

Q & A with ... Stanford RB Toby Gerhart

Dave Curtis, Sporting News

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A two-sport star his whole life, Toby Gerhart has already played in a College World Series at Stanford. He'd love to cap his time in Palo Alto by bringing the football Cardinal to their first bowl game since 2001. Gerhart chatted with Sporting News' Dave Curtis recently about his offseason, his career and another of his athletic passions.

Q: How was your summer?

A: It went great. When baseball season ended, I hung out with my family a little bit. My girlfriend lives in Knoxville, Tenn., so I got to see her for a few days. And I went to Arizona to see my brother and did some fishing on Lake Havasu.

Q: How big of a fisherman are you?

A: It's my favorite hobby. I've been on the ocean once, but it's mostly freshwater. I always have a tent, a sleeping bag, two poles and a tackle box in the trunk of my car. We can pull over if we see a little lake and just throw a line in.

Q: How much does fishing relax you?

A: That's the idea. But it usually turns into a competition, especially if I'm with my brother. That's the way everything is with me.

Q: What's been the competition for you since you've been back on campus?

A: Just trying to get stronger. That's the primary emphasis. When I go play baseball, I lose about 15 pounds during the season from not working out that often. So you have to get your legs and your cardio back. That's the biggest weakness. We've also been working on some stuff for my elusiveness. Getting in the open field, making some moves, I want to do more of that. And we're always working on speed stuff and flexibility.

Q: How does the conditioning work? Sprints? Long-distance runs? Do you do more than your teammates?

A: Everything we do is on the field, and almost all of it is in intervals. The most they have me run is probably 300 yards. You work up, a 50, then 100, then 200, then 300, like a ladder.

Q: What do you make of all the highly-touted running backs out west this year?

A: Yeah, the Pac-10 Conference has always been more of a West Coast, air-it-out conference. It seemed like when I was growing up, there were big-name quarterbacks at every school. The last couple of years, there have definitely been some good backs. And it looks like this year the emphasis is going to be who can run the ball. Maybe in a year or two, it will be back to all the passing.

Q: How would you assess your strengths as a back?

A: Patience, vision, and once I see a hole, I get north and south real quick. I always try to finish forward instead of off to the sides. My coaches here take a lot of pride in that I finish runs well. I keep going forward and try to break a tackle.

Q: Why will Stanford make a bowl this year?

A: We just overall, the last couple of years, we've gotten better players. People have gotten better since they've been here. They're stronger and faster. We've looked really good in camp.

Q: People expected big things from you guys after the upset over USC in 2007, but it hasn't really happened? Did that win make you guys a little cocky?

A: I don't think we took it like that. It was definitely a confidence booster. The morale, you know, "Hey, we can play with USC." They were considered the best team in the country at the time. And I think that was the game that got the community involved, the school itself and the student body. I think that might have been the turning point for the culture of the program.

Q: What's your most vivid memory of that night?

A: I wasn't there. I was hurt, watching it on TV. I just remember the replays and the (L.A.) Coliseum, with 90,000 people going dead silent when Mark Bradford caught that ball.

Q: Where were you watching the game?

A: I was at a barbecue for the baseball team. We were all in there watching the game, and then when we scored the final touchdown, I remember people jumping up and down going wild. We went back to campus, and we couldn't drive down the road because of all the people celebrating. Somebody had a huge bonfire on the quad. We were up until 1 a.m., when the team got back, and about 3,000 people stormed the bus. It was amazing.

Q: What's your future hold? Baseball? Football? Both?

A: It all depends on how this year goes. I love football, and I hope to have a future in football. We'll see what happens. I'll just play hard this year, look back and see how my numbers add up. If there's an opportunity in the NFL, I'd love a chance.

Q: Do you have any baseball eligibility left?

A: Yeah. One year. I can play in the spring.

Q: How do you want the Stanford part of your football career to end?

A: I just want to help the team take the next step. That would be the ultimate payoff. The goals for us aren't just a six-win season so we can go to a bowl. We want to compete for the Pac-10 title and the Rose Bowl, or a BCS game. If you get something like that, it would definitely make my career here worthwhile.

Gerhart's goals would make a Cardinal blush

Tom FitzGerald, Chronicle Staff Writer
Wednesday, September 2, 2009

(09-01) 20:14 PDT -- Starting with Saturday's opener at Washington State, Toby Gerhart will try to become only the second Stanford back - Darrin Nelson was the other - to post consecutive 1,000-yard seasons. But 1,000 isn't the number he's pursuing. It's 2,000.

Just as he says six wins and any old bowl berth won't satisfy the team's goals, he's aiming very high after rushing for a school-record 1,136 yards last year.

Asked recently about his objectives, he answered: the Pac-10 championship and a Rose Bowl berth. He reiterated Tuesday that the Cardinal wants a lot more than just their first winning season in eight years. He added, "I'd like to shoot for 2,000 yards (rushing) - that's the goal."

