

Dr. Matt Nelson picks the Hawkeyes

Written by Jim Ecker
Thursday, 27 June 2013 11:56 -

Matt Nelson will need a cool nickname when he plays football for the Iowa Hawkeyes.

How about the Sack Doctor? Or the Doctor of Defense? He wants to play defensive end for the Hawkeyes and become an orthopedic surgeon, so there are several possibilities.

Nelson carries a 4.2 GPA on a 4.0 scale entering his senior year at Xavier High School. A physical specimen at 6-foot-8 and 250 pounds, he picked Iowa over Notre Dame and Stanford for two main reasons.

"The medical facilities and coaches," he said Thursday after announcing his decision. "Notre Dame really didn't have the research opportunities that Iowa has.

"I just love the coaches at Iowa. They're such great people. They're midwest people."

Notre Dame finished second in the Nelson sweepstakes. Ironically, the Notre Dame assistant coach who recruited him the hardest was Bob Elliott, a midwest person who spent a good part of his life at the University of Iowa as a player and assistant coach.

Nelson called Notre Dame and Stanford this week to tell them he wasn't coming. Then he talked to three assistant coaches at Iowa to tell them he wanted to become a Hawkeye, but he wasn't able to get through to the head coach.

"Coach Ferentz was at a dental appointment," he said, smiling.

Nelson's parents, Jay and Julie, attended Iowa State. His older brother, Josh, will be a sophomore at ISU this year, and Matt cheered for the Cyclones when he was younger. More recently, he's watched college football games for the sheer enjoyment and to study the game, not necessarily to cheer for anyone.

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Now he'll be a Hawkeye. He searched the entire country for the right college, then picked the Big Ten school that's 30 miles down the road from Cedar Rapids.

"Everything just felt right at Iowa," he said. "The pre-med, the coaches, the football all meshed together to become the best fit for me. I'm really excited to play for them in the coming years."

Notre Dame played for the national title last season. Stanford won the Rose Bowl. The Hawkeyes limped through a 4-and-8 campaign, but Nelson is confident the Hawks will bounce back.

"The coaches are pushing the guys really hard," he said. "The recruiting class coming in, even from the in-state guys, is pretty good. It will be good in the future."

Nelson visited Notre Dame, Stanford and several other schools. He said that was important, even though he picked an in-state team.

"I needed to see what everybody had to offer," he explained. "That helped out a lot."

Nelson said he was not reluctant to leave home and play college football in California or Indiana, but simply decided the Hawkeyes had the most to offer. As an added bonus, his family will have an easy time watching him play.

"I like to travel, so I wouldn't have minded going to Stanford or Notre Dame. That's not a huge deal for me" he said. "But it's cool when you look up in the stands and see friends and family. It wasn't a big factor, but it played a part."

He's begun to picture himself running onto the field at Kinnick Stadium before 70,000 devoted Hawkeye fans. "It gives me chills every now and then," he said.

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Nelson starred at defensive end and tight end for the Saints last year as a junior, when Xavier finished 13-1 and reached the championship game of the Class 4A playoffs. He had 11 sacks and 19 solo tackles for losses on a stellar defensive unit and caught 14 passes for 162 yards and eight touchdowns on offense.

Nelson is also a promising 6-foot-8 basketball player and could have pursued opportunities in that sport, but football is his first love.

"That was the first tough choice," he said. "It's a lot easier to be more physical on a football field than basketball. I foul out a lot. You can't foul out in a football game."

And when it comes to football, he'd rather sack a quarterback than catch a touchdown pass. "It's a lot more of a thrill," he said.

Xavier Coach Duane Schulte helped steer Nelson through the recruiting process, but they talked just as much about medical school as football. Schulte has a law degree and his brother is a doctor, so he knows what it takes to succeed at a high level in athletics and academics.

He's confident Nelson has what it takes to achieve his goals.

"First of all, he's so smart and he's so coachable," said Schulte. "He'll do whatever you ask him to do, and he has the physical talent to do it. So when you blend the physical side and the mental side, he can do pretty much whatever he wants."

College recruiters came to appreciate Nelson for his special talents as an athlete, student and level-headed young man.

"They figured out that his kid is a pretty unique kid," said Schulte. "He's got the physical skills,

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but the mental side is just as important."

Nelson said he was recruited by Iowa as a defensive end. He'd like to gain another 10 pounds and hit 260, as long as it does not affect his footwork and quickness. He also could play tight end, and some people think he could gain 50 or 60 pounds and become an outstanding offensive tackle.

"They said defensive end is their first need, but if it really comes to it they will let me pick," he said.

Nelson said he's relieved the recruiting process has ended. He originally thought he'd make a decision later this summer, but decided this week to finish the game.

"It just felt right," he said. "I felt, why wait?"