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Stanford's Tyler Gaffney continues two-sport tradition

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When Stanford two-sport athlete Tyler Gaffney was a blue-chip running back in high school, recruiters from elite college football programs lined up. But most weren't eager to share him with the baseball team.

"They were pretty timid about letting me play baseball," Gaffney said. "But here, they had a history. That was a big reason why I chose this school."

Gaffney also is a big reason Stanford (35-20) begins a best-of-three NCAA Super Regional series against host North Carolina (48-14) on Friday with a College World Series berth on the line. The sophomore left fielder is riding a 20-game hitting streak to go along with a .323 batting average, three home runs, 34 RBIs and seven steals.

This comes after he was the fourth-leading rusher on Stanford's Orange Bowl-winning football team last season.

In fact, Gaffney is just the latest in a long line of dual-sport athletes on The Farm. He's following a well-trodden path of Stanford stars who have worn football cleats and baseball spikes -- including Hall of Famers Ernie Nevers and John Elway, and more recently Toby Gerhart, the 2009 Heisman Trophy runner-up.

"Even our coach did it," Gaffney added.

Mark Marquess, who is in his 35th season running Stanford's program, was a football-baseball player in the late 1960s.

"I wish they all played football because there's a mentality and toughness that they bring to the team," Marquess said. "I think it's unfortunate you don't see

more two-sport athletes. Forget the college level, you don't even see that much in high school anymore."

But Stanford has a tradition of encouraging multisport athletes, including some who went on to notable pro careers such as Brian Johnson, Toi Cook, John Lynch and Chad Hutchinson.

Elway, though, tops the list.

"Why would Elway even want to play baseball?" Marquess asked. "He knew he was going to be an NFL quarterback. But he was a competitor. He would much rather be playing baseball in a game that counts than practicing football."

Lynch is best known for being one of the NFL's most-feared hitters of his day and a nine-time Pro Bowl selection. But at Stanford, he was a better pitcher who signed a baseball contract with the Florida Marlins long before being drafted by the Tampa Bay Buccaneers.

"A lot of times, these guys don't know what their best sport is going to be," Marquess said. "Lynch wouldn't have come back (for his senior year) until Bill Walsh convinced him he could be an NFL safety."

Gaffney only knows that he loves both sports. He already had spent much of his life being compared

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to Gerhart because they hail from Southern California, have power running styles, are outfielders and share those T.G. initials.

He felt comfortable that Stanford, just as it had with Gerhart, would let him wear two uniforms.

"Marquess absolutely was OK with it," Gaffney said. "The bigger issue was (then-football coach Jim) Harbaugh, because they were paying for the scholarship. I needed his approval. But it worked out."

Last fall, he was part of the running back corps that had to replace Gerhart, who had departed for the NFL's Minnesota Vikings. The 6-foot, 210-pound Gaffney gained 255 yards in 60 carries despite being slowed by an ankle injury that kept him out three games.

This spring, he was supposed to suit up with the football squad for six workouts. (That was the limit because of NCAA practice time rules.) But he took a helmet to the knee on his third day and even missed a baseball game.

It also wasn't until later in the season that he finally got comfortable on the baseball diamond.

"Coming from football isn't that easy," he said. "I didn't even feel like a baseball player. In this sport, you have to be relaxed and loose. In football, you're bulky and intense. They're really different."

Marquess added that you need to be a rare athlete even to try both.

"You've got to be a stud, like Tyler," he said. "The football people will always tell you that if you don't go to spring practice, you're not going to start. But a stud will say: 'I'm gonna start anyway because I'm good.' And you better be good in baseball, because you're not giving up a chance to play in football to sit on the bench out here."

Gaffney knows that at some point he will have to pick a sport.

"Hopefully it's later instead of sooner," he said. "When you love both sports, you hate to put one down. But Bo Jackson isn't really around these days."

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