

# Stanford's Tarver knows good chemistry

By Kevin Gemmell

PALO ALTO, Calif. -- Jason Tarver learned an important lesson early in his life that has been invaluable in his ascension from college graduate assistant, to NFL assistant and now, to Stanford's co-defensive coordinator.

It's OK to say, "I don't know."

But that moment didn't come on a football field. It came in a classroom at UCLA while he was lecturing to 50 pre-med students. Yes, you read that right. He was the one lecturing to medical students. And it wasn't about the benefits of the 3-4 over the 4-3.

"Those guys are all probably brain surgeons by now," said Tarver. "When you are in front of a lecture of all fifth-year pre-med students, and you're the TA [teacher's assistant], and you don't know something, you say, 'I don't know. Let me find out.' It's the same thing with coaching. If you don't know something, you can't fake it. Not with these guys. We have some pretty smart student-athletes."

[+] Enlarge Jason Tarver

Kyle Terada/US Presswire Jason Tarver has taken a less-traveled road to his current position with Stanford.

And, apparently, some pretty smart coaches. Tarver is an academic -- with junior college playing experience -- from a university that has a defunct football program. How in the heck does he end up coaching for 10 years in the NFL and now is co-defensive coordinator for the No. 6 college team in the country?

"I got accepted to some medical schools, but I also caught the coaching bug," he said.

The unusual course of events can be traced by to his senior year at Foothill High in Pleasanton, Calif. It was the homecoming game when he tore his ACL, MCL and lateral collateral ligaments. Shredded, as he put it.

All that was left for him were offers from small schools, so he accepted a scholarship to play at Santa Clara University in 1992. But a few months later, the school cut its football program. His athletic scholarship was converted into an academic one, and he played down the road for two seasons at West Valley Junior College in '94 and '95 before injuries finally took their toll.

During that time, he got to know a lot of orthopedic surgeons, and was convinced that's what he wanted to do with his life. He went on to graduate Phi Beta Kappa with a bachelors of science degree in chemistry.

"I buckled down and studied hard," Tarver said. "I wanted to get as good of grades as I could so I could do whatever I wanted to do."

But he also wanted to stay close to football, so he returned to West Valley and coached the linebackers, defensive backs and special teams for a season. He was hooked, and a year later he was a graduate assistant at UCLA while studying for his masters in biochemistry and molecular biology.

After graduating (also with honors, by the way), he moved into research.

Then the call came.

"Steve Mariucci and Bill Walsh called me," he said. "You can't say no to that. It was too good to pass up."

He spent 10 years with the San Francisco 49ers, first as a quality control coach, then assistant running backs coach and offensive assistant before moving to the other side of the ball as the outside linebackers coach. He joined Stanford's staff in February and coaches the inside linebackers and shares defensive coordinator duties with Derek Mason. Together, the duo has produced one of the top rush defenses in the country.

"I think it's both coordinators working together," said head coach David Shaw. "They both give the other guy the credit. But they get together a lot. They are always watching game film together. Whenever I go into one guys' office, the other guy is in there. It's them tying everything together."

While coaching defense might not be as complex as, say, studying molecular biology, there are a lot of similarities between the teaching styles.

"In football, you've got 22 bodies moving at all times and you have to see and be able to adjust," Tarver explained. "It's the ability to make the complex seem easy and teach it in a way that's fast, likeable and easy and get the guys excited about it."

Seems pretty academic.