

Stanford WR Chris Owusu healthy, motivated

Tom FitzGerald, Chronicle Staff Writer

Sweating profusely and a little winded after a series of post-practice sprints, Chris Owusu vowed he's "back to 100 percent." If he can stay that way, there's no other Stanford player who can jerk fans from their seats the way he can.

Owusu is the Cardinal's resident deep threat and kickoff returner extraordinaire, and also the team's only wide receiver with extensive experience. Andrew Luck has many weapons when he drops back to pass, but only Owusu provides the wow factor.

The 6-foot-2, 198-pound senior has one more year to impress the pro scouts not only with his speed and acrobatic catches but also with his resilience. He missed the first two games last year, sustained a concussion against Oregon that caused him to miss two more games, then injured a knee against Arizona and missed two more games.

According to coach David Shaw, Owusu wasn't fully healthy for a single game of the seven he played in 2010. "I'd say at best he was 80 percent," Shaw said, "and when he was 80 percent, he was still the fastest guy on the field."

For the past several months, every time Shaw has seen Owusu, he says, "Every game."

That's what Stanford needs him to play. "We're a different team when he plays," Shaw said.

Owusu insists he hasn't gotten sick of Shaw's mantra. "Everything he says, I take to heart," Owusu said.

There were times during the 2009 season when opposing teams would have been better off hammering the ball out of bounds on kickoffs than booting it deep to Owusu. He returned three for touchdowns - 94 yards against San Jose State, 91 against Washington and 85 against Washington State. He would have broken the Pac-10 record of three kickoff TDs in a season except that he tripped on a 77-yarder against Oregon.

Another one he'd like to have back was a 52-yarder against Arizona. "I should have stayed to the left with my blockers," he said.

Last year, Owusu had an 88-yarder against USC, and it took an illegal horse-collar tackle to bring him down. But he was limited to 19 returns by the injuries and by the coaches' fears for his health.

This year, Shaw says he'll use Owusu judiciously on returns. "It's like trying to hold the horses back," he said. "He loves getting the opening kickoff. He loves trying to set the tone of the game."

Shaw wants to keep him in one piece for the offense, with good reason. Two years ago he caught 37 passes, averaged 18.4 yards per catch and scored five touchdowns. With just three starts last year, he caught 25 passes, three for TDs.

"If he stays healthy, he'll be better than he was two years ago," Shaw said. "He's that way right now. He's fast, explosive, physical and has a great understanding of the system. He's worked on his timing with Luck all summer."

Last season was frustrating, Owusu admitted, "but I learned to take it step by step. I learned a lot about perseverance, the things you see in a lot of movies. You control what you can control. It's definitely going to help me this season."

With Owusu, every beat is up. "He's such a positive human being," Shaw said. "He wakes up every morning with a smile on his face, and he's ready to go."

Owusu recently tweeted that he enjoys going to the dentist. On another tweet, he forwarded some advice that he obviously takes to heart: "Go to sleep with a dream and wake up with a purpose."

Captains picked: Luck and free safety Michael Thomas were elected co-captains by their teammates. The two players, who competed against each other as high school quarterbacks in the Houston area, are among six probable Stanford starters from Texas.