For a historical perspective, former Detroit Lions star Barry Sanders set the Division I (now Bowl Subdivision) record of 2,628 at Oklahoma State in his Heisman Trophy year, 1988. The Pac-10 record is Marcus Allen's 2,427 at USC in 1981.

Smith's recovery: Offensive tackle Allen Smith has made a remarkable recovery after missing most of 2007 and all of last season with a knee injury and then reinjuring the knee in spring drills. "He's getting close," coach Jim Harbaugh said, adding there's a chance he could play Saturday.

A decision on whether he will accompany the team to Pullman will be made later in the week. Harbaugh called him "relentless in his pursuit to come back." Until Smith was hurt early in 2007, NFL scouts were projecting him as a first- or second-round draft pick, Harbaugh said.

Fresh faces: Stanford's depth chart this week makes it just about official that three redshirt freshmen will start. Besides quarterback Andrew Luck, tackle Jonathan Martin and guard David DeCastro will start in the offensive line. True freshman Shayne Skov is listed as the backup behind middle linebacker Clinton Snyder.

Luck's debut: Luck, who will become the first redshirt freshman quarterback to start a Stanford opener since Kyle Matter in 2002, "acts like a guy that's been there three or four years," Gerhart said.

Luck described himself as "very excited and nervous. ... I know our coaches are going to put us and myself in the best possible situation. So that's a nice comfort zone."

He said he hasn't asked his father, former Houston Oilers QB Oliver Luck, what his first start was like at West Virginia. But he added, "I'll ask him tonight."

Harbaugh's first start as a college QB was a memorable one. As a sophomore at Michigan, he led the 14th-ranked Wolverines to a 22-14 upset of top-ranked Miami, the defending national champion.

Harbaugh said he talks to Luck every day, but it's not "hey, let me tell you about 1984, or what I was thinking."

Injury report: Backup outside linebacker Alex Debniaik won't play Saturday and probably will miss the Wake Forest game next week because of a knee injury.

Gerhart has big plans for himself and Stanford in '09

By Elliott Almond

Toby Gerhart has it almost all figured out. Not the million-dollar question about choosing major league baseball or the NFL, but Stanford's two-sport star is in no hurry to make that choice anyway.

He is focused squarely on the football season that begins Saturday at Washington State and whether he can achieve a landmark individual goal on the way to leading Stanford to its first bowl appearance since 2001. Gerhart wants to rush for 2,000 yards — something no Cardinal has come close to doing.

The way Gerhart figures it, the calculus goes something like this: $6.2 \times 25 + 1_{\text{newQB}} \times 12 + 1_{\text{bowlinvitation}} = 2,000$.

In other words, if Gerhart averages about 6 yards a carry and rushes 25 times a game for 13 games he would get close to the magical 2,000 mark.

Some might suggest the equation needs a little wishful thinking sprinkled around the edges. For starters, the Cardinal must get that elusive bowl invitation in order to play 13 games this season. For another, redshirt freshman Andrew Luck has yet to throw a pass in a college game.

Gerhart, who broke Stanford's season rushing record last year with 1,136 yards, considers his calculation "reasonable." He is encouraged by the presence of Luck at quarterback, saying defenses no longer can overload the line to stop the run.

"Now we're going to have bodies for bodies," Gerhart said.

In coach Jim Harbaugh's first two seasons at Stanford, the Cardinal had few offensive options to play. Every opponent knew the run was coming.

"I'm back there 7 yards deep, and I look up and see bodies everywhere," Gerhart said. "Wow, I've got to run through all these guys?"

Yep.

He has taken his share of lumps, suffering a season-ending knee injury in 2007 and a mild concussion in '08.

With the passing game unproven, Stanford again will lean on Gerhart, a 6-foot-1, 235-pound bowling ball. He welcomes the challenge.

"You just do it," said Gerhart, 22. "I don't think about it at all. You can't have fear. I don't think I've been scared of someone across the ball from me."

Actually, the reverse might be true. "He's one big muscle," said girlfriend Meredith Ayres, a Stanford swimmer.

Gerhart overpowered Southern California opponents while playing for his father, Todd, at Norco High. He broke the state career rushing record in 2005, finishing with 9,622 yards.

Todd, also a star running back at Norco, played briefly for the Houston Oilers and Minnesota Vikings. His wife, Lori, was a Norco basketball star.

Their six children have continued the sporting legacy. Garth, a year younger than Toby, plays center for the Arizona State football team. Toby's triplet sisters play college softball: Teegan and Kelsey are at Stanford while Whitley is at Cal Poly-San Luis Obispo. The youngest, Coltin, plays quarterback for his middle school.

Todd didn't coach any of the children until they entered high school, because "I didn't want them to be burned-out on me."

The parents also guarded against getting too caught up in the various traveling baseball and softball teams by taking the brood fishing in between games. Gerhart, who doesn't eat fish, still keeps two poles, a tackle box, a tent and a sleeping bag in his car at Stanford just in case he can sneak away.

