

It's more than a run of good luck with Taylor

By Rick Eymmer
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Stanford junior running back Stephan Taylor may have been a relative unknown his first year at Stanford, since he played in the considerable shadow of running back supreme Toby Gerhart.

Even last year Taylor may have been an afterthought to quarterback Andrew Luck, although he became just the sixth Cardinal to accumulate more than 1,000 rushing yards. In fact, Taylor recorded the second best single-season total (1,137 yards) in school history.

This year? No one is asking Stephan who? Not after what he's done the first four games of the season as Stanford has gone 4-0 overall, 2-0 in the Pac-12 North Division.

"He's done everything right from day one," Luck said. "His protection blocking, running the ball, acting as a decoy . . . he is not undervalued on our team."

All Taylor did was pick up where Gerhart, now in the NFL, left off. He allowed Stanford to have a 1,000-yard rusher for a third consecutive season. That had never been done before. The Cardinal is 16-1 since Taylor took over for Toby.

Taylor enters Saturday's conference game with visiting Colorado (4:30 p.m.) as Stanford's 10th-most prolific rusher in school history with 1,890 yards. He just surpassed Tommy Vardell (1,789) and could inch past Anthony Kimble (1,940) this week.

With a pair of back-to-back 1,000 rushing seasons, Darrin Nelson is the Stanford career rushing leader with 4,033 yards while Gerhart is second with 3,522. Taylor could threaten Gerhart's mark next season.

Taylor has thrived within the Cardinal offensive system because he's technically sound, knows when to follow his blockers and when to make his move. He's also a little bit lucky.

The third play from scrimmage during last Saturday's 45-19 romp over UCLA could have been a fiasco.

"There was one play I couldn't hear Andrew call the play," Taylor said. "I kept waiting for him to turn around and tell me. I knew it was a run, I just didn't know which way. Luckily I guessed right."

Taylor scored twice in the Pac-12 Conference victory over the Bruins, his 20th and 21st career touchdown. Only five players have scored more during their Cardinal career. He's within six of Brad Muster for third all-time.

"That doesn't matter at all," Taylor said. "I just go out and help the team. We have a good group of backs here and I am not selfish."

He's a big part of Stanford's ability to control the clock, especially in the fourth quarter. The Cardinal has yet to fall behind in any game this season, making the final period all about finishing strong.

"I love that situation," Taylor said. "We're running out the clock and we have the offensive line and fullback leading the way. The defense looks tired."

It's also fun for the linemen.

"We know we're going to run every down to run out the clock and put the ball in the end zone," Stanford's David DeCastro said.

While Taylor was in the midst of a prolific high school career (4,792 yards and 67 touchdowns in three years) in Mansfield, Texas, then-Stanford coach Jim Harbaugh made his pitch.

"He told me we're a running team and run the same kind of offense as my high school," Taylor said. "I really didn't know too much, but I was amazed at how we ran."

Filling in for Gerhart also proved productive.

"He taught me a lot as far as reading defenses," Taylor said. "My high school coaches taught me how to be physical."

Stanford is one of three Division I schools (with Auburn and Florida State) which has not lost a fumble yet this year. In fact, the Cardinal has fumbled once and gotten it back. Taylor said that comes from an attitude and running backs coach Mike Sanford, a former quarterback at Boise State, stressing it in practice every day.

"I never want to put the ball on the ground," Taylor said. "Coach Sanford made it an emphasis this year. He wants the ball to be high and tight, and he wants the pictures to show high and tight."

On the other hand, Stanford is one of three Division I schools without an interception (with Utah State and Akron) and that's a bit

irritating.

"The defensive backs work on ball skills pre-practice and post-practice," Stanford head coach David Shaw said.

Stanford leads the nation with one turnover lost and ranks 13th in the nation in turnover margin. Still, there's room for improvement.

"We didn't do everything we expected to do," junior nose tackle Terrence Stephens said. "We need to start a lot faster, with a little attitude and not try to feel our way into the game. We need to stay focused and we need to find a way to finish it."

Meanwhile Luck said he'd be just as happy if he never had to catch another pass, like he did against UCLA.

"Two in my career is enough," he said. "I'm fine throwing the ball. I have no desire to catch another pass."

The catch, a one-handed grab last weekend as he was falling out of bounds, did elicit a response from tight end Coby Fleener, who made a spectacular one-handed grab in the end zone for a touchdown, and made it look easy.

"His was more impressive than mine," Fleener said. "He wasn't wearing gloves and he's a quarterback. I was jumping up and down on the sideline. He's a superb athlete and he'd make one heck of a tight end."

NOTES: Wide receiver Drew Terrell, who threw the 13-yard completion to Luck, was banged up during the game and may be replaced as a punt returner . . . CB Barry Browning, who missed the UCLA game with back spasms, is expected to be ready to play against Colorado . . . CB Delano Howell, who hurt his shoulder, was cleared to play earlier in the week . . . Shaw, who caught two passes the last time Stanford played Colorado, on the sellout against UCLA: "You could feel it during warmups. The student section was already packed and it created a buzz." . . . The Pac-12 announced that Stanford's game at Washington State next weekend will start at 4:30 p.m. and be televised on Versus.n