

Tight end Zach Ertz has scoring touch at Stanford

Tom FitzGerald, Chronicle Staff Writer

Over Stanford's past nine games going back to last season, tight end Zach Ertz has caught seven touchdown passes. When the ball's in the red zone, it's often time for a Zach Attack.

He is the second leading receiver in a well-balanced receiving corps with nine catches for 127 yards. He has caught a TD pass in each of the three games so far and will try to extend his streak Saturday night against UCLA, the school he was headed to before being accepted by Stanford.

A 6-foot-6, 252-pound redshirt sophomore, Ertz says he's lucky to be part of a well-oiled offense that has Andrew Luck at the controls.

"The schemes we're running put us one-on-one on guys," he said. "Fortunately, I've been getting open, and Andrew puts the ball where it has to be. Half the time, I'm not even open, and Andrew puts it where it has to be."

Ertz's chief high school mentor thinks he's headed to the NFL. And he should know. Brent Jones was a four-time Pro Bowl selection with the 49ers. "He has grown into the player that I foresaw him being," Jones said. "Quite honestly he's done it a year or two before I thought he'd get there."

Ertz is part of the nation's premier tight-end stable with Coby Fleener and Levine Toilolo. They can all block; on pass patterns, linebackers can't run with them, and defensive backs can't out-jump them.

As for Ertz, fans of Monte Vista-Danville could see this coming. In his senior year, he caught 56 passes, 14 for touchdowns. He became part of a mini-pipeline from the school to Stanford, following wide receiver Ryan Whalen (now with the Cincinnati Bengals) and preceding quarterback Brett Nottingham, a redshirt freshman.

"He's a wide receiver in a tight end's body," Monte Vista coach Craig Bergman said. "He knows how to run routes. He's 6-6, and if the ball's in the air, he's going to get it."

"Zach's got great body control and great hands," Stanford coach David Shaw said. "He does some things naturally that you don't have to coach."

Jones got hooked up with Bergman's staff as a volunteer because his daughters attended Monte Vista. At first, Ertz admits, he didn't know how great a tight end Jones had been since he had lived in Southern California until he was 8.

As a ninth-grader, Ertz was a rangy, long-haired wide receiver. As a sophomore he shuttled between the varsity and the junior varsity. In the first game of his junior year, though, everything started to click.

"There was a fade that he caught in the end zone," Jones recalled. "There's not a DB anywhere that's going to take that ball away from him. He was a man among boys."

Jones said he felt during Ertz's sophomore year that the young player needed a stronger work ethic. "I was extremely hard on him," he said. "I drove him to be excellent with an NFL-style approach. I wanted to make sure he had a complete arsenal and wouldn't just be good enough, or run a route three-quarters speed, or jog back to the huddle.

"He responded extremely well. He was just a joy. He went from a gangly sophomore to a junior who could take over a game."

Despite Stanford's success, this has been a difficult time for Ertz. His brother Shane, a Monte Vista receiver, recently had to give up football after his second major concussion. Another brother, Nick, a sophomore, has had serious back problems.

"It's been a tough year for the family as a whole," Zach said. For Shane, "it's tough having something taken away that you've worked so hard for. We're very close as a family."

His youngest brother, Jackson, still in grade school, "is going to be a beast," Zach said. "He's 4 inches taller than I was at the same age. He's thick and athletic."

Another Stanford tight end in the making?