But who is he kidding? As soon as the football season ends, baseball begins. Gerhart has followed a long line of Cardinal two-sport standouts, including John Elway, Chad Hutchinson and John Lynch.

"They would much rather compete than practice," Cardinal baseball coach Mark Marquess said of competitors like Gerhart. "Toby would not be happy going to fall baseball. And he'd much prefer playing against USC in baseball than going to spring football practice."

Gerhart, who hit .288 last season, improved in the second half of the season the past three years. He wasn't drafted in June, but Marquess said Gerhart has the potential to play professionally.

So what's it going to be? A baseball career or football career "... "Or whatever happens," Gerhart said. "If a favorable opportunity presents itself, I'm definitely going to pursue it."

If not, Gerhart plans to enroll in a specialized four-year program that combines a law and MBA degree. But he's not looking beyond the football season now. Gerhart is one of 17 returning starters who have brought a renewed vigor to the Cardinal, which finished 5-7 last year.

Almost every mention of Stanford's potential begins with the 2008 second-team All-Pacific-10 Conference running back. And everyone seems to agree on the best first option.

"I'm not going to complain if we're scoring touchdowns and running the ball," Luck said.

It's just the ticket to help Gerhart reach his magic number and get Stanford back to a bowl.

Gerhart transcends football

Stanford back sets higher goals after big season
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PULLMAN – There's no doubt that Ralph Waldo Emerson's wisdom is taught at Stanford. And it sure seems like Toby Gerhart took the class.

After all, the famous transcendental poet and essayist saw self-improvement as a never-ending task.

So does Gerhart.

Already Stanford's offensive go-to-guy – he rushed for 1,136 yards as a junior, third best in the Pac-10 – the Cardinal tailback is still trying to improve.

"The first thing I worked on was my conditioning," Gerhart said of fall camp. "To be able to stay in there on long drives or after a long run. A lot of times last year, five, six, seven plays in a row, or if I break one for a 20-yard gain, I'm out of breath."

Gerhart left Washington State University breathless last year, running for 132 yards and four touchdowns, all in the first half of a 58-0 Stanford rout played in a steady downpour.

But that was so last year. Even Gerhart wants that forgotten.

"I want to be able to run with that north-south power," the 6-foot-2, 235-pound senior said, "but at the same time open it up with a few moves."

Gerhart not only makes an impact on the football field – he's 13th on the school's career rushing list – but on the baseball field as well. A three-year letterman, he hit .288 with seven home runs and 35 RBIs last season.

Playing baseball in the spring hasn't seemed to hurt his fall performances.

"He's one of the best backs in the league," WSU coach Paul Wulff said. "There's no question you have to control him. We're not going to stop him and I don't know if many people will this year."

Gerhart has made it clear his goal this season is to run for 2,000 yards in 13 games – yes, he expects Stanford to play in a bowl for the first time since 2001 – which averages out to about 154 yards a game.

"He's going to get his yards, he's too good a player not to, and they commit to it enough for that to happen," Wulff said.

The Cardinal did in the past, in part, because Stanford coach Jim Harbaugh didn't seem confident in the quarterback position.

Tavita Pritchard – related to WSU tight end Tony Thompson – filled that role last year. He was 4 of 8 for 41 yards and a touchdown against WSU last season, but is now a backup to redshirt freshman Andrew Luck for this one.

Harbaugh has been praising Luck since spring and has made a point to emphasize his passing accuracy. Plus, Harbaugh notes, he has the background to be a successful quarterback, with dad Oliver having played in the NFL.

"I think Andrew understands the nature of the quarterback position," said Harbaugh, a former quarterback. "I think he understands the nature of all eyes being on you."

Not all the eyes. WSU's defense will be focused first on Gerhart.

"We're going to get all 11 guys to the ball," said senior Andy Mattingly, back at linebacker after playing defensive end during last season's loss. "We're going to hit him as hard as we possibly can from play one to the last play of the game.

"We're going to get as many hats on him as we can."

"This is going to be a heck of a challenge for our defense to be stout against the run," Wulff said. "Our key is to hopefully slow (Gerhart) down, hopefully stop him on some key third-down runs, force them to punt and obviously not allow one to break free."

Or as Emerson might put it: "No one can cheat you out of ultimate success but yourself."

Freshman helping clear way for Stanford's Gerhardt

By Elliott Almond, Mercury News

Tailback Toby Gerhart has a vested interest in befriending the Sequoia-like men on the Stanford offensive line.

But after four games, he's still getting to know redshirt freshmen David DeCastro and Jonathan Martin.

"David is quiet," Gerhart said the other day.

And Martin, Gerhart says, remains a mystery.

"He doesn't say much, then there are times right before a game he and Allen Smith are banging heads against each as hard as they can for 10 or 15 times, and I don't know why," Gerhart said of the offensive tackles.

