

## Stanford's Howell is a true student-athlete

Tom FitzGerald, Chronicle Staff Writer

Stanford's football roster is loaded with excellent students, some of whom were high school valedictorians. So which is the one most likely to run for public office someday?

Free safety Michael Thomas picks Delano Howell because he's so strong in his beliefs. "It's hard to convince him otherwise," Thomas said. "He speaks very well."

Howell, a hard-hitting senior strong safety who led the team in interceptions last season with five, was surprised to hear that. He'd pick the ever-smiling Thomas. As for being firm in his views, Howell said, "That's true. It's always been the case."

Politics isn't for him, though, because he's "not patient enough," he said. He prefers to do his running in football games, probably NFL ones next year, and track and field meets (he moonlights as a long jumper on the track team in the spring).

Stanford takes on another private school with high academic standards when it plays Duke today at 12:30 (PDT) in Durham, N.C. To Howell, it's a chance to clean up the mistakes the defense made last week against San Jose State.

"In order to beat Duke, we'll have to do a lot better," he said.

That might sound strange considering that the Cardinal held the Spartans without a touchdown and have allowed just seven TDs in the past seven games going back to last season.

But this defense has high standards, something that didn't change when Derek Mason and Jason Tarver took over as co-defensive coordinators after Vic Fangio went with Jim Harbaugh to the 49ers.

Howell, Thomas and the rest of the secondary will have to contain two fine receivers today. Junior Conner Vernon led the ACC in receptions in 2010, and Donovan Varner, a 5-foot-9 senior, did it in 2009.

They were two of Duke's bright lights in a dismal Opening Day loss to Richmond, a second-tier NCAA team that has beaten the Blue Devils three times in the past three seasons.

Duke hasn't had a winning season since 1994, but Howell said the Cardinal aren't taking the Blue Devils lightly. "They're athletic, and they have a good quarterback (6-5 junior Sean Renfree) and good running backs."

The running backs, however, are wounded. Desmond Scott, who rushed for 80 yards and a touchdown against Richmond, is out with a leg injury, and starter Juwan Thompson probably will play despite a leg injury.

As a result, Renfree might try to pass frequently against a deep Stanford secondary that has gotten an infusion of freshman talent, especially from Wayne Lyons and Jordan Richards.

"The coaches always tell us their job is to go out and get somebody better than us," Howell said. "They do a very good job of doing that. These freshmen are fast, physical and understand the game well. To be honest, I haven't seen any freshmen come in as prepared as they have."

Unlike the new defensive backs, Howell entered Stanford prepared to play running back. "Originally, I wasn't ready for the transition," he said. "I wasn't expecting it. Defense is a completely different game, just reacting to everything."

He has become one of the best safeties in the country and a prime pro prospect. Now he loves playing defense. And he's steadfast in that opinion.