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Fonoti draws attention

True freshman guard earns playing time on line

BY MATTHEW HANSEN
Staff writer

Freshman guard Toniui Fonoti, from Hauula, Hawaii, has no doubt been attracting attention since he first set foot on campus. After all, any 6-foot-5, 320-pound freshman is bound to receive a few stares at orientation.

Since the start of fall camp, though, Fonoti has regularly turned heads not only with his physique but also with his performance as an offensive lineman. In fact, the young guard has turned enough heads to merit playing time, a rare opportunity for a true freshman lineman.

"We've only had three or four true freshman play significant minutes for us in the last 25 years," Nebraska Offensive Line Coach Milt Tenopir said. "The fact that Toniui is playing this year puts him in an extremely select group."

Fonoti didn't even give much thought to playing this season. He said that he was prepared to take the same path as most Cornhusker linemen and redshirt. His quick rise up

the depth chart to the position of backup guard leaves him admittedly surprised.

The build that caused those stares at orientation has much to do with Fonoti's quick insertion into the offensive line rotation. According to both Tenopir and senior offensive tackle Adam Julch, Fonoti is the most physically developed freshman to come to Nebraska in recent history.

"The first time I saw him, I was just blown away by how big and strong he was," Julch said. "I mean, the guy is just enormous. He has more strength and quickness than I have ever seen from an incoming freshman."

Tenopir had the same reaction. "By looking at his high school tapes, we could see how big and strong he was," Tenopir said. "What we didn't know is how quickly he would pick things up."

It is the mental part of line play that has been the biggest challenge for Fonoti.

"In high school, we had about 20 plays, and everything was simple," Fonoti said. "Here, things are totally

different. I can't even count the number of plays we have to know."

According to Tenopir, though, Fonoti has managed to handle the mental part of the position reasonably well. Fonoti attributed much of this progress to his elders along the offensive line, as well as the coaches. He said that without their guidance, he would not be playing right now.

"Dominic (Raiola, the starting center who also is from Hawaii) and I have kind of taken it upon ourselves to help him out," Julch said. "We tend to go up to the line and help him with assignments. It's happening less now, though, because he usually can get it on his own."

Both Tenopir and Julch said the 17-year-old Fonoti is just scratching the surface of his potential.

"The thing about Toniui is that he is just getting his bearings," Tenopir said. "Once he gets it all together and is more sure of himself out there, he is going to be an excellent player."

Julch agreed.

"His potential is just through the roof," said Julch. "I think that he can be as good as he wants to be."

Williams provides lift for NU

■ Nebraska's forward brings more than just speed off the bench for the Huskers.

BY DARREN IVY
Senior staff writer

When describing the importance of sophomore soccer player Najah Williams, Nebraska Coach John Walker compared her to a football I-back with breakaway speed.

At 5-foot-5-inches, and very fit, Williams doesn't really look like an I-back, but she possesses the same ability to get behind opposing teams' defense.

"It's like in football, bringing in an I-back who can go the distance every time he touches the ball," said Walker, who recruited Williams as a defender. "One mistake in the back from the other team, and she can get in."

Williams came in with the reputation of being a speedster, but recently she has proven that she has more to her game than just speed.

Against Oral Roberts and Kentucky two weekends ago, the Phoenix, Ariz., native scored three goals, which equaled the number of shots she took the entire 1998 season.

"Goal-wise, that was the best weekend I have had," said Williams, who is tied for second in goals on the team with Lindsay Eddleman.

Walker said Williams' improved play thus far this season wasn't a surprise to him.

"She had a good spring," he said. "That is where she really started to make progress. This fall, we have really tried to do what is best for her and settle her closely in one position."

That position is forward, a spot Williams hadn't played since her club soccer days in Arizona.

She said concentrating mainly on forward, rather than several positions, has allowed her to be more confident.

"In the midfield, John (Walker) always wanted me to be offensive minded, but I wasn't confident that I could go up and make it back," Williams said. "At forward there is only one way I can go - forward."

Teammate Shannon Tanaka has noticed Williams' increased confidence level this fall as well.

"It shows in her play and composure," said Tanaka, a sophomore midfielder. "You can tell she is more comfortable at forward, and that has helped her become an offensive weapon for us."

Walker said moving Williams to striker was an easy decision.

"We thought with the experience of our returning defenders that it didn't make a whole lot of sense to keep her at defender," Walker said. "We thought with her athleticism and speed that we needed to get her on the field."

Williams hasn't started, but she has played about as many minutes as the starters.

When she enters the game, the energy level of the rest of the Huskers on the field increases, Walker said.

"She gives us a big lift when she comes onto the field," he said. "You know, high energy and that breakaway threat."

But the most impressive thing about Williams this fall, Walker said, is that none of her three goals have come on pure speed.

Williams' individual workouts and dedication to making herself a more fundamental player are paying off, he said.

After scoring three goals in one weekend, Williams might expect the same out of herself each weekend.

Not the case.

"I just want to play well and do what I can to help this team win a national title," Williams said. "If (defenders) are worried about me, it is easier for Lindsay, Kelly (Rheem) and Becky (Preston) to get open and score. It doesn't matter if I score again."

WAC coaches support conference

BY SAMUEL MCKEOWN
Senior staff writer

It wouldn't be entirely untrue to say the departing members of the Western Athletic Conference left the cupboard bare when they formed the Mountain West Conference.

Many believe they did. But that won't come out of the mouths of WAC coaches and officials.

After all, they'll say, Texas Christian, one of the eight teams still in the WAC, had a winning record of 7-5 and beat big-name Southern California in the Sun Bowl.

So what if the other seven remaining teams had a combined record of 26-54? Or that despite being in huge television markets, cooking shows could generate more interest than Texas-El Paso vs. San Jose State? It doesn't matter to Tulsa Coach Dave Rader.

"You're talking to a guy that was without a conference for a long time," Rader said. "So I love this conference. There's some good football to be played here."

Rader pointed to the WAC's new marketing tool for proof. Of the eight teams - Fresno State, Hawaii, Rice San Jose State, Southern Methodist, TCU, Tulsa and UTEP - six are in California and Texas. And what states, Rader said, play better high school football than those?

"Everybody recruits out of those states - everybody," Rader said.

However, Fresno State Coach Pat Hill doesn't expect the best players to just come to the WAC. Hill, whose Bulldogs have the best quarterback-receiver tandem in the conference in Billy Volek and Charlie Smith, believes the new WAC needs to gain respect through non-conference games against big-name opponents. Last season, current WAC teams combined to go 7-21 outside of league play.

"You have to keep playing the big-name teams - even if you get your ass kicked - until you beat them," said Hill, who takes his team to UCLA this year. "It's either going to be a parade or a funeral procession. That's the only way to do it."

Hill said he expects Fresno State to

be one of the teams to beat in the WAC. TCU should be strong again with 15 returning starters, as should SMU, which had the nation's 14th best defense last year. Rice, San Jose State, Tulsa and UTEP will have to reload defensively to compete.

Then there's Hawaii.

They were an abysmal 0-12 last season. June Jones quit as the San Diego Chargers' head coach to take over the Rainbow Warriors. Part of the problem with playing UH is the trip itself, cited by former WAC members as one reason they left the conference.

It's often a four-day deal, which pays few dividends if the opponent only scores 149 points (12.4 average) in a season, one point less than what UCLA scored in three games last year.

Another issue with the WAC is money. The teams still remaining are painfully weak at the gate. Despite residing in metropolitan areas of more than 1 million people, Rice (in Houston), SMU (in Dallas) and SJSU (in San Jose) drew 22,115, 18,218 and 12,532 in average home attendance last season.