Better not to ask when it comes to a 6-foot-6, 291-pound man whom teammates call "Moose."

Then again, perhaps DeCastro, a 6-5, 310-pound right guard from Bellevue, Wash., has something to do with it.

"He hits people with his head," Martin said of his road roommate. "It has rubbed off on me. It is easier to move people if you put your head into it."

Whatever works.

DeCastro and Martin have mastered the inglorious techniques of trap, chop, side and drive blocking. The two have helped the Cardinal forget the loss of departed graduates Alex Fletcher and Ben Muth.

Instead of rebuilding, the Stanford offensive line has reloaded to direct the Pacific-10 Conference's leading rushing attack heading into a home game Saturday against undefeated UCLA. Stanford ranks 11th in the nation in run offense (233.75 yards per game).

"I never had that much talent when I was that age," senior right tackle Chris Marinelli said. "They've got it: physical, big and fast."

The freshmen will need every ounce of their skill sets Saturday when facing the best defense of their young careers. No one will present a bigger challenge than the Bruins' Brian Price, who has 11 solo tackles and two sacks this season.

Martin, who attended North Hollywood's Harvard-Westlake School, can't wait. He orally committed to UCLA in the summer before his senior year and wore Bruins-theme clothing proudly.

Stanford recruited Martin, who also was accepted at Harvard, once it saw his college test scores. The big man says he would have been the first fourth-generation African-American to attend Harvard.

"Just the allure of playing Division I football at Stanford, I just couldn't do without," he said of his decision.

The one-time violinist got a late start in organized football. He was ruled ineligible for Pop Warner because he weighed 14 pounds more than the 176-pound limit.

"I couldn't get down," Martin lamented. "I tried really hard. I was tall and pretty skinny. I got down to 183 and gave up."

Martin described himself as soft as a freshman at Harvard-Westlake.

"He wasn't coordinated when he first got here," said the school's coach, Vic Eumont.

Martin credits a bigger friend with toughening him up during his sophomore season.

DeCastro could relate to that experience. He went against Steve Schilling, now a tackle at Michigan, in high school.

"He beat me all sophomore year," said DeCastro, who played at powerhouse Bellevue High where he also won the state shot-put title in 2008. "It made me grow up fast."

After Bellevue lost in the state semifinals in DeCastro's senior season, he sat by his locker and cried.

"He wasn't crying because we lost but because he wasn't going to play with those kids again," said then-quarterback Tommy Castle, now at Tufts University. "He wasn't all about winning."

DeCastro, like Martin, just wants to help the offensive stars succeed. Gerhart appreciates the sentiment. And after four games, he knows this much about DeCastro: "You want to run behind a road grader like that," he said.

Gerhart tries his hand at several other Stanford sports

It all started with a vision out of the Stanford Media Relations Department and has turned into an instant classic.

Toby Gerhart: football star, baseball star, synchronized swimming star? According to the promotional video, Gerhart is about to become Stanford's first multi-sport star.

The tongue-in-cheek video, which is over 45,000 hits -- and counting -- on YouTube, was embraced by Gerhart and the synchronized swimming team, and put together by Stanford's Director of Creative Video Bud Anderson.

In essence, the video includes highlights from Gerhart in a football uniform, in his baseball uniform, and in a swimsuit on the decks of Avery Aquatic Center.

He also attempts field hockey, swimming, golf and tennis in his own way.

He takes a pass from a field hockey player and runs for a touchdown, does a cannonball wearing his helmet, hits a golf ball with a baseball bat and swings for the fences in tennis.

The highlight of the video is Gerhart being lifted out of the water by the synchronized swimming team -- and nothing was faked.

Stanford senior Taylor Durand acted as the underwater "board" upon which Gerhart stood. The rest of the team raised Durand, who took the weight of the 235-pound running back, and produced an unforgettable image.

Gerhart, who will attempt to run through the UCLA defense on Saturday at 12:30 p.m., said the entire shoot on the deck of Avery Aquatic Center took about 15 minutes.

"They taught me a few quick things and then we got in the water," said Gerhart. "Between takes I was dying. I had to go to the side of the pool and hang on. They just stayed in the water and listened to directions. It sure makes you appreciate what they do."

Gerhart needed three takes to rise out of the water and stay balanced, which likely accounts for his enthusiastic reaction in the video.

"They all went down together and one girl (Durand) lay flat and I stepped on her thighs and stomach," Gerhart said. "They were incredible."

The filming was done in June, following Stanford's national runner-up finish in synchronized swimming.

The idea for the video came from Director of Media Relations Jim Young, who has formerly served in the same capacity with the Oakland Athletics and Santa Clara University.

"I just wanted to join football and some of the underappreciated sports," Young said. "Toby was great about it."

Anderson is also the brains behind last year's highly-successful and well-received women's basketball promotional videos, which featured players plying their specialties in every day campus life.

