

## After sitting a year, Toilolo eager to get dirty

Tom FitzGerald, Chronicle Staff Writer

The high hopes that Stanford's coaches and players had for tight end Levine Toilolo last season were ratcheted even higher when the redshirt freshman grabbed a pass for a 27-yard gain a few minutes into the opening game.

Those hopes were dashed shortly thereafter. A Sacramento State defender hit him low - which is where you tend to hit somebody who's 6-foot-8 - and two of Toilolo's knee ligaments were torn.

"He came in lower than I expected," Toilolo said. "I tried to lower my shoulder, but that's football. I felt my knee was unstable. I was hoping it wasn't serious, but the inside of my knee was on fire."

Eventually he had surgery and was out for the season. As the other Cardinal players enjoyed a 12-1 season, Toilolo hobbled on crutches and celebrated from the periphery.

Stanford opens a new season Saturday against San Jose State, and Toilolo can't wait. He has bulked up from 250 pounds to 258, and coach David Shaw said his blocking has improved as he's been able to get low, not an easy thing for a giant to do.

Toilolo and his fellow tight ends, Zach Ertz and Coby Fleener, can catch the ball. All four of Andrew Luck's touchdown passes in the Orange Bowl went to tight ends, three to Fleener.

Their main job, though, is to block. Stanford has had excellent blocking tight ends the past few years in Jim Dray and Konrad Reuland. They're both in the NFL, so somebody else will have to put defenders on their backs.

"All our tight ends demand a lot from themselves, blocking-wise," Toilolo said.

As in the past under coach Jim Harbaugh, all three will sometimes be in the game at the same time. Sometimes they'll line up wide. If the wide receivers don't produce the way Shaw wants, he says he'll have no compunction about dialing up more passes to the tight ends.

Toilolo will wear braces on both knees. "I don't care if it takes a tenth off his 40 time," Shaw said. "He's not here because he runs a 10.4 100 meters. He's here because he's a big target and a physical blocker."

Toilolo was a tight end and defensive end at Helix High in La Mesa, the school that produced Reggie Bush and Alex Smith (not to mention Bill Walton and the late Dennis Hopper). Three of Toilolo's uncles were NFL linemen, Dan Saleaumua, Edwin Mulitalo and Joe Salave'a (now defensive line coach at the University of Arizona).

The Stanford coaches considered putting Toilolo on defense, but the notion of using his imposing presence on pass patterns and blocking schemes was too enticing.

"It's pretty rare to see a guy that size who can move the way he does," wide receiver Griff Whalen said. "With his physical skills, it's kind of a mismatch no matter who's on him. It will be somebody who's a little too slow or a little too small."