

Stepfan Taylor becomes Stanford's top running back

Tom FitzGerald, Chronicle Staff Writer

Stanford still has a committee at tailback, but Stepfan Taylor apparently has ascended to the chairmanship, that is, the Toby Gerhart seat.

Don't expect Taylor to even grin about it, much less crow about it. When it comes to the "humble hearts" that coach Jim Harbaugh frequently refers to in describing his players, Taylor's heart is among the humblest.

When Stanford and Oregon meet Saturday in a duel of unbeaten, the Ducks will have one of the flashiest tailbacks in the country in LaMichael James, a constant threat to go the distance. Meanwhile Taylor's longest carry this year is 17 yards.

Stanford's two longest runs from scrimmage have come not from tailbacks but from quarterbacks, Andrew Luck's 52-yarder against Wake Forest and backup Alex Loukas' 48-yarder against Sacramento State.

"It doesn't bother me," Taylor said. "I'd like to get some long runs in, but that's fine."

Even when he appeared to solidify his starting role by rushing for 108 yards on 28 carries against Notre Dame last week, his longest run was just 9 yards. While he's waiting for his chance to break away, his contributions come in less spectacular form.

"He had a whale of a game against Notre Dame," Harbaugh said. "It was yards after contact and pass protection. There were plays where he blocked two guys."

On a second-quarter play, Harbaugh said, Taylor "was on the ground, got up and blocked a guy who was about to tackle" Luck.

According to Luck, Taylor "does all the little things that no one realizes until they turn the film on and say, 'Wow, he made this play go by getting the chip on the defensive end and coming back around and picking a linebacker off who was blitzing.' He's smart and he works his butt off."

To Taylor, that's just part of his role in Harbaugh's "smash-mouth football." He sees protecting Luck as a key role. "The main thing is to keep him healthy," he said.

Picking up blitzing linebackers isn't easy when you're 5-foot-11 and 208 pounds. "You've got to recognize that they're 250 and coming at you full speed - and chop their legs out," he said.

Talking to him, you marvel that he can find it in his gentle soul to chop anybody's legs out, much less smash a mouth. He's a yes-sir, no-sir kind of guy.

Like James and both starting quarterbacks in this game, Luck and Oregon sophomore Darron Thomas, he's from Texas. He resisted the temptation to stay closer to home - Texas, TCU and Missouri were among the many schools recruiting him.

Last year as Gerhart's understudy, he rushed for 303 yards and a 5.4-yard average. This year he has rushed for a 4.5 average and will continue to share the load with Tyler Gaffney, whose status is in doubt this week because of an undisclosed injury; Usua Amanam and Jeremy Stewart, who recently returned to practice after recovering from an ankle injury.

Briefly: Wide receiver Ryan Whalen, who sustained a reported elbow dislocation against Wake Forest, returned to practice Wednesday, Harbaugh said. ... Safety Michael Thomas, who injured an ankle at Notre Dame, is also practicing. ... The Cardinal are expected to practice today amid very loud music, to simulate the noise level at Autzen Stadium. During such practices, Luck said, "I get a headache because I'm constantly yelling."