

Stanford kicker Jordan Williamson has a leg up

Tom FitzGerald, Chronicle Staff Writer

For a long time, Jordan Williamson aspired to be a pro soccer player. Growing up, he even copied David Beckham's hairstyles, though eschewing the British icon's body art.

That meant bleaching his hair blond. Once it came out orange; when he tried to correct it, he became a platinum blond.

When he decided Beckham had become too mainstream, too corporate, he began styling himself after Cristiano Ronaldo.

That was many years and one sport ago. Williamson is off to a terrific start as the placekicker on the Stanford football team, which has a bye this week. The redshirt freshman is 6-for-6 on field goals, and his kickoffs, aside from the opener, have been powerful.

He's made all of his extra-point kicks. But then, he doesn't know what it feels like to miss a PAT, having made all 93 of his tries at Westwood High School in Austin, Texas.

He's been "very impressive," coach David Shaw said. Besides making all three of his field goal tries against Arizona, including a 45-yarder, he was "absolutely perfect" on kickoffs, Shaw said.

He has been a very capable replacement for last year's All-Pac-10 first-teamer, Nate Whitaker, who graduated. Meanwhile, opposing kickers have been spraying field-goal tries around as if they were wearing snowshoes. They're 2-for-8.

Williamson's high school coach, Anthony Wood, isn't surprised in the least by his early success. "I told him from Day 1 he's going to be kicking on Sunday," he said. "He's got a great leg. He made a 52-yarder for us and begged me to let him try longer ones."

The NFL possibility is getting a little ahead of the story. It really starts when Williamson was a skinny ninth-grader and a skillful forward in club soccer. Another freshman football player told Wood that Williamson would make a great placekicker.

Williamson didn't think he could play both sports, but Wood told him he could moonlight as a football player and let him tailor his practice schedule around soccer. Williamson soon booted a 43-yard field goal in a freshman game. He later found out he had done it with a broken toe, a soccer injury.

He spent the next two months recovering, but when the varsity kicker was suspended for a playoff game, Williamson was ready. He made his debut against Westfield-Houston, the third-ranked team in the state, at Texas A&M's Kyle Field in front of nearly 10,000 people. The freshman didn't try a field goal but made two extra points and booted a couple of kickoffs.

"He goes in like he hasn't a care in the world," Wood said. "He's incredible."

Those steely nerves were tested in the cauldron that is Texas high school football. Half of Westwood's games are on local TV. Its stadium seats 16,000 and has a jumbo video screen. The team's website would put many college teams' to shame.

As a sophomore, Williamson was dribbling during a soccer game when he got nailed on a tackle. He sustained a chipped bone in his neck, a concussion and a broken nose.

"He kept having injuries, but always in soccer," said his mother, Laura Burton.

When he wasn't hurt, he had one of the best kicking careers in Texas schoolboy history. He made 32 of 45 field goals. As a senior he pounded one from 52 and another from 50. By that time, he had dropped soccer, to the chagrin of his club and school coaches.

Several universities were on his trail for football, among them Arkansas, Nebraska and Vanderbilt. They were a little late. He had attended a Stanford kicking camp the previous summer, and had won a field-goal kicking contest with a 65-yarder, impressing the coaches.

Getting into Stanford was a whole other matter. Williamson had to load up on Advanced Placement courses as a senior, continue to get excellent grades and go through all the application hoops. The acceptance didn't come until Jan. 16. If he hadn't gotten in, he and his parents would have had two weeks to find another school before national signing day.

After that kind of tension, a placekick in a game is not a big deal for Williamson. The other day he bombed a 63-yard field goal in practice. "I was just messing around," he said. "There's no pressure at all."

The pressure kicks are coming, but Stanford figures it has the right man for the role.