

Notre Dame football: Whitaker gets to work

By JIM MEENAN
South Bend Tribune Staff Writer

Nate Whitaker doesn't sound like he looks back too often at his time at Notre Dame these days.

A fifth-year senior and starting kicker with emerging national power Stanford, he really doesn't have to.

"Everyone has high expectations for what the season has to offer," he said in a recent phone interview. "It's a pretty positive attitude out here."

Things are going well for Whitaker, a former Notre Dame walk-on, who was given a scholarship at Stanford after last season.

Through three games this season, he was 3 for 3 on field goals and had made eight straight going back to last season when he was an honorable mention All-Pac-10 selection.

Included in those eight field goals were three against Notre Dame in the final game of the Charlie Weis era, a 45-38 Cardinal win.

Whitaker said that Stanford was his top choice coming out of high school. He opted to transfer there after two years at Notre Dame, where as a sophomore he missed his lone field goal attempt, a 50-yarder against Penn State, made one of two extra points and kicked off 28 times. He saw limited action his freshman year, handling kickoff duties, ironically against Stanford, and making his lone PAT attempt against Purdue.

Those were the 2006 and 2007 seasons, the latter of which Brandon Walker (6 of 12 on field goals) was the starting kicker on a 3-9 team.

Whitaker left for an opportunity.

"To be honest, I have tried to stay away from this but I don't feel like I got a completely fair chance because of the fact that I was a walk-on," Whitaker said of his time at Notre Dame. "But other people have different opinions on that factor, and it's up for discussion. But personally I don't think that I had the fair chance that I deserved."

He believed that chance lacked mainly at field-goal kicking, where he was behind Carl Gioia as a freshman and then Walker the following year. Ryan Burkhart, a scholarship kicker, was also in the mix both those seasons.

"It's debatable, but I feel I got kind of (short-changed)," Whitaker said.

It makes last year's success all the more meaningful, he said of the season in which he made 16 of 22 field goal tries, including all six from 20 to 29 yards and four of five from 30 to 39 yards. He also kicked a 54-yarder against Wake Forest.

"It means everything," Whitaker said. "The stuff I have been through has driven me and motivated me and made it that much more meaningful that I am succeeding and doing well."

"It definitely is a big point of mine. I love the fact that I am doing well after all the stuff I have been through."

Interestingly, his special teams coach this season is the same man who tutored him at Notre Dame on special teams, Brian Polian.

Whitaker said he was not apprehensive when he learned Polian would work with him again for his final season.

"It was actually kind of humorous," he said. "We get along great. Brian Polian's a great coach. The team has fun with him."

Not that it's always gone that well between the two.

"We had some conflicts at Notre Dame, but it was nothing that we couldn't get over," Whitaker said. "Just like most players and coaches butt heads every once in a while, we definitely had our fair share of those at Notre Dame. But we are all adults, we got over them, and he's a great coach. I enjoy him."

Besides, these days, Whitaker is more focused on his goal of not missing a field goal this season.

"I don't know how realistic that is because of different situations like long field goals, but my goal is to not miss a field goal and improve my kickoffs a little bit," he said.

He also hopes to do well enough to continue his career in the NFL.

Whitaker played wide receiver a bit in high school, earned all conference honors in the San Diego area in soccer and also ran the 100 meters and 300 hurdles in track.

"I was one of the fastest on Notre Dame's team and one of the fastest on Stanford also," he said, citing his 4.52 40 and 11.0 100 meters. "I pride myself on being an athlete."

Whitaker says this year's Stanford team, ranked 16th in the latest AP rankings, is confident and he enjoys playing for Jim Harbaugh.

"There is just a lot of energy," he said. "He has a way of motivating a team. He's very into his players. He gets people motivated for practice. He's a great coach."

Whitaker is looking forward to returning to the place where his college career started — Notre Dame.

"I actually really enjoyed Notre Dame overall," he said. "The weather wasn't exactly what I thought it would be. It's kind of gloomy there six months of the year."

But the school and tradition are great he said.

"It was a mixed experience between school and everything but overall it was enjoyable," he said.

Whitaker looks forward to his return to Notre Dame Stadium.

"I am very excited to come back to Notre Dame and play," said the 5-foot-9, 185-pounder. "It's a great environment to play in. There is definitely a lot of players on the team that I still know."

"There's a lot of people who were a year below me that still go to school there that are seniors, so I am very excited to play there."

He will be motivated, too, as he returns with former Irish tight end Konrad Reuland, saying the two "hopefully will show Notre Dame what they are missing."