Boom Boom Pow | Stanford's Gerhart has powered his way to Pac-10 rushing lead

By Ron Bellamy
The Register-Guard

While the comeback win over Stanford last year was a turning point in Oregon's season, the first of four straight wins culminating in the victory over Oklahoma State in the Holiday Bowl, it was also a turning point for the Cardinal.

A tough road win within their grasp, the Cardinal lost to the Ducks, 35-28, on a touchdown and two-point conversion with six seconds left. A Stanford win would have clinched a bowl berth for the first time since 2001; the loss was followed by two more, against USC and at Cal, and the Cardinal finished 5-7.

"That was heartbreak for us, and a good one for them," Stanford running back Toby Gerhart said. "I don't know how much time was left when they scored, hardly anything, to win the game. ... Going up there and playing at Oregon and being that close, and coming down to the wire and not being able to finish was a little heartbreaking."

Gerhart was literally unable to finish, after suffering a strained right hamstring. "Wrapped it up and tried to get out there and do a little bit, but I really couldn't do much," said Gerhart, limited to 21 yards on eight carries — the only time in a seven-game stretch in which Gerhart neither surpassed 100 yards nor scored a touchdown. "I was basically stuck on the sidelines watching for the most part."

He figures to be in the thick of things — and, no, we're not talking about the length of the grass on the Stanford Stadium field just yet — when Stanford hosts the No. 7 Ducks on Saturday. The 6-foot-1, 235-pound senior leads the Pac-10 in rushing — no Cardinal has done so for an entire season since Charles Shea in 1957 — and ranks seventh nationally, at 124.2 yards per game.

With 29 career rushing touchdowns, Gerhart ranks second all-time at Stanford, behind Tommy Vardell with 37. With 2,645 career rushing yards, Gerhart is third on Stanford's all-time list, and 295 yards away from passing Brad Muster for second.

He's rushed for at least 100 yards in 15 games, one behind Darrin Nelson's school record of 16, and surpassed the century mark in six games this season, five of them Stanford wins.

Now come the Ducks.

"Oregon's probably the best team in college football right now," he said. "Their offense looks unstoppable. And defensively, they're flying around; they're an attacking defense, quick and they're going to be a great challenge. ..."

"This is a huge opportunity for us. Oregon's at the top of the Pac-10, they just beat USC, who's been the elite program in the Pac-10 for it seems like the last decade now. We see this as an opportunity to make a name for ourselves and play with the best team in the Pac-10. That's where we're trying to get, to be in the top tier in the Pac-10, and to be the best you've got to beat the best."

What kind of opportunity knocks for Gerhart after Stanford will be interesting to watch. His preference, clearly, is to play in the NFL, but he's also a talent in baseball as an outfielder, with a .274 average, 16 home runs and 68 RBIs in 141 games over three seasons, and has a season of college baseball eligibility remaining. The past baseball season brought Gerhart to PK Park, and he inspired one of the better lines by UO baseball coach George Horton after Gerhart was tagged out at the plate by catcher Mitch Karraker in a rare Oregon win.

"It's a good thing they have the slide rule," Horton said then, "because Gerhart might have killed our catcher on that play."

Gerhart said he enjoyed playing baseball in Eugene. "That was awesome," he said. "Their field is definitely going to be one of the best. It was still under construction when we were there, but by the time that thing's done, it's going to be one of the best, if not the best stadium in the country. They had a ton of people at the games; it was a fun place to play."

That Gerhart enjoys fun is evident in a video promotion he did for Stanford football before its homecoming game earlier this season. He was told the script called for him to sing with "Fleet Street," a campus a capella group. "And I said, 'Whoa, whoa, whoa, me singing is not going to go very well,'" he said.

"So then they said, 'You don't have to sing, just play along.'"

The final product, in which Gerhart has a mock tryout with the singing group, shows an athlete with a sense humor, and a flair for comedy. (Find it online by searching for "Toby Gerhart — Crooner?")

Speaking of humor, questions about how long the grass at Stanford Stadium will be Saturday — presumably, to slow down the speedy Oregon offense — drew a laugh. "I don't know how long it's going to be," he said. "We'll see when we walk out there Saturday."

But Gerhart did say that the grass has been longer this year than in past seasons. "I think it's something with the grass this year," he said. "Normally, it's cut really short, but this year it's been a little bit longer." Of course, Gerhart might have been trying to have a little fun with the Ducks and their fans. Figure that he won't be kidding around on Saturday.

Stanford's 'Touchdown Toby' may soon be hyped for Heisman

By Elliott Almond, Mercury News

They're calling him "Touchdown Toby," a made-for-the-masses appellation with hulking arms and Heisman hopes.

But instead of posting glossy billboards or distributing action-packed videos, the Stanford sports community is taking to less conventional methods for hyping its two-sport star, such as "Vote for Toby" tweets from coach Jim Harbaugh and others. An amusing video making the rounds on YouTube shows the 235-pound Gerhart trying, among other sports, synchronized swimming.

