

# Stanford seniors live transformation

By Ted Miller, ESPN.com

Folks throw around terms such as "best" and "worst" and "most" and "least" in sports in all the time, even when their application is more symbolic than real. Extremes are easy to understand. Talking about them can be fun. Actually experiencing them is rare, though. Living through the best of times and worst of times? That was just Charles Dickens rolling out a good opening line.

Richard Sherman and the rest of Stanford's fifth-year seniors, however, know both the best of times and worst of times, at least in terms of college football.

In 2006, the Cardinal went 1-11. That was the most losses in school history and worst record since an 0-10 mark in 1960. It was the program's fifth consecutive losing season, and coach Walt Harris was fired after just two years.

Worst of times.

In 2010, the Cardinal went 11-1. That set a school season record for victories. Stanford, ranked fourth in the final BCS standings, hasn't finished ranked in the top five of the AP poll since 1940. It's headed for a date with Virginia Tech in the Discover Orange Bowl on Monday.

Best of times.

And, yes, the latter is more fun.

"It's unbelievable," Sherman said. "I can't even express to you the emotions I have and the other seniors have. Coming in the way we did, obviously, 1-11 and now leaving with a record-setting season, one of the best offenses in the country, one of the best defenses in the country. Just a great team. We love each other. I can't explain it to you. It's a combination of joy, happiness, pride, a lot of things. Man, watching these guys grow up. We've all come a long way."

Sherman was a freshman on the 2006 team. It was shut out twice. It lost to San Jose State. It ranked 118th in the nation in scoring (10.6 points per game) and 108th in scoring defense (31.4 ppg), meaning it lost by an average of three touchdowns.

Harris went 6-17, turning in the shortest tenure of any Stanford coach since Rod Dowhower left after one season in 1979 with a 5-5-1 record. It was clear his disciplinarian methods weren't clicking with the sort of players who can get into Stanford.

"It was maybe just a bad fit," receiver Mark Bradford said at the time. "Maybe we didn't respond to the way that was his style of coaching. His style of coaching probably would have worked in a lot of other places. It didn't work here."

Enter Jim Harbaugh, who introduced himself by stating, "I vow I will attack this endeavor with enthusiasm unknown to mankind."

He was the anti-Harris. "It was just a whole different way of coaching... Coach Harbaugh definitely brought a different energy and enthusiasm to the program. Basically, he brought a belief in winning that I don't think guys had before he got here," Sherman said.

That can't be undersold. While injuries were a huge issue for Stanford in 2006, there was plenty of talent on the roster: Trent Edwards was the quarterback for the first half of the season before he got hurt and plenty of guys went on to the NFL. And many names are familiar because of their roles in the Cardinal's recent surge under Harbaugh, from running back Toby Gerhart to Sherman to almost the entire offensive line.

There was talent in 2006. Sherman said the players worked hard and practiced hard. But the results were terrible. The offense only scored as many as two touchdowns in two games all season.

"It was rough coming from high school," said Sherman, who started out as a receiver. "You don't really know what to expect and then you come into that. It's rough to not get wins. You work hard every week, you game plan every week, and things just don't work out for you. It's obviously frustrating."

Just four years later, Stanford became one of the great turnaround stories in college football history. Louisville, which went 11-1 in 2001 after going 1-10 in 1997, was the last FBS team to win one game and then as many as 11 games four years later. Pittsburgh won the 1976 national championship with a 12-0 record four years after posting a 1-10 mark.

The 2010 Cardinal not only won, they dominated. They outscored foes by an average of more than 22 points. They ranked No. 8 in the nation in scoring (40.3 ppg) and No. 11 in scoring defense (17.83). They recorded three shutouts for the first time since 1969. They set a

**STANFORD FOOTBALL CLIPS December 29, 2010**

school record for points (484), and quarterback Andrew Luck set a school record with 28 touchdown passes. For the second consecutive year, the program produced a Heisman Trophy finalist -- Luck -- who followed Gerhart, the 2009 runner-up.

"This year was like the perfect storm," Sherman said.

But Sherman & Co. still retain a chip on their collective shoulders. They aren't ready to announce their arrival on the national scene just yet. They won four games in 2007, five in '08 and eight in 2009. It's been a process, and they sense there are still some stragglers who doubt them.

"People don't look at us as a talented team now and they didn't look at us as a talented team then [in 2006]," Sherman said. "Obviously, when you put on the Stanford 'S' it takes your talent and speed away. You're not fast or athletic anymore. It's been that way since I got here. We have great athletes, great players."

Sherman said the Cardinal aren't satisfied with merely earning the trip to Miami for a BCS bowl game. "There aren't going to be many guys trying to live the life in Miami. It's not about the trip. It's about the win," he said.

Winning, of course, is the only way to ensure that 2010 will be remembered as the very best of times on the Farm.