

Stanford lineman David DeCastro has future in NFL

Tom FitzGerald, Chronicle Staff Writer

One of the most interesting matchups in the Washington-Stanford game Saturday at Stanford Stadium will pit Cardinal guard David DeCastro against defensive tackle Alameda Ta'amu.

Each may be a first-round pick in the next NFL draft. DeCastro is a junior but he is widely expected to enter the draft after this season.

"I have no idea," he said this week. "I've got to give all of my attention to this season."

Ta'amu, a 6-foot-3, 337-pound load, sometimes will line up opposite DeCastro, although he'll often work out of the nose guard spot. He and DeCastro, a 6-5 312-pounder, might engage in something akin to a sumo wrestling match.

DeCastro grew up in Bellevue, Wash. - his home was about five minutes from Husky Stadium, he said. He considered attending the local school but found Stanford impossible to resist.

He helped the Cardinal running game shatter school records the past two years. This year, with three new starters joining him and standout tackle Jonathan Martin, the line has allowed the fewest sacks in the nation (two). Stanford is third in the Pac-12 in rushing at 181.7 yards per game.

Coach David Shaw said DeCastro reminds him of Steve Wisniewski, the eight-time Pro Bowl guard with the Raiders who is now an assistant line coach with Oakland. Shaw was on the Raiders' staff during four of those years.

"Steve was bigger, but they have the same tenacity, athleticism, brute strength in pass protection and run blocking," Shaw said. "He's got a long way to go to become what Steve was in the NFL, but I see similarities in their play."

DeCastro said that was "a pretty big compliment" because Wisniewski, who helped tutor Stanford's offensive linemen last season, is one of his role models.

"He taught me a lot about work ethic, drills, little technique stuff," DeCastro said. "He was a great mentor."

Mike Bloomgren, a former Jets assistant who is in his first year as the Cardinal's running game coordinator and offensive line coach, said DeCastro "is playing probably as well as any guard in America right now."

What impresses Bloomgren the most about him is "his hand strength and his ability to drive people off the ball. It's something you don't see a lot in modern college football. ... Double-D will come off the football and drive his knees, his hands and his head into you and move you off the football."

DeCastro "might be the top guard out there, junior or senior," said Dan Shonka, a former NFL scout who runs Our Lads NFL Scouting Services. He projects him as a late first-round or early second-round pick if he enters the next draft. He'd go even higher, but tackles generally are rated higher than guards, Shonka said.

"He's equally good in run blocking and pass protection," he said. "He has good body control and can recover quickly to sustain his block (on passes). He's good downfield. He can pull on the perimeter and block a moving target. He stays on his feet."

"He has first-step quickness. He drives into defenders and keeps a good base. He processes well on the blitz pickup. He can adjust on the run. He's very competitive and smart; you can't be a dumb guy and play pro football. Some teams have 30 different pass protections."

"He's playing in a pro-style offense. He's the total package."

A faceoff to watch as Huskies battle Stanford: Ta'amu vs. DeCastro

By Bob Condotta
Seattle Times staff reporter

Playing Washington means a chance to see some old friends for Stanford offensive guard David DeCastro, a graduate of Bellevue High.

One old friend — Washington defensive tackle Alameda Ta'amu — he'll see up close and personal.

The two figure to lock heads often Saturday in an interior-line matchup as enticing as any in the Pac-12 this year.

Ta'amu, a 6-3, 333-pound senior from Rainier Beach High School, is generally considered a possible first-round NFL pick this year — ESPN.com draft expert Todd McShay rated him 16th overall this week. DeCastro, a 6-5, 310-pound fourth-year junior, was rated 26th overall by McShay this week.

"They are going to have plenty of opportunities to go against one another," said UW coach Steve Sarkisian. "It would be great if Alameda could play one of his better ballgames."

Whatever happens, Ta'amu says he'll warmly shake DeCastro's hand afterward. "That's my boy right there," he said this week.

The two got to know each other following the 2007 high-school season when they were roommates at a high school all-star game in Miami. "He's a great guy," DeCastro said of Ta'amu.

UW fans, of course, wish they'd had a chance to remain roommates. Instead, DeCastro headed to Stanford as part of Jim Harbaugh's first full recruiting class with the Cardinal. He committed early, then briefly reconsidered late before reaffirming with the Cardinal. He's always maintained that Stanford's academic tradition was the ultimate difference between the two schools.

And he's had no reason to regret the decision as he's helped lead Stanford to some of its greatest seasons. The Cardinal is currently on a 14-game winning streak that is the longest in the nation.

DeCastro has started all 32 games he has played at Stanford, and Cardinal coach David Shaw says, "I think David is playing on a level on par with any offensive lineman in college football right now. He is as good as just about any that I've been around, just his consistency as far as his physical toughness and his athletic ability, the amount of times we ask him to pull and every time you pull it's a completely different picture and he adjusts and he can get around piles and can step over guys laying on the ground and still drops his weight with an unbelievable punch on impact. He's phenomenal."

The low-key DeCastro, told of Shaw's comments, said: "That's nice. But I don't think I played that well last week, to be honest."

Shaw also applauds DeCastro's leadership skills, having asked DeCastro to take a more vocal role this season after the Stanford offensive line lost three starters off last season's team. The other returner is left tackle Jonathan Martin, also regarded as a potential first-round pick.

"It's something kind of different I've been asked to do," DeCastro said. "It's one of those things you definitely get better at. I'm still working on it every day."

Because he redshirted in 2008, DeCastro could return next season. But it's widely assumed he will leave early. Asked this week, he said he wasn't thinking about his future now, preferring to focus on this season.

And specifically this week, the Huskies and Ta'amu.

"He's a pretty big and powerful dude," DeCastro said.

Ta'amu, however, was admittedly less powerful in the first few games of the season. He was dealing with a broken hand and constant double- and triple-teams.

The hand, however, has healed, and Ta'amu says the addition of fellow 300-plus pounder Semisi Tokolahi as the starter at the other tackle spot has diverted some of the attention of opponents.

DeCastro and Stanford, however, will provide his biggest test yet. The Cardinal is as physical as any team in the conference and is averaging 181.7 rushing yards per game, while having allowed only two sacks.

"I want to get my name out there, too," Ta'amu said of the spotlight that will be on him this game. "It's a good challenge." And just in time, Sarkisian says Ta'amu is rounding into form. "I think he has improved as the year has gone on, and what I have come to find out about 'Meda is he does improve as the year goes on," Sarkisian said. "I've seen that from him the last two seasons, that he has played his best football the second half of the season."