Perhaps that's appropriate for the slippery tailback who leads the Pacific-10 Conference in rushing. With Gerhart plowing through tacklers like a wheat cutter, Stanford's resurgent football team has entered the national spotlight for the first time in years. And if the Cardinal continues the fun Saturday at Oregon State and beyond, Gerhart might need to start prepping for more predictable Heisman Trophy promotions.

Though certainly a long shot, he has thrust himself into the conversation by gaining a nation-leading 650 yards and scoring eight touchdowns. Gerhart also averages 130 yards per game, which ranks him fourth nationally and first in the Pac-10.

"That's always been a dream," Gerhart said of the Heisman. "But to get to that point, it has to come through the team. We've got to continue to win."

And that won't be easy. Stanford faces consecutive road games in Corvallis, Ore., and Tucson, and a November lineup featuring Oregon, USC, Cal and Notre Dame.

Harbaugh, who finished third in Heisman voting while at Michigan, embraces the recent attention but has tried to keep the focus on a team that's on the verge of its first top-25 ranking since 2001.

"I'm not into billboards," he said. "We're not campaigning for anything, not the top 25, not Heisman Trophies. Blue-collar teams don't need to be in the top 25 right now. If we're meant to be there, we'll have to muscle our way in."

Whatever happens, Gerhart already has joined an elite class of Stanford tailbacks. He is fifth on the school career rushing list (2,301 yards) and is tied for third with Darrin Nelson (1977-81) on the career touchdown list with 24.

Gerhart, a senior academically, could leave the program as the greatest back of all time if he plays next year; he would be eligible because he suffered a season-ending injury in his first game of the 2007 season.

But Gerhart's also an NFL and major league baseball prospect. He would turn professional in either sport given the right opportunity next spring. Then again, California's all-time leading high school rusher out of Norco High said he might also opt to enter a law/MBA program if he doesn't get drafted high enough.

Gil Brandt, longtime player-personnel man for the Dallas Cowboys, sees football in Gerhart's future. He predicts an NFL team will take the back in the second round of the draft next spring. Brandt also debunked the idea that Gerhart runs too upright to succeed in the NFL.

"He's got some trout in him," Brandt said. "He has some wiggle when he runs."

Starting center Chase Beeler marvels at how difficult it is for defenders to bring Gerhart down.

"I see the frustration in their eyes," Beeler said.

Harbaugh didn't know what he had when arriving at Stanford three years ago. Gerhart wasn't around the football team much because of baseball commitments and the injury in 2007.

"I almost went a year without knowing," Harbaugh said.

Now the coach knows. His running back is being compared to Stanford greats such as Glyn Milburn, Brad Muster, Tommy Vardell and Nelson.

"If you want to track him from a quantitative standpoint, he's right up there at the top," said Vardell, once known as "Touchdown Tommy."

Nelson says he and Milburn were more finesse players because they also caught passes. "Tommy, Toby and Brad, they were a different breed," Nelson said. "They're big, tough, hard-nosed guys."

Or as Oregon State coach Mike Riley says of the latest Stanford bruiser he'll see Saturday: "He carries a punch." On the football field, baseball diamond and even in the pool, it seems.

Oregon State-Stanford: Gerhart gaining momentum coming into Beavers game

By Mike Tokito, The Oregonian
October 08, 2009, 6:04PM

Stanford coach Jim Harbaugh's 34,851 Twitter followers got this message Thursday morning: "Water. Teeth. Vote for Toby."

The tweet was part of Harbaugh's daily reminder telling his followers that, every morning, they should drink some water, brush their teeth and go to a Web site to vote for Cardinal running back Toby Gerhart for the Heisman Trophy.

As Stanford (4-1, 3-0 Pacific-10 Conference) has gotten off to a quick start heading into its game Saturday at Oregon State, attention on Gerhart has picked up. The 6-foot-1, 235-pound senior leads the conference in rushing at 650 yards, and his 130-yard per-game average ranks No. 4 among FBS players.

Last season, OSU's Jacquizz Rodgers was the Pacific-10 Conference offensive player of the year and California's Jahvid Best the conference's leading rusher. But Gerhart has emerged as perhaps Pac-10's strongest early Heisman Trophy candidate.

"You just talk about kind of a prototype athletic running back," OSU coach Mike Riley said. "He's got the combination of speed and power, and he's also got a niftiness about him, quick feet, that allows him to get out of tight spaces and make very, very good cuts. ... He's as good an all-around back as we've seen."

Teammates describe Gerhart as a quiet guy who lets his actions speak for themselves, and Gerhart typified that when asked about his name being mentioned in Heisman talk.

"In the back of your mind, you get excited about that kind of stuff, but it's something that I try not to think about," he said. "At this point, it really doesn't matter. We're five games into the season, and I'm just worried about helping the team win."

Gerhart's story would make good Heisman fodder. He's a former high school legend who plays two sports for Stanford, where he is tackling a tough major and nearly had his career cut short by injury.

