelfth season, HBO's acclaimed NFL docu-series goes to training camp with Tampa Bay.

The NFL regular season may kick off in early September, but for hard-core fans, the surest sign that football is back comes a month earlier, with the first episode of *Hard Knocks*.

Each year, the groundbreaking docu-reality series from HBO Sports embeds with an NFL team through five weeks of training camp. Narrated by actor Liev Schreiber (*Ray Donovan*) and produced by NFL Films, the show is renowned for its cinéma vérité shooting style and filmic editing. Equally central are the multiple storylines that follow players and coaches on and off the field.

"*Hard Knocks* provides inside access into a world rarely seen," says HBO Sports executive vice-president Peter Nelson. "It humanizes people and athletes in a way that's unique."

The latest installment, *Hard Knocks: Training Camp with the Tampa Bay Buccaneers*, spotlights one of the league's up-and-coming young teams. And while proven stars like quarterback Jameis Winston and newly acquired receiver DeSean Jackson will be featured, the series derives its enduring appeal from the epic struggles of undrafted free agents and rookie hopefuls as they compete to make the team.

"A lot of the drama comes from watching people who could be out of a job in five weeks," says NFL Films coordinating producer Ken Rodgers. Executive producers for NFL Films are Howard Katz, Jordan Levin, Pat Kelleher, Ross Ketover and series creator Marty Callner.

Cameras, which seem to be everywhere, deliver the ultimate insider football experience: bone-jarring hits, sideline trash talk and the emotional moments when a player learns he's been cut.

This season, a thirty-two-person crew will descend on Tampa with six manned cameras. Long an innovator in miking players, NFL Films can wire

up to twelve people per camera. ("Our technology to wire football players in their pads is incredible," Rodgers says.) More than a dozen robotic cameras will also provide unfettered access to meetings in

the coach's and general manager's offices.

Hard Knocks is shot Monday to Monday and airs Tuesday nights. Rodgers calls this brutally fast turnaround "one of the biggest challenges in all of television." Each week, some 400 hours of footage must be whittled down to an hour.

Just four years ago, footage — on film, tape or digital cards — had to be flown from a training camp by private courier. Today, thanks to advances in technology, that footage is relayed via dedicated internet lines (installed in all NFL stadiums) that feed straight to editing machines at NFL Films' home base in Mt. Laurel, New Jersey.

Back in 2001, when reality shows were revolutionizing the TV landscape, Callner came up with the idea for a reality show that would star an NFL team. The veteran music and comedy producer-director shrewdly put two heavyweights together — the late Steve Sabol, co-founder of NFL Films, and Ross Greenburg, then president of HBO Sports. A long-running partnership was born.

Hard Knocks memorably debuted in 2001 with the defending Super Bowl champion Baltimore Ravens. It made instant TV stars out of players like Shannon Sharpe and Tony ("Goose") Siragusa, and it established a benchmark for sports reality series. Fifty-seven episodes and fifteen Sports Emmy Awards later, *Hard Knocks* has become a certified brand name, with producers competing to co-opt its format.

Rodgers is both flattered and humbled. "We were never trying to make a show that had this kind of staying power," he says. "We were just trying to tell great stories." —Graham Flashner