

Gaffney getting chance to run in some familiar footsteps

By Rick Eymmer
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Stanford sophomore Tyler Gaffney was a record-setting running back in high school in San Diego. He was also considered a top baseball prospect and wanted to play both sports in college.

A fullback at Cathedral Catholic, Gaffney is a bruiser of a runner, preferring to take on a would-be tackler rather than wait to be hit.

Last year he got to see, up close and personal, a running back with similar traits. Stanford's all-time season-season rushing leader Toby Gerhart, now with the Minnesota Vikings of the NFL, wasn't much for finesse. He normally carried tacklers along with the football as he charged downfield.

Gerhart still owns the California prep state career rushing record, gaining over 9,000 yards while at Norco High. He also came to Stanford as a two-sport star.

Gerhart may own the state, but Gaffney owns San Diego, as in a San Diego Section single-season record 2,866 yards. That was second in the state in 2008 and his 56 touchdowns ranked first in the state.

"No one wants to just take a hit," Gaffney said. "I come from a defensive background in high school and I want to deliver the blow."

Tyler Gaffney shares more than his initials with Toby Gerhart, and Cardinal coach Jim Harbaugh couldn't be happier about it.

Gaffney makes a return trip to South Bend this weekend as No. 16 Stanford (3-0) tries to end its drought at Notre Dame (1-2) on Saturday in a 12:30 p.m. (PDT) kickoff televised by NBC.

Gaffney took a recruiting trip to Notre Dame, and had the Irish in his top three before deciding on Stanford. He could do something Gerhart never could, and that's win in South Bend. No Stanford football team has won at Notre Dame since 1992.

Gerhart was California's Gatorade Player of the Year. Gaffney (6-1, 215) was named Mr. Football by CalHiSports.com in recognition of being the state's top player. The San Diego Hall of Champions, in addition to the San Diego Union-Tribune, named Tyler Gaffney its Offensive Player of the Year.

"Toby taught me a lot," Gaffney said. "The most important thing he taught me was organization and time management. He grilled that into me."

Gaffney said he's been able to juggle football, baseball and his schoolwork. If he takes on time management like he does would-be tacklers, he's already a success.

Gaffney is one of several running backs playing the grand scheme of the Stanford offense. For now he's just fine with sharing.

"You definitely get a feel for the defense the more you carry the ball," he said, "But all of our running backs are a little different."

Gaffney tends to bull his way through the line, while most of the others -- Stepfan Taylor, Usua Amanam and the injured Jeremy Stewart -- tend to use quick, feint feet to gain yardage.

No one running back, and quarterbacks Andrew Luck and Alex Loukas are in the mix here, have outstanding numbers but together they have nearly doubled their opponents' rushing yardage after the first quarter of the season. The Cardinal has rushed for 727 yards, as compared to 614 at this point last year.

Taylor, Luck, Gaffney and Loukas have all accumulated at least 111 yards. Amanam and freshman Anthony Wilkerson will almost certainly join that club in the next few weeks.

"We want to play with class and we want to play with cruelty," Gaffney said. "We want the world to know we come to play. People know we run power and run it over and over."

A disciplinary action, during his high school days, by his father, Gene, had an impact on Gaffney's view of life and led to a belief in truth and morals above all else.

A Cathedral Catholic teacher imposed a grade punishment after Gaffney was caught sharing class work with a classmate. His father, after discussions with all involved, took him off the baseball team for the regular season. He no longer worries about a repetition of the incident. He's playing things on the level, which makes him tougher to handle for a defense. Harbaugh also gave the offensive line props. Stanford has allowed only one sack thus far. "A lot of that starts with Chase Beeler and Andrew Luck," Harbaugh said. "They are so on the screws and dialed into the game plan, orchestrating it like a catcher and pitcher in baseball. That's a great battery. Derek Hall has continued to elevate his game every week. (David) DeCastro, (Andrew) Phillips, (Jonathan) Martin are all playing solid football."