

Actions speak louder than words for Delano Howell

By Elliott Almond, Mercury News

Edrick Floreal learned something fundamental about Delano Howell when the Stanford football player joined the track and field team in the spring.

"His leg could be broken in two and he wouldn't tell me," the track coach said. "He'll lie to you to play."

The football team is well aware of Howell's inclination to downplay injuries. Cardinal coaches sometimes make the strong safety wear a non-contact yellow practice jersey to remind him to go easy on himself.

Howell, who had a team-high five interceptions in 2010 to earn second-team All-Pac-10 honors, shrugs off the notion he's super human.

"Everybody plays with some kind of pain," he said. "I don't think it's worth talking about it."

He's referring to the scrapes and bruises players suffer over the course of a football campaign, not the type of serious knee injury that knocked linebacker Shayne Skov out for the season Saturday night at Arizona.

Skov had served as the spiritual leader of the defense before going down. Now the fifth-ranked Cardinal has turned to Howell, among others, as the team regroupes during its bye week before playing host to UCLA on Oct 1.

A hard-hitting safety who rarely shows emotion, Howell has 14 tackles in three games after finishing last season as Stanford's fourth-leading tackler.

"I'm more the talker; he's more the enforcer," fellow senior safety Michael Thomas said. "People get hyped up from what I say; people get hyped up from what he does."

And what does Howell think about the assessment?

"Yes, that's exactly right," he said.

Howell came to Stanford in 2008 expecting to play on offense after rushing for 1,491 yards and 29 touchdowns, and adding 41 receptions for 625 yards and six scores, as a junior at Hart High in Newhall.

He ran for 59 yards in nine carries and one touchdown and caught nine passes for 94 yards as a college freshman.

Then-coach Jim Harbaugh, however, needed to reshape his secondary, so he turned to Howell and Thomas, who played quarterback in high school.

At first, Howell, 5-feet-11, 198 pounds, wasn't ready for the move, but now can't imagine playing any other position. And coach David Shaw can't imagine a better competitor for a last-line of defense.

"Missed tackles in the secondary loses games," he said. "If you're a safety, you can't miss a tackle. You just can't."

Howell, a science, technology and society major, derives his competitive nature from his brothers and sister. The oldest, Keith Jr., attended Harvard, where he played cornerback in 2003-05. Dan Howell was a linebacker at Washington and Renah a sprinter/long jumper at UC Davis.

Howell always wanted to match his siblings, if not outdo them. Dinah Howell thought her youngest child would redshirt his first season at Stanford.

"Nope," she said. "His brother finished in four years so he was going to, too. You always have to prove yourself."

The strong family bonds also helped Howell when father Keith Sr. died in 2006 after complications with heart surgery. Instead of going to the wake, Howell wanted to honor his father by playing. He returned the opening kickoff 95 yards, rushed for 168 yards and had a Hart-record five touchdowns that night.

Howell politely declines to discuss his father, who had come from Barbados and instilled a strong Christian faith into his children.

But he hasn't forgotten the lessons that he learned from the man. Howell hopes it culminates in making the NFL next season but he also is making alternate plans.

"He doesn't live his life just depending on that," Dinah Howell said. "If not, life goes on. He will be an entrepreneur."

Howell displayed his entrepreneurialism by joining football teammates Bademosi Johnson, Trent Murphy and Jamal Patterson on the

track team in the spring. Howell had a best of 23 feet 8 inches in the long jump in just a few weeks with Floreal.

But his main focus is perfecting the art of the big hit as a strong safety.

"That guy rarely makes a mistake," Thomas said. "You want to play a higher level just playing alongside him. There's no way I could take a play off on him."

Because, God knows, Howell isn't about to take one off any time soon.