

Tight end can do everything

By Avani Patel

Anthony Fasano has turned himself into a go-to guy on a talented offense.

Heading into Saturday night's game against No. 22 Purdue (2-1), the Notre Dame tight end has 21 catches and is on pace to break Ken McAfee's single-season team record for a tight end (54) set in 1977.

With each game, Fasano's stature seems to grow.

"I've coached a lot of tight ends at the level higher than this and there aren't very many of them who can do all the things he can do," said Irish coach Charlie Weis, most recently the offensive coordinator for the Super Bowl champion New England Patriots. "I've had guys who are better blockers . . . who could run better . . . who were better receivers. But I've had very few who could do everything [like he can]."

Fasano makes it appear as if it all comes easily to him. Loose in the huddle, focused on the field, the 21-year-old senior with another year of eligibility has the ability to be a star, the timing to be a top-notch player-comic and the good sense to savor the ride.

The tales of his many talents seem as tall as the praise is high. Only in his case, they're true.

Fasano, emerging as a bona fide NFL prospect, has always been considered an outstanding all-around athlete. In his first outing with the Verona (N.J.) High School varsity baseball team, he pitched a one-hitter. He won the New Jersey state championship in the javelin throw and averaged better than 44 yards per punt. Just last summer he fired a football 77 yards to beat every quarterback on the team in a throwing contest.

The foundation of his college career was a computer analysis that propelled him to Notre Dame. Inundated with scholarship offers his senior year, he used a computer program his father, Joe, designed to rate all the schools in which he had an interest. A dozen or so categories included football history, academics, television exposure and playing opportunity.

"No matter how we cut it, how we looked at things, Notre Dame always wound up being the highest score," Joe Fasano said.

So a player coach Bob Davie initially recruited committed to a program Tyrone Willingham had taken over. Now, he is flourishing in Weis' system.

How he came to this is partly a matter of luck, according to his father. Fasano, who now is 6 feet 5 inches and 255 pounds, spent most of his youth football shut out of the skill positions because he exceeded weight limits.

"[Coming] from a program as a lineman, he was fortunate his high school coach was open-minded," Joe Fasano said. "He got an opportunity to play tight end."

A four-year starter, Fasano finished his high school career with 168 catches for more than 2,500 yards and 42 touchdowns.

Playing one of the deepest positions for the Irish, Fasano broke through the pack because he steadily improved his blocking to supplement his receiving.

"He can combine pure athleticism as well as toughness," said linebacker Brandon Hoyte, who often has gone head-to-head with Fasano in practice. "He's a great athlete."

To say nothing of his value as a teammate.

"We all make mistakes when we're out on the field," Irish quarterback Brady Quinn said. "If he does happen to mess up, which is not often, he jokes about it. He has a lot of charisma. He helps us play loose."

That part comes naturally to Fasano.

"I found myself getting looser and looser as I got older," he said.

If he weren't preparing to lead the 13th-ranked Irish (3-1) against the Boilermakers, "I'd probably be trying to play on the PGA Tour," Fasano said. "I'd probably be at a big state school, just hanging out and partying."

An avid golfer, Fasano hit the links about 20 times in his six-week stay at home in New Jersey last summer before returning to campus. Although his putting is not where he would like it to be, Fasano routinely drives the ball 300 yards.

"I have a lot of room for improvement in golf," he said, echoing the sentiment he often expresses about football.

But befitting someone who maximizes his opportunity on every play, whatever the play, he applies the lessons he learns from golf to football.

"I've always played the front nine good and the back nine bad, and I think one of the hardest things in golf is putting a whole complete round together. That's also what a lot of people struggle with--putting that complete [football] game together. It's a challenge."

One that, according to teammates and coaches, he is meeting with ease.