

Stanford's Stephens finds his voice

Tom FitzGerald, Chronicle Staff Writer

As a nose guard, Terrence Stephens doesn't get to be the star. On running plays, his job is mainly to fight off double-teams and keep the offensive linemen occupied so they can't block the linebackers, who then are free to make the tackles.

In another area, Stephens would love to be a star. He can sing up a storm.

He'll have to be content doing the dirty work at the line for No. 6 Stanford as it tries to extend its nation-best 11-game winning streak tonight, against UCLA at 7:30 at Stanford Stadium.

He won't be singing the national anthem, but someday he'd love to. "It's definitely a tough song," he said, "but in front of 50,000-plus people, that would be exciting."

At 16, he tried out for "American Idol," singing "Ain't Too Proud to Beg" by the Temptations and "Over My Head (Cable Car)" by the Fray. He got past the first round before being eliminated. "It was an amazing experience," he said. "I got to be around a lot of talented people."

As a high school junior, he sang the national anthem at the Maryland state wrestling championships at the University of Maryland's Cole Field House. He received an ovation that, he admits, nearly brought him to tears. (He then took his only loss of the season in the finals.)

Two years ago, during a talent show that matched Stanford and Oklahoma players at the Sun Bowl, he sang a Boyz II Men song, backed up by about a dozen of his teammates. Witnesses say his tenor voice was impressive.

He's a junior psychology major and a prospect to follow his pal and predecessor, Sione Fua, into the NFL. Fua starts as a rookie for the Carolina Panthers.

Stephens' other dream is to be a professional singer. "I'd love to pursue that path because it's something I enjoy," he said. "It's definitely a passion."

Stephens, a 6-foot-2 294-pounder, is also passionate about playing on the defensive line. "It's fun," he said. "I'd rather be in the trenches than be back with the linebackers and the secondary. That looks like fun, but the dirty work gives you more satisfaction at the end of the day."

He and fellow starting linemen Matt Masifilo and Ben Gardner have helped the Cardinal (3-0, 1-0 Pac-12) rank first in the nation in rushing defense (36 yards per game) and tackles for loss (10.3 per game). They're tied for fourth in scoring defense (nine points per game).

UCLA (2-2, 1-0) is second in the conference to Oregon in rushing, averaging 214 yards per game behind sturdy tailbacks Johnathan Franklin and Derrick Coleman, so it will be a matchup of strengths.

In three one-sided games so far, Stanford has played mainly in nickel and dime defensive alignments with extra defensive backs and with outside linebackers Chase Thomas and Trent Murphy at the ends. That has meant limited plays for the interior linemen, including reserves David Parry, Josh Mauro and Henry Anderson.

"Has it been frustrating? Of course," Stephens said, "but that's the name of the game. There's so many guys with so much talent in our program. You can't look at that as a negative thing."

Without leading tackler Shayne Skov, out for the season with a knee injury from the Arizona game, Stephens said, "We all have to step up our game 10 times. ... He's a tremendous player and a tremendous friend. We've suffered a huge loss. We're playing the rest of the season for him."