

Nelson picks his college (he'll tell Thursday)

Written by Jim Ecker

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Matt Nelson plans to pick up his phone Thursday and call Iowa, Notre Dame or Stanford with the good news that he's accepted their offer to play football at their school.

He does not plan any press conferences at Xavier High School or any major announcements. Just a phone call to the winner will take care of it.

"Just a simple phone call," he said Tuesday evening. "I'm not into the elaborate announcements that people do. I'm not going to do anything fancy. I was offered a press conference, but I'm already going to get enough press attention."

Nelson is a 6-foot-8, 250-pound defensive end who became one of the most sought-after football players in Iowa this spring. He's an all-state player with a terrific frame, quick feet, great instincts and a love for the game. He also sports a 4.2 GPA on a 4.0 scale and wants to become a doctor.

Nelson helped Xavier reach the championship game of the Class 4A playoffs last fall as a star defensive end and tight end, but he likes defense the most and plans to play defensive end or outside linebacker at Iowa, Notre Dame or Stanford.

The avalanche of major scholarship offers began this spring.

"Right after Stanford offered," he said. "It was about spring-break-ish, about the middle of March. That's when it really started escalating."

Florida State, Nebraska, Wisconsin, Arkansas, San Diego State, Harvard and Yale tossed offers his way. "I'm missing a few," he said. "That's all I can think of."

The "right fit" for Nelson was academics and athletics, where he could be a serious student and

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play football for a big-time program. "I'd like to be a doctor. An orthopaedic surgeon. So pre-med for the undergraduate stuff," he said.

He wrote the "pros and cons" on a sheet of paper, weighed his options, weighed the offers and focused on Iowa, Notre Dame and Stanford.

"It was hard to choose from all these great schools," he said. "Those three schools have the best of academics and football. The best of both worlds, so I went from there. Those three made the cut."

Nelson has made a final decision, but he's not telling. He's told one of the finalists that he's not coming, but has one more of those tough calls to make. Then he'll make the easy call on Thursday to the winner.

He knows a heavy schedule of pre-med classes and an equally heavy football schedule will be a tough double in college, but he's determined to succeed in both pursuits.

"Some people are negative and say, 'Oh, you can't do it,'" he said. "But there are some people that I've seen do it. I've met kids from every place that I've been that are actually pre-med and are going to graduate this year. That's a very welcome response to that."

Nelson has traveled all over the country for his college visits. He's spent time with Iowa Coach Kirk Ferentz, Notre Dame Coach Brian Kelly and Stanford Coach David Shaw.

"It's incredible," he said, "because you meet these coaches of national recognition on kind of a weekly basis. I've met Coach Kelly and Coach Shaw within a week. That's huge."

Notre Dame played for the national championship last season and finished with a 13-1 record. Stanford claimed the Pac-12 title, won the Rose Bowl and finished 12-2. The Iowa Hawkeyes, on the other hand, had a sub-par year and finished 4-8.

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Nelson said he wants to play for a winning program and considered each school's track record before making his final decision, but the Hawkeyes made the cut anyway when he trimmed the list to three teams. "You never want to play for a losing team and get your butt kicked all the time," he said.

He also studied the depth charts at each school.

"I didn't want to be one of those kids that gets stuck behind the 5-star kid that is probably going to go to the NFL," he said. "That's no fun, playing behind him for four years. So that also plays a role."

Nelson played at 220 or 225 pounds for Xavier last season as a junior. Now he's tipping the scales at a trim 250 and looks great. "It's pretty good weight," he affirmed.

Nelson is glad he's made a final decision. Now he can focus on playing his final year at Xavier and try to help the Saints win a state title.

"It definitely feels like a weight has been lifted," he said. "It was a gut feeling at the very end. It felt perfect."

He'll wake up Thursday and call the winner. "And probably tweet about it," he said. "Other than that, pretty simple."