

Punt-returner Terrell still looking for big break

Tom FitzGerald, Chronicle Staff Writer

Returning punts can be a daunting job. Unlike a kickoff returner, the punt returner stands a long way from his blockers when the ball is kicked. It's much harder to go the distance on a punt.

Then there's the critical choice: Fair catch or not, with opponents pouring at you with malice in their hearts. If you don't signal for a fair catch, you're daring the tacklers to belt you at top speed.

Drew Terrell loves the job, even though he's still looking for his first touchdown on a punt return in his three years at Stanford. For that matter, he's still looking for his first touchdown, period.

"It's something I've done since I played Pop Warner," he said. "I've always enjoyed it. It's an opportunity to show your athletic ability. You're the only one back there."

The 5-foot-11, 181-pound junior is averaging 13.9 yards per return, fourth best in the Pac-12 and 15th nationally. That's a fine number for somebody who has yet to break one for a touchdown. Stanford's opponents, meanwhile, are averaging 4.0 yards.

The goal is to average at least a first down per return, according to special-teams coach Brian Polian. Terrell "has developed very well from midseason last year through the bowl game to where we're at now," Polian said.

"We've got to get over the hump where we can make the last guy miss or we can finish the last block, so we can get a home run instead of the 35-yarder. ... Sometimes there's a little bit of luck involved on the last guy."

Terrell has gone nearly the distance a few times in his college career. He had a 42-yarder against San Jose State this year and had returns of 27 (Arizona), 34 (Arizona State), 32 (Cal) and 25 (Virginia Tech) last season.

"We're getting close to breaking one," he said. "It's coming."

He has caught three passes this season as a backup wide receiver, but head coach David Shaw said this week that he has earned more playing time. It's not because he threw the pass on which quarterback Andrew Luck made a marvelous catch against UCLA.

"He blocks well, and that's where it started with Drew," Shaw said. "When a (wide receiver) goes out there and blocks, then you feed him the ball. You give him a chance to make some catches. He's got great hands and quick feet."

Terrell took a big hit on a return Saturday night, and Shaw said he wasn't sure he'd be able to play this week against Colorado. Terrell said Tuesday he felt fine. "I'll be in the lineup on Saturday," he said.

He said he has been urging the coaches for three years to let him throw the ball even though he hadn't done it in a game on any level. The Cardinal practiced the play once Wednesday and once Thursday.

"It's tough for a guy to go in the game and throw a ball when you only practice it twice in a week," Luck said.

Terrell initially thought he had thrown it too far. "I had seen the safety over the top, and I didn't want to lollipop it and leave Andrew out to dry," he said. "Fortunately, he was able to make a play."

While waiting for the officials' review of the play, he said, "I told him it was a great play, and I was trying to get him the Heisman. That was my excuse for leaving it out there a little too far - so he could make the one-hand grab."