

Recruited Walk-on to Team Captain

Will of A Champion.com

Freshman: Played in 12 games. Cardinals finished 4-8.

Sophomore: Played in 12 and started 7 games, led the team in receptions. Cardinals finished 5-7

Junior: Honorable Mention All-PAC 10, 2nd Team ESPN the Magazine Academic All-America, awarded Stanford Gundelach Award for the top Junior, led the team in receptions. Cardinals finished 8-5.

Senior: Elected captain by teammates. Currently the Cardinals are 8-1 with three games left.

Ryan Whalen is from Alamo, California where he attended Monte Vista High School, only one and a half hours from Stanford University. He didn't play tackle football until he was in high school. While growing-up his favorite sport was Basketball. His father played college basketball for Cal Poly in San Francisco. But his High School junior and senior football seasons were outstanding. He had scholarship offers to play football for Sacramento State, Nevada, Idaho, and the University of California Davis. Ivy League schools, WAC schools, and the academies spoke with him about playing for them. Oregon, UC and Stanford recruited Ryan to walk-on. After investigating his opportunities, Ryan believed the best school for him was Stanford. Head Coach Jim Harbaugh told him that at Stanford he would get a chance to compete, to play, and earn a scholarship. That is exactly what happened.

Coming out of high school Ryan ran a 4.60 forty, which is why he thinks the bigger schools didn't offer him a scholarship, initially. His senior year he had 80 catches for 1200 yards and 14 touchdowns. He was All-state in both basketball and football. He was scholar-athlete of the year. In basketball he earned the East Bay Athletic League Player of the Year award.

Will of A Champion: Why did you walk-on to Stanford?

Ryan: Growing up in the Bay area I've always been a Stanford fan. I was never a Cal fan even though I was from the east bay. Even though I had extended family that attended Cal, I was never a fan. Stanford was close enough but not too close to home. The athletics and academics were big for me because I always worked hard in the classroom. If I wasn't going to play in the PAC 10 then I was going to go to an Ivy League school. My parents instilled in me the importance of education at a young age. I know I won't play football forever, so I want to play while I can, as well as obtain an excellent education. Another reason I chose Stanford was playing PAC 10 football in a new era with Stanford. Stanford was coming off some tough seasons but Coach Harbaugh and his staff seemed like they were turning it around and into a good opportunity.

The culture here is great. The guys really bond and I could see that when I visited. Coming here was the right thing and I've never questioned it, I trusted God with it.

Will of A Champion: What has been one of your greatest challenges as a walk-on?

Ryan: Honestly, nothing really stands out in regards to walking-on with our team. The challenge was more when I first came out of high school and questioned why they didn't offer me a scholarship. I was better than other guys. Coming in I kind of had a chip on my shoulder but I was fortunate and God blessed me and I earned a scholarship in training camp my freshman year. Since then things haven't been real unique. My challenges are the same everyone else is going through. I really don't think I've experienced more because I was a walk-on or anything like that.

Will of A Champion: Often walk-ons will share that a challenge they face is getting an opportunity to prove what they can do. But you didn't face that?

Ryan: I expected that I would have to start at the bottom and work my way up. But our coaching staff did a good job of letting guys demonstrate their ability. The coaches stuck with the philosophy that the best guys will play. There were a couple of injuries my freshman year so I got thrown into the mix really fast and I performed well. That is how it worked out.

Will of A Champion: So you earned your scholarship the fall of your freshman year?

Ryan: Yes. There was a rule, it may only be in our league, but in order for me to play as a freshman I had to be on scholarship because I was a recruited walk-on. There is something about if you're a recruited walk-on you can't play your freshman year, but since I was going to play I got the scholarship.

Will of A Champion: When you first arrived as a walk-on, do you think you had to be more mentally tough compared to a scholarship player?

Ryan: Yes, I think so. The off-season before I came in I knew I had to be in the best possible shape I could be; which is why I had a little chip on my shoulder, because I knew I had to prove myself. I was going to make every play I could, catch every ball, block and do all the little things other guys wouldn't do. So I think I felt some pressure. I don't know how much it differed from a guy coming in with a scholarship. I think it helped me in the long run and helped me come in with a better attitude. Getting in shape for that first year propelled me forward.

WillofaChampion: Did you come before or stay after practice to do extra work?

Ryan: I was doing extra after practice. I have always been a guy that does extra; catching footballs with the machine after practice, running extra routes I needed to work-on, or spending more time in the weight room. That was something I started before I got here, I did that when I got here, and have continued through-out my career.

WillofaChampion: Has your work ethic been an example for others?

Ryan: I was very honored to be elected by my team to be captain this year. I think that is a reflection of what my peers see in me. I have tried to take on that role of leadership as much as I can. I try to lead by example. Not that I'm real quiet, but I am not the most vocal guy. I try to help my teammates and be the best example I can be. Being a leader is part of my role with the team.

WillofaChampion: I generally ask how your teammates received you when you first arrived, but it sounds like there is a special team bond at Stanford.

Ryan: Yes. I didn't really know anyone when I first came because most of the freshman had been here over the summer. So there was an adjustment for me, but I expected it. If you perform on the field and do it in a respectful manner, your teammates will respect you no matter where you go. I think the best thing I did was perform on the field and guys did respect me. Guys were joking with me telling me they were going to take my scholarship and give it to another guy. The guys really welcomed me with open arms.

WillofaChampion: Similarly, it sounds like your coaches received you well?

Ryan: I would say the same thing with them. There was obviously a lot to learn at first with the play book and all. But effort and doing the little things, working hard and performing created a real positive first impression. They respected that and gave me a chance to play. If you perform you're going to play.

WillofaChampion: What was it like the day you were told you were getting a scholarship?

Ryan: I was ecstatic of course. But for some reason, I don't know why, it felt like a stepping stone. That it was supposed to happen next. I was really excited for my parents. Telling them they wouldn't have to pay for any of my school for four or five years, however long I am here. That was pretty awesome. Looking back, I probably appreciate it more now because I can see how God's hand had been on my career, guiding me down this path, the plan he had for me but at that time I probably didn't see it as much. I was looking at what was next, what is my next goal. I think I can appreciate it more now.

WillofaChampion: Do any of your individual achievements such as: earning the scholarship, starting as a sophomore, being elected captain as a senior, stand out more than another for you?

Ryan: The most special thing is when we're winning, going to our first bowl game in seven or eight years last year, finishing 8 – 5. That is a good year, not great. Now, with three games left and the opportunity to do something special, this is the exciting part. It just keeps getting better, working with my teammates to win. My last year and the big wins we have had, those are the things I will remember.

WillofaChampion: What impact has following your dream and earning it had on your life?

Ryan: A huge impact. I can't imagine if I had gone somewhere else. Everything is coming together. That isn't to say there aren't challenges or trials, but time will tell how the opportunities here will set me up for later in life. The relationships with players and coaches, the friends I have made I will have later in life, the education I am obtaining, the community we have here, the church, those things will be with me forever.

WillofaChampion: Other athletes reading this article may be considering walking-on, what advice do you have for them?

Ryan: I think the first thing is to go where your heart takes you. You want to be at the school you attend. You don't want to go somewhere for the wrong reasons. Like if someone else wants you to go there or whatever it may be. I encourage them, for me it has been an awesome experience. Other walk-ons on our team would say the same thing. But know that it is like anything else in life, be prepared for challenges and you have to work hard. If you're a walk-on you may have to work harder but don't let that discourage you. I've been fortunate to be part of something really great here.

Ryan is majoring in Science, Technology and Society