

Stanford's tunnel vision builds better union

Tom FitzGerald, Chronicle Staff Writer

In the final minutes of Saturday's 65-21 demolition of Washington, a union meeting took place on the Stanford sideline.

For the past few years, the offensive line has called itself the Tunnel Workers Union, a name conceived by former tackle Chris Marinelli, whose father worked on Boston's Big Dig.

The Tunnel Workers joined with the rest of the offense to celebrate the team's school-record 446 yards rushing and performed the line's daily chant: "Woo-woo! Union!"

Stanford's O-line has allowed the fewest sacks (two) in the nation and done enough tunnel digging to help the Cardinal average 219.4 rushing yards, 17th in the nation. The linemen hope to maintain that excellence at USC on Saturday.

In Southern California, according to left tackle Jonathan Martin of North Hollywood, "Everyone thinks we're just a bunch of nerds up here."

Stanford's crunching ground game would seem to belie that notion. For the past two years, the Cardinal frequently have used seven offensive linemen at the same time and not solely in short-yardage situations.

The seven-linemen grouping is called the Hulk. Mike Bloomgren, the first-year running-game coordinator and offensive-line coach, has expanded on it with various formations named after references to the Incredible Hulk comic books and the old TV show, like the "Bruce Banner."

Though many other college teams are running spread formations, Stanford loves to pack things tight, unleash its so-called "power" run and dare the opposition to stop it.

"We're old school," backup tackle Tyler Mabry said. "We're bringing football back 60 years. It's awesome. We love it."

Martin and right guard David DeCastro, both redshirt juniors, were first-team all-conference selections last year, and both figure to be high draft picks if they turn pro after this season. But who are the rest of the guys in the Hulk? Here's a quick look:

Center Sam Schwartzstein, junior: He beat out Khalil Wilkes for the job of replacing the graduated Chase Beeler and was "off the charts," according to head coach David Shaw, in the opener against San Jose State. "Our offense doesn't work if the center doesn't play well," Shaw said. Bloomgren added, "He's driving the ship."

Left guard David Yankey, redshirt freshman: While watching tape, Bloomgren said, he sometimes thinks he's watching No. 52 (DeCastro) when it's really Yankey (54). "I can't imagine how good he can be years from now because he's playing at a high level now," Bloomgren said.

Right tackle Cameron Fleming, redshirt freshman: Martin calls him "a monster in the weight room." A Texan like Schwartzstein, he had to develop the conditioning to play a full game, Bloomgren said. "He's past all that now."

Backup guard Kevin Danser, sophomore: The former Bellarmine High lineman plays both the right and left sides. His block after pulling from left guard helped spring Stepfan Taylor on his 70-yard run Saturday. Danser was ticketed for the starting lineup until a severe case of dehydration set him back.

Backup tackle Mabry, senior: The fifth-year student has waited a long time for his day in the sun. After playing in extra-linemen situations last season, he got in the game for more than 30 plays against Washington and enjoyed the rushing record immensely. "It's by no means our end goal," he said, "but after the game, it was definitely something to celebrate."