

# Whalen catches on as receiver, team leader

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Ryan Whalen was never meant to be in this position. He was a walk-on out of Monte Vista High in Danville, for goodness sakes, and had to work extra hard just to get some attention.

The senior receiver, however, has become the classic definition of a possession receiver (think Dwight Clark when he was with the 49ers) and is now indispensable to 13th-ranked Stanford's prospects on the football field.

From his humble beginnings Whalen has transformed into a team leader, the guy people look to when the going gets a little ragged. Even as he missed two games with a dislocated left elbow, he turned into the team's biggest cheerleader.

Restricted to special teams' duty as a freshman, he worked his way onto the depth chart by the season finale. Mark Bradford, Richard Sherman and Evan Moore dominated the receiving statistics. Doug Baldwin and Whalen were backups.

Whalen now has led the team in receiving each of the past two years, though two games on the bench has him behind Baldwin, Stephan Taylor and tied with Chris Owusu.

Entering this Saturday's Pac-10 game at Washington (2-2, 3-4) that kicks off at 4 p.m., Whalen has caught 116 career passes for 1,647 yards and eight touchdowns, three coming in his first five games this season. He had a TD reception in last week's 38-28 conference win over Washington State.

Whalen is an unlikely candidate for stardom, but that's what they said about Troy Walters when Tyrone Willingham brought him to Stanford when no one else recruited him.

As a senior, Walters won the Fred Biletnikoff Award as college football's best wide receiver. He finished his Stanford career with 244 catches and over 3,900 yards, both school records.

After spending several seasons in the NFL, Walters is currently the wide receivers coach at Texas A&M University. Whalen may not earn as much recognition, but he's the type of player who could easily wind up coaching at the college level.

While his future remains bright, it's the present that concerns him and his teammates. The Huskies present the latest challenge in a season where the Cardinal (3-1, 6-1) sits in a second-place tie with Arizona (3-1, 6-1) in the Pac-10 Conference with a possible berth in the Rose Bowl still on the line. "We understand this could be a special season," Stanford quarterback Andrew Luck said. "We know what it could mean to the program." Walters was a member of the 2000 Rose Bowl team as a senior. Whalen could be part of the next Rose Bowl team, 11 years later.

Stanford's seven-game start matches the 1970 team that also reached the Rose Bowl. The Cardinal was led by Jim Plunkett, Stanford's only Heisman Trophy winner. Luck is one of 16 semifinalists for the Davey O'Brien Award. Could the Heisman be close behind?

Whalen's performance over the next five games can only help his roommate on the road. "We've done a good job of not looking too far ahead," Whalen said. "We haven't played our best football yet and we'll need that moving forward." Whalen returned to the lineup and produced his best game yet, catching seven passes for 71 yards and a touchdown against the Cougars. "It just felt good to be back on the field," he said.

It was the first time Whalen had ever been injured in his football career and didn't know what to do, so he turned cheerleader on the sideline. "I just tried to be the biggest leader I could," Whalen said as his elbow was immobilized for a week to allow the joint to settle back into place.

He had no trepidation taking the field again. It was business as usual. "I usually concentrate on the ball," Whalen said. "Catching it is the most important thing. If I take a hit, then so be it."

Cardinal coach Jim Harbaugh, meanwhile, has called Washington the loudest stadium in the Pac-10 because of its bigger capacity than Oregon. Whalen played in both stadiums as a sophomore. "Well, it is definitely a loud environment," Whalen said. "We had the music out at practice simulating that kind of atmosphere. When you line up on the ball you can't hear the snap count. You have to watch the ball. It's fun for the team; it gives you extra juice."

Rain could also be a factor Saturday but Whalen doesn't think it will be much of a problem on the Huskies' turf field. "It will be a challenge for everyone," he said. "The turf gives you more of sure footing. We've handled wet balls in the past so that won't be an issue."

Taylor, who has rushed for over 100 yards in four straight games to become one of only four players in Stanford history to do that, figures he'll just have to hold onto the ball a little bit better. "Hopefully the referees will help keep it dry," he said. "Other than that, just hold on tight." As for his success running the ball? "I'm enjoying it," Taylor said. "I get the feel of the game a lot more. I don't want to be satisfied with that. I can always start better." Ryan Whalen probably would agree.