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Football: Speed, strength aid Terrell

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REBECCA S. GRATZ THE WORLD-HERALD

UNO's Levi Terrell has a chance for the national rushing title despite sitting out the first four games.

When UNO plays its final home game of the season at 1 p.m. Saturday against Pittsburg State, check to see Levi Terrell's PAL in action.

That's posture, arms and legs — the product of workout mentality with which the University of Nebraska at Omaha freshman has grown up. His balanced posture, powerful arms and chopping legs are leaving a mark on a season unlike any other true freshman at the University of Nebraska at Omaha.

Check out these numbers:

In just five games, the 6-foot, 195-pound tailback from DeSoto, Mo., has rushed for 899 yards.

His average of 179.8 yards per game would rank second in Division II, but because the original plan was for him to redshirt, he sat the first four games and hasn't played enough to qualify.

It should come as no surprise that when Terrell decides to go, he gets there fast.

Dallas Terrell, Levi's father, is the head speed and strength coach at D1 Sports Training and Therapy in Huntsville, Ala., a firm whose owners include NFL quarterback Philip Rivers — whom Dallas had trained as a high schooler. D1's Huntsville client list includes NFL players like Amobi Okoye of the Houston Texans and many college athletes from the Southeast.

Working on speed and strength is in Levi's blood. His parents, both bodybuilders at the time, met in a gym.

Terrell grew up spending the school year with his mom, Jennifer McCallister, in the St. Louis area, and the summers in Huntsville with his dad. Either way, there was always training to do. For instance, last summer, Levi worked out with St. Louis Rams running back Kenneth Darby.

"It's really helped me to do the same workouts as NFL guys are doing," said Terrell, largely ignored in recruiting after missing his junior season with an injury.

The results are obvious.

Terrell (pronounced Tuh-RELL) has rushed for 192, 192, 119, 178 and 218 yards in his games in a Mav uniform. He's been a workhorse, too, carrying the ball 44, 34, 37, 30 and 33 times.

Even if he had played in UNO's first four games and rushed for 0 yards, he would still be leading the Mid-America Intercollegiate Athletics Association in rushing at 98.9 yards per game. The league is discussing whether it would drop its "75 percent rule" and declare Terrell the rushing champion. After all, he already has more attempts than any player in the league.

To qualify for the national rushing title, Terrell's season-ending yardage total would be divided over nine games, which would put him at or over the 75 percent threshold for the 11- or 12-game season the Mavs will play. Joiqie Bell of Wayne State (Mich.) averages 188.4 yards, so Terrell would need 797 yards over the next two or three games to get there, assuming Bell's average stays the same.

The fact that a true freshman has even an outside chance to win rushing titles is impressive.

"This is an indication of what can happen if you really prepare for something," UNO coach Pat Behrns said. "You seldom see something like that from someone coming straight out of high school. We rolled the dice by playing a true freshman, but it's paid off because of what he did to prepare."

His workout program has finely tuned the small but active and important muscles that other athletes don't worry about until they are injured — the rotator cuff, and those around the hips and spine which key flexibility and explosion.

His father has timed him in the 40-yard dash at 4.45 seconds. He's strong, too: Terrell constantly finishes off his runs going forward, with one tackler seldom enough to get the job done.

The reason he's able to break so many tackles, his father said, is because of his running posture. When he makes contact, his hips are under his body, not trailing the shoulders, allowing him to maintain balance. Proper arm action enhances posture and balance.

And the leg action?

"He runs with angry knees," Dallas Terrell said. "I tell him about Roger Craig and Eric Dickerson, guys who weren't 240 pounds and didn't have prototypical running styles, but they had very violent knees. I was a linebacker in high school, and guys like that were no fun to tackle. When you put your head down, you wonder if you're going to get a knee to the helmet."

The scary thing about Levi Terrell, as Behrns often says, is that he really isn't entirely sure what he's doing yet. Just wait until he figures out the Mavs' zone running scheme, where the back reads the blocking and cuts accordingly, rather than running a predetermined course through the line of scrimmage or running into contact.

"I know I have a lot of stuff to work on," Terrell said. "I'm starting to see it. Last week was really good as far as seeing things show up. That's what they work with me on every week: be patient and wait for things to open up."

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