

Taylor: Big key to Stanford's success

Thayer Evans, Fox Sports

The recruiting letters for Steffan Taylor poured into Mansfield (Texas) High School by the dozens.

They were first delivered to then-guidance counselor Shermette Doctor, who passed them on to the intellectual star running back. They came from schools such as Notre Dame, Texas A&M and Nebraska.

But one day a letter arrived from Stanford. Although Doctor hadn't sent a student to the academically prestigious university, the envelope gave her a feeling unlike any other she had ever experienced.

"I just knew that's where Steffan needed to go," Doctor says. "I knew it would provide a challenging education and curriculum for him and that he would be successful there."

When Taylor picked up his letters from Doctor, she had placed the one from Stanford atop the pile and recommended he look at the university. Just receiving a letter from Stanford was a significant accomplishment for Taylor and his family.

His academically strict mother, who raised him, attended beauty school and his father is a truck driver. The most prestigious school anyone in Taylor's family (a cousin) had attended was the University of North Texas.

Yet Taylor wasn't initially interested in Stanford because he thought it was an Ivy League school. But after talking with his mother about the university and researching it online, he visited the campus for a football camp before his senior year and was overwhelmed.

Doctor had been right about Stanford. And three years later, she still is, as Taylor has blossomed both on and off the field for the fourth-ranked Cardinal (9-0, 7-0 Pac-12).

With his team's BCS title hopes on the line entering Saturday's home game against No. 7 Oregon (8-1, 6-0), the 5-foot-11, 208-pound junior has rushed for 891 yards and eight touchdowns this season. And as a science, technology and society major, he carries about a 3.0 grade-point average.

And, though overshadowed by quarterback Andrew Luck, a fellow Texan and the favorite for the Heisman Trophy, the fun-loving Taylor is invaluable to Stanford. His coaches and teammates gush that he does everything right — not only running the ball but also as a receiver and blocker.

"He's one of the most underrated guys in the nation," first-year Stanford coach David Shaw says. "That's until they see him on film, and then they rave about him just because he makes difficult runs and gets tough yards. He doesn't back down. He doesn't get tired. He just goes."

Growing up in Mansfield, a bedroom community about 20 miles southeast of Fort Worth, Taylor, whose first name is pronounced Ste-FON, also had to be nonstop in the classroom because his mother, Skyla, made sure his grades took priority over athletics.

Taylor started playing football in third grade, but he weighed so much that first season he was permitted to play only offensive and defensive line. The next season, he played running back — and he's been doing so ever since.

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Cardinal

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But the numbers Taylor's mother cared about weren't the ones he racked up on the football field. Her focus was his GPA.

"My mom wouldn't let me slack off," Taylor says. "She was hard on me."

By the time Jeff Hulme took the head-coaching job at Mansfield High School in February 2008, Taylor was coming off a junior season in which he rushed for 1,586 yards and 21 touchdowns on 187 carries in a spread offense. But Hulme was giddy at the prospect of Taylor playing in his rush-heavy pro-style, I-formation offense.

"This kid is really going to like what I do if he's truly a tailback," Hulme recalls thinking.

Although Taylor hadn't met Hulme until he became Mansfield High's coach, Taylor questioned nothing his new coach asked him to do. Less than a week after meeting Taylor, Hulme asked his star to organize and lead the team's weight-lifting session after school for an hour every day.

Taylor's response was what Hulme learned to always expect from his star: "Yes, sir."

Early on, Taylor met with his new coach and explained his plans to attend Stanford.

"I want that degree," Hulme recalls Taylor saying.

Hulme was taken aback by a teen who was already preparing for life after football.

"Here's a teenager who was looking 10, 15, 20, 30 years into the future and saying, 'Where's a Stanford degree going to take me?'" Hulme says. "That just shows the level of maturity he has."

After Hulme found out about Taylor's interest in Stanford, he showed the standout tape of his previous team's victory against Luck in the 2007 Texas playoffs that had ended the star quarterback's high school career. Hulme did so to help explain his run-based offense to Taylor.

"This is what we're going to do to people," Hulme recalls telling Taylor.

Taylor got further confirmation the summer before his senior season, when he met Luck's high school coach, Eliot Allen, at the Stanford summer camp.

"I know your new coach, and you're going to love what they do," Hulme recalls Taylor being told.

During that first trip to Stanford, Taylor fell in love with the sunny, cooler summertime temperatures, a welcome break from the triple-digit heat in Texas. He was also spellbound by the university's picturesque campus, especially when he saw its grand entrance, Palm Drive, which is lined by its namesake.

"This," Taylor recalls thinking, "is nice."

Less than a week after the trip, Taylor committed to Stanford. To meet the university's rigorous admissions requirements, he had to reorganize his high school classes.

That meant he had to take two more Advanced Placement classes the final semester of his senior year.

"Coach, if that's what I got to do and what they want me to do, I'm going to do it," Hulme recalls Taylor saying.

Taylor took on a bigger load on the football field, too. As Hulme had promised, Taylor's carries increased significantly his senior season.

Instead of getting 15 to 20 carries a game, he carried the ball about 30 times per game. He battled a lower back injury early in his senior season, but in each of his last six games, he was consistently around the 200-yard mark.

