

Stanford's Moose helping backs run loose

By Kevin Gemmell, ESPN.com

PALO ALTO, Calif. -- Has there ever been a more appropriate nickname for an offensive lineman than "Moose?" It leaves little to no room for interpretation about size or demeanor.

And except for the fact that Stanford offensive tackle Jonathan Martin is extremely articulate -- and lacks antlers -- the nickname fits him as snugly as his shoulder pads.

"That's how he introduced himself to me (the first time I met him)," joked quarterback Andrew Luck -- whose blindside is protected by the 6-foot-6, 304-pound Martin.

Martin was crowned with the moniker when he was in fifth grade. He was too big to play Pop Warner football in California, so during a flag football game, one of his teammates first called him Moose.

"I guess I was mauling people," Martin said. "It stuck since then."

It's how he still introduces himself -- though not to his professors.

"I'm more comfortable with Jon or Jonathan Martin in an academic setting," he said.

So when his name is called in the first round of the NFL draft -- probably not too long after the guy he's protecting -- chances are it will be Jon or Jonathan.

"He has natural tools," said head coach David Shaw. "An old coach once told me you have to find the guy that can do the things that you can't teach. And you can't teach a guy to be 6-5, 304-pounds and be athletic. And that's what he is.

"He's long. He's got long arms. He's tall, but he's flexible. He can kick and punch, and a lot of the publicity he's gotten is from NFL draft rankings, because he looks like an NFL tackle. Guys like that don't come around very often to be able to do the things he can do."

It's tough to statistically quantify the progress of an offensive line or lineman. But there are a few telltale signs. For example -- Stanford has increased its rushing total every week, from 141 yards against San Jose State to 205 against Duke to 242 against Arizona. Luck has only been sacked twice (though one was him running out of bounds). Those are pretty good figures.

"He's a tireless worker," Luck said of Martin. "He takes a lot of pride in being consistent and using the right technique ... he sets such a great standard for the younger guys. He's very meticulous, which I appreciate, obviously.

"(The offensive line has) done a great job. They are still hungry ... they take pride in the fact that they want to be a physical group."

Martin, who has started in 27 of the past 29 games since redshirting in 2008, checks in as the No. 6 player on ESPN's Mel Kiper's Big Board. He said he still needs some work on his pass protection (Luck would disagree), but he might be the best run blocker in this year's draft class.

"I really like those drives at the end of games when you get to run the ball for 10 straight plays," Martin said. "It's a pretty gratifying feeling."

Shaw has asked Martin to do more than just protect the presumptive top pick in the NFL draft. With three starters from the offensive line graduating last season, Martin and David DeCastro became the veterans of the line. Tackle Cameron Fleming, center Sam Schwartzstein and guard David Yankey had never started a college football game prior to the season opener. And if the group was going to meet their coaches' expectations, Martin and DeCastro were going to have to whip them into shape.

"The roles those two guys played were so vital," Shaw said. "It's one thing when the coaches demand it of a young player. It's an entirely different deal when the veteran players, the guys they see in the locker room, in the weight room, and in the training room demand it of them also. There is no soft place to land when you don't do it right. And that's a good thing. David and Jon have been very vocal in their expectations about how the line should play. And each game it's getting better."

The younger players speak highly of Martin, calling him, among other things, an impressive leader. He's made it an emphasis that as a line and a team, he won't accept anything but their best effort. Martin arrived at Stanford in the midst of the culture change and has seen firsthand the strides the program has made. His hope is that he leaves it in better shape than when he first arrived.

"We want to win. We expect to win," Martin said. "That's where the standard has been set. Before, it was just to get to a bowl game. Now we have higher aspirations to win the Pac-12. It's been a fun process to be a part of."