

Stanford's Jeremy Stewart ready for last Big Game

Tom FitzGerald, Chronicle Staff Writer

Nobody could say that Jeremy Stewart hasn't seen the glory. He had a 62-yard return against Oregon on the first kickoff he handled at Stanford.

That was in 2007, the year Stanford knocked off USC 24-23 in what some call the greatest upset ever. Stewart had seven carries for 29 yards in that game. In the Big Game that year, he rushed 24 times for 70 yards and caught seven passes in a 20-13 win.

More recently he bolted 60 yards to a touchdown against Virginia Tech in last season's Orange Bowl. This year he has nine touchdowns, second on the team to Stepfan Taylor's 10. The fourth-string running back has become the short-yardage specialist, the team's closer, if you will.

"I don't know that there's a better guy inside the 5-yard line in college football right now," coach David Shaw said. "He is fantastic."

Stewart has also experienced his full share of heartache, including a bad left ankle sprain that was mainly responsible for him missing 16 games over the last three years. He spent innumerable hours in the training room while his teammates practiced.

"He's been the second back, the third back, the fourth back," Shaw said. "He's been all over the place, so nothing fazes him."

Stewart was granted a fifth year of eligibility because of all the time he missed. He could have left school but he wanted a lot more.

"Last year didn't go the way I wanted it to go, missing a lot of the season," he said, knowing full well he had started fall camp on top of the depth chart, only to fall behind Taylor, Tyler Gaffney and Anthony Wilkerson.

"I came back to have the season I knew I was capable of having," he said. "As far as the team goes, I knew we had a chance to do some big things this year. I wanted to be part of that."

Counting the 34-28 loss in 2009, which he watched from the sidelines, he's 2-2 against Cal, so Saturday night's game is his personal rubber match.

"I didn't know much about the Big Game before I got here" from Louisiana, he said. "As soon as you get out here, you find out real fast how big the Big Game is. If people don't care about any other game, they care about the Big Game."

As a freshman, he said, "I remember how badly the seniors wanted to get the Axe back" after a five-year drought.

Now he's the grizzled senior trying to retain the trophy. Yes, he even has some gray hair, a small thatch just above his forehead that he's had since he was 12 and led to the nickname "Patch."

Now he prefers "Stew" or "J-Stew" - "I wanted to do something different."

He has completed his studies for his degree in management, science and engineering, and he figures he learned some important lessons in football as well.

One was that he should have spent more time rehabbing his bad ankle after it healed the first time. "You assume you're invincible when you're young," he said. "I didn't spend as much time as I should rehabbing it. Now I realize it's an ongoing process."

According to quarterback Andrew Luck, Stewart "goes unrecognized a lot. He's a true testament to perseverance and sticking it out and coming to work every day. When he gets his opportunities, he makes the most of them."