In one of those games against then third-ranked and undefeated Abilene (Texas) High School, Mansfield High took over possession at its 10-yard line with seven minutes left and the score tied 14-14. It handed the ball nine straight times to Taylor, who capped the possession and his 198-yard rushing performance with a 14-yard touchdown run with just under four minutes left to win the game.

"It was all him," Hulme says.

All the while, Stanford's coaching staff was astonished by the reports it was receiving on Taylor. The Cardinal coaches looked forward each week to finding out how many rushing yards Taylor had piled up.

"Remember, this is big-time Texas football," Shaw says. "And here's a kid who's bright, tough and humble. He just seemed like our kind of guy."

One who continued to answer, "Yes, sir," whenever Hulme at time needed Taylor to play safety to shut down an opponent's best player or be a kickoff returner.

"He just took care of business," Hulme says. "I'm not saying Stepfan was a prude. He wasn't. He liked to have fun and joke around in the locker room and could imitate some coaches. He was a popular guy, but he knew when to go to work and when it was time to get serious."

By the end of Taylor's senior season, he had rushed for a school-record 2,463 yards and 33 touchdowns on a whopping 396 carries.

"He was a beast," Hulme says.

Just as he was in the classroom. He ended up making A's in both of his AP classes in his last semester and graduated with a 3.87 GPA.

"He's an amazing person and an amazing athlete," Doctor says. "He's just one of those all-around kids. The kind that you wish for and hope everybody can be like."

When Taylor arrived at Stanford in 2009, the Cardinal coaching staff knew he would eventually be a major contributor but didn't expect him to play as a freshman. But when running back Toby Gerhart needed breaks that season, one in which he was the runner-up for the

Heisman Trophy, Taylor spelled him.

Taylor had a knack for picking up extra yards and the speed to reel off big runs.

“We’re taking the best running back in the nation off the field and putting this true freshman in there because he was mature and could handle it,” Shaw recalls.

Last season, in his first as a starter, Taylor rushed for 1,137 yards and 15 touchdowns on 223 carries during a 13-1 campaign in which former coach Jim Harbaugh guided Stanford to an Orange Bowl victory.

“He’s got uncanny balance, quickness and vision,” Shaw says of Taylor. “You look at him and he’s not the biggest guy or the fastest guy, but he’s got a knack for never really getting hit very hard. The really good backs never really take big blows. They take glancing blows.”

While most running backs usually at least have an idea how many rushing yards they have accumulated, Taylor has no clue. He says he doesn’t look at his stats and is unconcerned about his lack of national attention.

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“I’m just playing,” Taylor says. “I can’t really look at that and let it influence my play and get frustrated by that.”

Mention Taylor to his teammates, and they all say the same thing: “He does everything right.”

It’s almost like they are reciting talking points, but Taylor is that fundamentally sound.

“I don’t know what we’d do without him,” says Luck, who praises Taylor’s blocking on pass plays.

Opposing coaches, though, are plenty aware of Taylor.

“He’s the perfect power back,” Washington State coach Paul Wulff says. “He’s just not flashy. He doesn’t give you that awe factor some backs give you, but in terms of productivity, he’s as productive as anybody.”

Taylor is quiet on the field but entertaining off it. He enjoys acting and is known for making comical videos that he posts on YouTube.

In one, a shirtless Taylor holds an iPhone with a mustache on its screen over his mouth while lip-synching Adele’s song, “Rolling In The Deep.” In another, he’s wearing a Dallas Mavericks ball cap while dancing in a kitchen with a broom and sweeping up a piece of paper that says, “Lakers,” after the Mavericks swept Los Angeles during last season’s NBA playoffs.

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There’s also a video in which Taylor wears thick black glasses, a black scarf and red Converse-like shoes while dancing unabashedly with friends in front of onlookers in downtown San Francisco.

“He’s fun to be around,” Luck says. “He’s very lighthearted.”

Taylor’s self-proclaimed nickname of “Kulabafi” was born earlier this season when he and sophomore running back Anthony Wilkerson were freestyle rapping during a break at practice. Taylor was rhyming about himself when he suddenly blurted out, “Kulabafi.”

He decided to adopt the nonsensical idiom as his nickname and wrote it on a piece of tape that he put on his locker. Most of Taylor’s teammates have started referring to him “Kula” or “Bafi.”

“It’s catching on now,” Taylor says. “I really like it.”

And while Taylor’s future is bright, he hasn’t forgotten his past. In the spring, he returned to Mansfield High and spoke to the football team, which also got to see his Orange Bowl ring.

Taylor has also received a mayoral proclamation from his hometown for his success on and off the field.

“I use him as an example all the time when we’re talking about character,” Hulme says.

Even now, Taylor marvels that he’s at Stanford. He talks in amazement at having met fellow students who can play a song on the piano by ear.

“It’s a great place to be,” Taylor says. “Out here, people are great at things.”

Now working at a school in Port Arthur, Texas, Doctor hasn’t spoken with Taylor since he left for Stanford. But when reached about her

former student recently, her pride overflowed.

“I’m just grateful that he even thought about me, actually,” Doctor says. “I’m surprised.”

But Doctor is not surprised by Taylor’s success at Stanford. Remember, she foresaw it before anyone else did.