

Vaughters Making an Impact at Stanford

By Kyle Bonagura, Patch.com

A year ago at this time, James Vaughters was a star linebacker for the Tucker High football team.

As a unique blend of football talent and academic acumen, Vaughters was regarded as one of the best prep football players in the country. With scholarship offers from Ohio State, Florida, Georgia, Georgia Tech, Notre Dame, USC, Auburn and Alabama among several others, he has his pick of the college litter.

For Vaughters, who carried a 4.0 gpa and was an Under Armour All-American, it eventually became clear there was a university that fit what he was looking for — Stanford.

"Stanford is a special place because No. 1, its in Palo Alto (Calif.) and it's a great area," Vaughters said after a practice last week. "And then there's the combination between football and academics — it's like no other place. We're a top-25 football school and a top-ranked academic school."

In fact, Stanford ranks No. 5 in both the AP Top-25 football poll and most recent US News and World Report ranking of American universities.

The Cardinal's ascension into college football elite was a swift climb under former coach Jim Harbaugh and is off to good start with first-year coach David Shaw calling the shots. The team's 11-game winning streak is the longest in college football.

Knowing there was a talented group in place ahead of him, Vaughters still arrived in Northern California with expectations to see the field right away.

"They told me during recruiting (that they wanted me to play right away) and when I got here, they were still telling me the same thing," Vaughters said. "But coming from high school you don't know what to expect. Especially since Stanford has so much talent."

Sure enough, Vaughters showed enough promise in camp for the coaching staff to green light playing time for the true freshman. In the team's first game, at home against San Jose State on Sept. 3, Vaughters saw his first playing time in the third quarter.

By that time, the Cardinal had already built a big lead.

"There wasn't too many butterflies at that point," Vaughters said. "It was basically more like practice."

At 6-2, 225 pounds, Vaughters immediately looked like he belonged. He made three tackles in his debut, including one for a loss.

"His explosion and pure athletic ability is what he has right now," co-defensive coordinator Jason Tarver said. "He really wants to be good, so where there are things that he doesn't know yet, he asks intelligent questions. That's what you like to see."

Through wins against San Jose State, Duke and Arizona, Vaughters has made eight tackles and picked up his first sack against the Wildcats in the Pac-12 opener.

He's predominantly been used in nickel situations at defensive end, where his natural pass rushing skills are best utilized.

"We're going to play him a lot, but where he's comfortable," Shaw said. "We're still training him to play linebacker, but we have guys who are ahead of him there. At some point I think he's going to be a dominating player at both (linebacker and defensive end). Right now he's very good with his hand in the dirt."

Vaughters started playing football at age seven and recalled playing at Fitzgerald Park while in middle school. He credited his trainer, Steve Campbell of Rock Hard Fitness, as a key figure in his development as a football player.

"(He) really motivated me to work harder than anyone else," Vaughters said.

He moved to California early in the summer and joined his new teammates for summer work outs.

"At first I was just glad to get out of the humidity (in Georgia)," he said. "But then the work outs were cool and the guys were cool. It was everything I expected."

Carrying a quiet confidence, Vaughters has high expectations for his career at Stanford. "First of all, I need to get a starting spot," he said. "That's one thing I'm looking to get to. And just getting through this year and focusing on academics and just managing my time."

It won't come as a surprise to those from Tucker, but his future certainly looks bright. "I'm excited to get to know him even more," Tarver said. So are Stanford fans.