

Stanford's Masifilo happy with his decision

By Kevin Gemmell, ESPN.com

If there were questions -- and there probably were -- Matt Masifilo didn't hear them.

If there were shocked faces -- and there probably were -- Matt Masifilo didn't see them.

Still, it just didn't make sense. Masifilo could have had his pick of almost any other Pac-10 school. Why would the defensive end from Ewa Beach, Hawaii, want to go to Stanford, a school that was 1-11 his senior year? After all, he was rated the seventh-best defensive lineman in the country. Top-10 guys like that don't go to 1-11 schools. They rarely go to 6-6 schools. It didn't make sense to anyone.

Except to Masifilo.

"Once you take football out of the equation, it's pretty obvious," Masifilo said in a 2007 interview with Rivals.com.

Oh, that makes sense.

His mind was made up. He had taken his visit to Stanford even before Jim Harbaugh was hired as the new head coach. And while the eccentric, energetic new skipper coming from FCS University of San Diego might have put Masifilo over the top, he said it's likely he would have ended up in Cardinal red anyway.

"I saw it as an opportunity for greatness and helping to build a program," Masifilo said. "I wasn't concerned with their record. Academically, Stanford is second to none. I didn't want to compromise anything. That's how I live my life. If you're going to do something, don't take the easy road."

And the fifth-year senior is pretty happy with his decision. He's experienced the Cardinal renaissance firsthand and has his fingerprints all over it. But this year, he's doing his finest work.

While offensive linemen David DeCastro and Jonathan Martin get a great deal of credit for helping their line stay together with three new starters, Masifilo has had to do the same thing on the defensive side of the ball, with two new starters on the three-man front. Masifilo is the only holdover from last year's starting trio.

"The main thing we wanted was to get a bond and make sure everyone is fully comfortable and building a level of trust you get when you're playing next to your brothers," Masifilo said. "That's how we view the defensive line. It's a brotherhood. Almost like a sitcom.

"Everyone is like their own character. It's what makes it fun to hang out and work and train with those guys. Everyone brings their own personality to the table."

"Growing Pains" wouldn't be a suitable title. The defensive line has been fantastic this season. Terrence Stephens has grown magnificently into the noseguard role and Ben Gardner has been the pleasant surprise of the season opposite Masifilo at the other defensive end.

But it's the veteran who has caught coach David Shaw's eye the last few weeks.

"The last couple of weeks, he's really turned it loose," Shaw said. "The last couple of weeks, he's just going. He's made effort plays. He was our defensive player of the week last week [against Washington]. Just playing at a high level and playing with high intensity and high energy."

After just four tackles in the first three games this season, Masifilo has 12 over the past four -- including 2.5 tackles for a loss.

"I think Matt started a little slow [this year]," Shaw said. "He was really trying to do his job [too hard]. He's the most conscientious kid you'll find ... and I can't say enough about Ben Gardner. The two of those guys have made some really great, high-effort plays that have helped out our defense."

The nice thing about being a fifth-year senior is that you command respect. Having started 26 games heading into Saturday's matchup against USC, Masifilo has been a beacon to many of the younger players on the team -- not just the defensive linemen.

"He's that veteran up front," said linebacker A.J. Tarpley. "He's been in every situation that you can imagine, whether it's a close game, big opponent or tough place to play on an away game. He's definitely one of the veteran guys on our defense that you can ask anything and he'll know if we are doing our job. Playing behind him, it's nice to know that he's been in all of those situations before. Nothing is new to him."