

New fullback making his mark

By Jon Wilner, Mercury News

Stanford fullback Ryan Hewitt's goal seemed modest, until you consider the shoes he was filling.

"I wanted to keep the level of play at the position set; I didn't want there to be a drop-off," Hewitt said as the No. 6 Cardinal prepared for Saturday's date with UCLA.

Hewitt is not in Owen Marecic's class as a blocker, and he's not starting on both sides of the ball. Nor is he "the perfectly engineered football player," as former coach Jim Harbaugh once called Marecic.

But Hewitt, a sophomore, is making significant contributions in his own right with as many receptions in three games (nine) as Marecic had all of last year.

He also has a touchdown and is averaging 11.7 yards per catch -- an impressive figure for a fullback.

"He's different than Owen, so we're doing different things with him," Stanford coach David Shaw said. "By trade he's a tight end; he came to us with a different skill set."

In that sense, Hewitt is representative of Stanford's evolution under Shaw. While the basics of Harbaugh's playbooks remain the same, the coaching staff has tweaked the offensive and defensive schemes to suit this year's personnel.

No one has asked Hewitt to be Marecic. Instead, the Cardinal has redefined the fullback position to make the most of Hewitt's skills as a receiver. Only wideout Chris Owusu has more receptions this season.

"Ryan is playing fullback, but we can also flex him out (wide) or line him up at tight end,"

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Shaw said. "We call him Mr. Versatility."

Hewitt isn't the only first-year starter making an impact:

Junior nose tackle Terrence Stephens has played well in place of run-stopper extraordinaire Sione Fua.

Senior Max Bergen has seamlessly replaced Marecic at one of the inside linebacker positions.

Redshirt freshman David Yankey has held down the left guard spot he won in training camp after projected starter Kevin Danser suffered a dehydration-related setback.

This, after Yankey entered the season competing for playing time at right tackle.

"He's not just being serviceable," Shaw said. "He's looking really good."