

Cardinal stands tall at tight end

By Elliott Almond, Mercury News

Stanford is known for the Tree, a leafy dancing fool of a mascot.

But this season its football team could become known for "the Trees," the redwood-size tight ends that bring an unusual wrinkle to the college playground. Meet 6-foot-6 Zach Ertz, 6-6 Coby Fleener and 6-8 Levine Toilolo, perhaps the best trio of tight ends this side of the NFL.

By integrating big guys into the offense in innovative ways, Stanford quarterback Andrew Luck has more options than a cable television subscriber.

Just ask Virginia Tech, which got burned by Fleener and Ertz in the 40-12 Orange Bowl thrashing in January. Fleener caught six passes for 173 yards and tied an Orange Bowl record with three touchdown catches. Alamo's Ertz caught Luck's other touchdown pass.

After the victory, then-coach Jim Harbaugh said, "People ask us why recruit so many tight ends? That's why."

Stanford (1-0) takes it supercharged power game to Duke on Saturday, one week after tight ends caught two touchdown passes in the Cardinal's 57-3 season-opening victory over San Jose State.

"They're going back to old-school football and revolutionizing the run game," said Washington defensive coordinator Nick Holt, whose Huskies face Stanford on Oct. 22.

Once known as Quarterback U, Stanford built a power running team under Harbaugh over the past four seasons by using two- or three-tight end formations to bull through defenses. His replacement, David Shaw, has no plans to

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detour from the formula that is the centerpiece of some NFL teams.

"We're a gap-scheme team, and it starts with the tight end position, and they know that," Shaw said. "They know they get to play more plays if they block well at the proper time."

While their play-action catches give the secondary headaches, "all three are more interested in becoming great blockers," new tight ends coach Ron Crook said.

The best blocker of the bunch? "That will start a fight," Shaw says of the debate.

Fleener, who returned for his senior season instead of opting to enter the 2011 NFL draft, enjoys a knock-'em-back block as much as a touchdown catch.

"Two different types of joy," he said.

Last year, Ertz, Fleener and Konrad Reuland combined for 65 catches and 833 yards, and caught 13 of Luck's 32 touchdowns. Now the Cardinal has reloaded with the return of Toilolo, who suffered a season-ending MCL and ACL knee injury on his first and only catch of 2010.

Toilolo gives Stanford yet another dimension, although he looks as if he'd be equally at home inside Maples Pavilion. Toilolo focused on football like three of his uncles who played in the NFL -- Dan Saleaumua, Edwin Mulitalo and Joe Salave'a.

"To go up against all the other tight ends that you might see and then line up against something like that on a Saturday, I'd probably be scared," Cardinal safety Michael Thomas said.

Toilolo didn't have the perfect return Saturday, failing to hold onto Luck's quick 2-yard pass into the end zone that San Jose's Brandon Driver leapt to knock away in the first quarter. He also had a pass interference penalty to nullify Luck's 19-yard pass play to Chris Owusu. "I told him, he's 6-8, 260 pounds, he can't hide," Shaw said. "He creates contact with a smaller guy and extends his arms, he's going to get a flag."

Not long ago it seemed guys such as Toilolo were getting whistled for fouls instead of facing flags because of the potential for riches in pro basketball. But Stanford is leading a movement to bring the big body back to the front-line. "They really are a novelty," said Washington's Holt, who grew up in San Jose. "It's hard to find kids that are big enough and powerful enough to block defensive ends but yet athletic enough to win on their routes and in the passing game."

Holt said playing Stanford reminds him of facing a wishbone offense because so few schools use tight ends the way the Cardinal does. Fleener loves the problems his group presents to defenses. "It's kind of like a carousel," he said. "If Levine's in the game you have to watch out for his height. If Zach's in the game you have to watch out for his speed. It's like, 'What are you going to defend?' " The simple answer is there is no answer when facing the new Tight End U.