

Stanford tight ends are triple threat to USC

By Gary Klein, LA Times

Dion Bailey and Hayes Pullard have faced big challenges in their first season as starting linebackers for USC.

None were as large as the one awaiting Saturday against unbeaten Stanford.

The Cardinal features three tight ends, all 6 feet 6 or taller.

Coby Fleener, Zach Ertz and Levine Toilolo form a triple threat that can be deployed along the line, spread out wide and even in the backfield, often at the same time.

Stanford has taken full advantage, with 13 of the team's 21 touchdown passes going to the trio.

Bailey and Pullard, redshirt freshmen who are USC's top tacklers, have never seen anything like it.

"I've got to understand that I am half their size so I can't have all this pride and try to take them on like I'm 6-4, 230," said Bailey, a converted safety who is 6 feet, 200 pounds. "I've got to use my speed and play smart."

So does the 6-foot, 225-pound Pullard.

"I have my own advantage," he said. "Quickness and pad leverage."

Stanford's tight ends are part of a run-oriented offense that has averaged 48.6 points and 504 yards a game. Last week, the Cardinal extended its nation-best winning streak to 15 games by rushing for a school-record 446 yards in a 65-21 victory over Washington.

Nearly one-third of quarterback Andrew Luck's completed passes this season have gone to tight ends, who have averaged a combined 123.9 yards receiving per game.

"They look like offensive tackles," said Monte Kiffin, USC's assistant head coach for defense. "And then all of a sudden, you see [No.] 82 streaking down the field and he runs a 4.5 40."

Fleener is No. 82 and Luck's No. 1 target for scoring plays. The Illinois native has caught 17 passes this season, seven for touchdowns (one was from backup quarterback Brett Nottingham).

The 6-foot-6, 254-pound Fleener also can go deep. In last season's 40-12 Orange Bowl victory over Virginia Tech, he scored on three pass plays of 38 yards or longer. This season, he has 60- and 51-yard touchdowns.

Fleener arrived at Stanford in 2007, former coach Jim Harbaugh's first season with the Cardinal. He thrived under Harbaugh and is doing the same with former offensive coordinator David Shaw, now the head coach.

"When I came in, I had no idea what the offense was going to entail," said Fleener, who averages 22.6 yards per catch. "I had to take Coach Harbaugh's word that tight ends were going to be used, and Coach Shaw has continued that to an even greater degree."

Ertz, a sophomore from Danville, Calif., has benefited from the emphasis, catching 22 passes this season, three for touchdowns.

The 6-6, 252-pound Ertz was tutored on the field in high school by former Pro Bowl tight end Brent Jones.

"He helped me out learning the ins and outs of the position," Ertz said, "particularly the route running."

Toilolo, a 6-8, 262-pound sophomore from San Diego, has the fewest receptions among tight ends. But three of his eight catches have gone for touchdowns.

The former La Mesa Helix High standout was accustomed to lining up next to the offensive tackles. Now he is comfortable when split wide.

"I just try to be an athlete and get open however I can," he said. "I have to remember to bend my legs and show some athletic ability."

Luck, he added, makes that easier.

"The times he throws you the ball, all you really have to do is put your hands up — he puts it right there," Toilolo said. "He'll put it in your facemask if you're not ready."