Gerhart put up mind-boggling rushing numbers for Norco High School, about 40 miles east of Los Angeles, where he rushed for 3,233 yards as a senior and finished 9,662 yards for his career, a state record and the third-best total in the nation.

Gerhart also is a standout outfielder for the Stanford baseball team who helped the Cardinal reach the 2008 College World Series. Throw in his management science and engineering major, and Gerhart is left with a busy college career that leaves others in awe.

Joey August, a Salem native who played with Gerhart on the Cardinal baseball team, said he used to schedule his classes so he carried a heavy load during the fall so he could have a lighter load during baseball season. It's a luxury Gerhart doesn't have.

"I couldn't do it," said August, who is in the New York Mets minor league system. "I definitely marvel at how he juggles his time and does so well on the field as well in the classroom."

Gerhart arrived at Stanford in 2006 and played in all 12 games as a freshman, rushing for 375 yards on 106 carries on a team that finished 1-11, leading to the school firing coach Walt Harris.

In 2007, under Harbaugh, Gerhart came off the bench in the season opener against San Jose State and gained 140 yards on 12 carries. However, he injured his left knee in the game, tearing his posterior cruciate ligament.

Gerhart said he was told that, unlike tears to the anterior cruciate ligaments, from which athletes routinely recover after surgery, surgery to repair torn PCL ligaments are far less certain.

"It was a big question mark whether we should even do surgery because it doesn't always work out, and I'd be right back in the same spot I was prior to the surgery after a year of rehab," he said.

Instead of major reconstructive surgery, Gerhart opted to have an orthoscopic procedure to clean scar tissue out of the knee, then undergo extensive rehabilitation. He was back in time for baseball, and he hit seven home runs and had 21 RBIs in 56 games as he helped the Cardinal reach the College World Series.

Last football season, he came out of the gates quickly, rushing for 147 yards and two touchdowns on 19 carries against Oregon State in the season opener. He finished with 1,136 yards, breaking the school's single-season record.

In some ways, the record shows Stanford's lack of great running back history. The 1,136 yards would rank no higher than the seventh-best season at any other Pac-10 school, and would be 22nd at USC.

But it also showed that Gerhart, who still plays with a large knee brace, had regained the speed that surprises many because it comes from a 235-pound powerhouse.

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"I'm definitely fully confident in my knee now," he said.

Although a senior, Gerhart could play another season for Harbaugh by applying for a medical redshirt because he missed most of the 2007 season. He said this week the decision would depend on how his NFL draft prospects look. He has one season of baseball eligibility, too.

"If it's not looking the way I want, if I'm not evaluated the way I'd like it, I would come back, play my senior year of baseball and another year of football," he said.

For now, Gerhart says he is focused on helping Stanford build on its strong start. The Cardinal haven't had a winning record or been to a bowl game since 2001, and Gerhart, who saw how exciting postseason play can be in baseball, wants his football teammates to have that experience.

"I'm extremely hungry and excited to get to that point," he said.

Two-sport stars learn to excel on more than one field

By Andy Gardiner, USA TODAY

Have season, will play has become the mantra of a trio of major college athletes who are excelling on the football field after starring on the baseball diamond last spring.

- Stanford junior running back Toby Gerhart (6-1, 232 pounds) rushed for a school-record 223 yards last weekend in an upset of No. 8 Oregon and has gained 1,217 yards with 16 touchdowns this season. He is a three-year starter in left field who hit .288 in 55 games for the Cardinal last year. Perhaps befitting of his football background, he led the team with nine hit by pitches.
- Clemson redshirt freshman quarterback Kyle Parker (6-0, 210) has thrown for 1,665 yards and 14 TDs to keep the Tigers in the Atlantic Coast Conference title race. He's started 115 games in two baseball seasons and was second in home runs (12) and RBI (52) in 2009.
- LSU safety Chad Jones (6-3, 222) has 51 tackles, two interceptions and a 93-yard punt return for a touchdown for the No. 11 Tigers. He played a key role in LSU's run to the 2009 College World Series title as a left-handed reliever and spot outfielder.

"It's all about competing. That's what separates these guys from other athletes," said Stanford baseball coach Mark Marquess, a quarterback and first baseman for the Cardinal in the 1960s. "They bring a mental and physical toughness to both sports."

LSU baseball coach Paul Mainieri coached wide receiver/pitcher Jeff Samardzija at Notre Dame and had wide receiver/outfielder Jared Mitchell alongside Jones at LSU.

"You have a lot on your plate to balance but I think competing year-round is a big plus," Mainieri said. "You're always in the spotlight and have to develop the poise to handle the expectations and the pressure."

Marquess hopes this current crop of multi-taskers becomes a trend.

"I'm old school. I think there's too much specialization in sports now," he said. "It's so healthy to have these examples excelling in elite programs, and it could encourage a new wave of high school athletes."

