

Tarpley Capitalizes On Stanford Opportunity

By Kyle Bonagura, Patch.com

As A.J. Tarpley was preparing to step onto the football field for the first time at Stanford, the Plymouth native figured he'd be a key contributor on special teams and occasionally rotate in as linebacker.

"Coming into the season you got to prove yourself and Polian [special teams coach] gave me the chance to start on some teams early," Tarpley said.

For the first two and half games that's exactly how it played out. The 2010 Wayzata High School graduate quickly established himself as a special teams standout against San Jose State and Duke and made an impact when he got his limited opportunities on defense.

In the third game, a 37-10 win at Arizona, the No. 4-ranked Cardinal lost star linebacker Shayne Skov to a season-ending knee injury.

All of a sudden, Tarpley's role grew exponentially more important for a team with national-title aspirations. Along with Jarek Lancaster, Tarpley was called upon to step into the starting rotation at inside linebacker.

"Injuries are never a good thing especially to a guy like Shayne, who means so much to our team," Tarpley said. "It's not how I wanted to get on the field, but when you're on the bench and not starting you take the opportunities as they come."

It has been nothing but rave reviews from the coaching staff for Tarpley, a redshirt freshman and former Minnesota Gatorade Football Player of the Year.

"We tell guys that you never know when your opportunity is going to come, but when it does come you have to be ready to take advantage of it and that's what he's doing," said Stanford Defensive Coordinator Derek Mason. "He's maximized every opportunity that he's had in scrimmages, practices and everything else."

Tarpley's introduction to football came when he was a third grader at Plymouth Creek Elementary School. Third graders weren't technically allowed to play football, but Tarpley started practicing with his older brother Matt's team, which was coached by their father, Audie. Matt is now a wide receiver at Ole Miss.

"I was always a linebacker and had fun," Tarpley said. "I kind of went up through (East) middle school and into high school. It was a great experience."

He named fellow Wayzata graduate James Laurinaitis, a linebacker with the St. Louis Rams, as a guy he's looked up to and it now appears he's on a similar career path.

Tarpley admits it can be tough to get recruited in Minnesota, but credited Wayzata High Football Coach Brad Anderson for helping him with the recruiting process.

Tarpley's first scholarship offer came from Central Florida, before Wisconsin, Kansas State and Georgia Tech among others got involved. However, once Tarpley got an offer from Stanford, he knew it was an easy decision.

"I knew it was a great school and was on the upward for football and obviously looking back it was the right decision and I'm glad that I made it," he said.

Oddly enough, the University of Minnesota did not make an offer to Tarpley, but he said it didn't bother him.

"I wasn't really a Gophers fan growing up anyway," he said.

Stanford plays Colorado in a game that will be televised nationally on Versus on Saturday at 6:30 p.m.