

Howell Hitting and Running

By [Paul Putignano](#), The Signal Newspaper

When Stanford senior safety Delano Howell walks onto the Dan Elliott Practice Field wearing a yellow non-contact practice jersey, conventional thinking says it would serve as a warning for teammates to avoid hitting him hard.

With Howell, it's a little different.

"We actually put a yellow jersey on him in practice to remind him that he's too hurt to create contact," says Cardinal first-year head coach David Shaw. "Just to remind him to back off, because there's only one way he knows how to play — full speed, face first."

And that style could lead to big things for Howell, Shaw adds.

The 5-foot-11-inch former Hart High star is entering his final season at Stanford, and he appears poised to not only build on last year's breakout performance but take his game to a new level of national recognition and maybe even the pros.

"The goal has always been the NFL, but at the moment, first things first — the Pac-12 championship," Howell says.

Stanford is ranked No. 6 in the country in the USA Today preseason coaches' poll, and the Cardinal is projected to finish second in the Pac-12 North division by the media.

Howell's continued evolution could help make those predictions a reality.

Howell burst onto the scene as a junior last year after making the switch from receiver to the secondary. It was a natural fit for the hard-hitting defensive back, who finished the season with 60 tackles and five interceptions.

One of his best games came in a 37-14 win over Notre Dame on Sept. 25, 2010. Howell led the team with 12 tackles.

Twice he recorded a fumble recovery and an interception, and in the Orange Bowl on Jan. 3, Howell recorded four tackles, including one for loss. He also had an interception and a sack in a 40-12 rout of Virginia Tech, the Cardinal's first bowl victory in 14 years.

There's no hiding Howell's abilities any longer.

According to Stanford teammate Andrew Luck, however, his emergence took place much earlier in his career.

In fact, it occurred three years ago in a game against UCLA.

Howell was playing the wingback, focusing primarily on blocking. On one play, he was asked to block the strongside linebacker. Howell bee-lined straight for the middle linebacker, lifted him and drove him back down.

"We were watching the film the next day, and I'm like, 'Oh my God,'" Luck says. "He's like a little 190-pound freshman, just going in there and throwing hits. I think the legend, at least in my mind, his legend to me was born that day."

Howell laughs when reminded of the play. After all, it's his job to hit and be physical.

He's always been competitive, he says, something he attributes to growing up in a high-intensity home with his two brothers and one sister. Losing wasn't an option.

"I've really had some good leaders, some good role models to follow," Howell says. "I definitely lived in a very competitive household. When my brothers come home, to this day, we play any type of game and it's very competitive. We are almost not family at that point. It's definitely in the family."

He carries that same competitive nature onto the field each and every day. He has to, given the constant influx of strong young talent.

Because of his work ethic and constant physicality, he's admired by teammates and feared by opponents.

"Thankfully I'm not allowed to be touched during much, so that's nice. Especially from Delano. He's one of the toughest people I know," Luck says. "He's fearless. We'll have long conversations where he'll come up to me and start talking about how he would tackle me, and how he would hit me. He's one of those guys that loves to tackle, loves to hit. I think that's awesome. Football needs those types of guys. And he does it the right way."

It's that style of play that Shaw believes could make Howell one of the best players in the country this year and eventually land him a job in the NFL.

But Howell had that skill set last season.

STANFORD FOOTBALL CLIPS August 9, 2011

This year, he's added a key tweak that not only keeps him motivated, but will pay dividends to his team: more maturity.

"The biggest thing that I learned last year, that we a team learned last year, is the concept of trusting each other and doing our own job," he says. "Work as a unit, and the sky is the limit."

The communication with fellow defensive backs Michael Thomas, Johnson Bademosi and Barry Browning is essential, Howell says.

He knows they will do their job, and he can focus on his.

So when the press predicts Stanford will finish second in the North Division behind two-time defending conference champion Oregon, it only serves to fire him and the Cardinal's secondary up.

"The goal is not to be the best team in your conference, but the best in the country," he says. "You, we, always strive to reach that goal. You can always get better, no matter what, always shooting for precision, always practicing hard. You treat every practice like a tryout, an NFL tryout."

For Howell, the NFL may not be far off.

But first things first.

Stanford opens its season Sept. 3 at home against San Jose State.

Big things can be expected from Howell.

Especially the hits.