Stanford's star stays grounded

Tom FitzGerald, Chronicle Staff Writer

The ability to see blocks almost before they happen. The power to shrug off tacklers without breaking stride. The mentality to finish plays with a bruising flourish. Speed. Balance. The skill and toughness to block blitzing defenders. The hands to catch passes.

Stanford's Toby Gerhart is the complete package as a running back. He has something else that few other players have: his own personal spotter.

His dad, Todd, who coached him at Norco High School in Riverside County, watches from high in the stands and flashes hand gestures. Toby gave an example of one that, he says, means "as soon as I get through the hole, he wants me to break to the sideline." Another means: Next time, hurdle that tackler.

At halftime in the locker room, he checks his text messages. The eye in the sky will tell him: "Hit it - you're running soft" or "Running too high."

Gerhart obviously gets the message. Rushing for an average of 140 yards per game, the senior is ranked third in the nation. He could break Stanford's season and career records for rushing touchdowns in Saturday's Big Game against Cal.

He could even become Stanford's second Heisman Trophy winner, the other being Jim Plunkett in 1970. (The front-runner appears to be Alabama running back Mark Ingram, who has carried the Tide to a 10-0 record and the No. 2 national ranking.)

As Stanford coach Jim Harbaugh sees it, "The Heisman has evolved to where 50 percent is about preseason hype, 25 percent is about giving it to somebody who's on an undefeated team, and about 25 percent is about actually what the player is accomplishing."

Todd Gerhart wasn't in any Heisman discussions at Cal State Fullerton in the mid-1980s, but he was a fine power back, about the same size as Toby, 6-foot-1, 235 pounds.

Todd admits it's not easy to strike a balance between demanding coach and concerned parent. "I want him to finish runs but not take excessive hits," he said. "I tell him, 'Finish the run lower.' Running backs tend to get thrown around at the end of a play. I'm going, 'Why don't you just go down?'"

That's not in Toby's DNA. Speaking of genes, his mother, Lori, was a basketball star at Norco High, where Todd was the football star. Toby's instincts on the football field, according to Harbaugh, come "from Mom, Dad and God. (Players) come out of the crib with it. Either they have it or they don't."

Toby and his brother Garth, the starting center on the Arizona State football team, were running pass patterns through the kitchen shortly after they learned to walk. The whole family is athletic. Two of Toby's triplet sisters, Teagan and Kelsey, are freshman softball players at Stanford. The third, Whitley, is playing at Cal Poly. The youngest boy, Coltin, 15, is a strong-armed quarterback.

As Toby was rushing for a state-record 9,662 yards in high school, college recruiters learned that in the Gerhart household, Tuesday is Taco Night, Thursday is Spaghetti Night and academics count for a lot.

The standard course load at Stanford is 15 credits. This quarter, Gerhart is taking 21. Then he'll be three courses from his degree in management sciences and engineering. He's taking investment science, integral calculus, introduction to optimization (engineering), prehistoric archaeology and high-technology entrepreneurship.

He'd like to go to a four-year graduate program that would give him both an MBA and a law degree, depending on how pro football works out.

He said that if he doesn't figure to be a high draft pick this coming offseason, he might stay in school and play baseball again. An outfielder, he hit .288 last season but is considered a pro prospect.

So how high would he go in the pro football draft? Dan Shonka, general manager of OurLads Scouting Services, an online operation run by ex-NFL scouts, sees him as an early second-round pick.

C.J. Spiller of Auburn "is the only guy (among senior running backs) we have higher than Gerhart," Shonka said. "My guess is he'd get knocked into the second round by some of the junior running backs who probably will come out."

The man whose Stanford touchdown records Gerhart is about to break, Tommy Vardell, calls him "a phenomenal prospect." Vardell, the ninth pick of the 1992 draft, played eight years in the NFL.

"The question will be what kind of a system he's in and how he can leverage his assets," Vardell said. "If he can get the ball and run downhill, I wouldn't anticipate him being any less productive in the NFL than he is in college."

Perhaps Gerhart has a productive future in football, but he might not match his current variety of production off the field. Besides hitting the books hard, he's a bit of a YouTube star. He willingly played along on a Stanford-produced video that poked fun at his two-sport status and showed him trying - and failing - in other sports, even synchronized swimming. At one point, he was hoisted out of the pool by

several of the swimmers.

The one he was standing on like a plank was senior Taylor Durand, who gave this assessment: "He's very clearly a land mammal."

Grounded, too, according to Meredith Ayres, a member of Stanford's swim team who has dated Gerhart for two years. "He's very laid back," Ayres said, "and that's different from a lot of other people at Stanford. He handles stress very well. He's really good at taking things one at a time, and not projecting into the future."

One friend, however, sees a limit to what Gerhart can accomplish.

His roommate, Wande Olabisi, has a fine retort when the running back muses that he could have been a good linebacker as well. "You'd suck at it," Olabisi says. "You're not mean enough."