

Toppers' Payne making gains with Fudge

By **TREY WILLIAMS**

Press Sports Writer

twilliams@johnsoncitypress.com

At first glance, Science Hill senior Alex Payne thought some of Derek Fudge's unconventional training methods were a bit of a stretch.

But Payne, a Tennessee State football signee, has warmed quickly to Fudge's flexible philosophy.

Fudge, an All-Southern Conference linebacker at East Tennessee State who started as a freshman on the 1996 Buccaneers team that reached the FCS quarterfinals, implements everything from resistance bands to gymnastics balance beams to help generate speed and explosive agility in athletes.

A lot of it didn't look particularly manly to Payne, a rugged defensive end/linebacker who had 90 tackles, four sacks and three fumble recoveries as a senior for Coach Stacy Carter's Hilltoppers.

"I didn't know what to think," Payne said. "But it's opened up a new world for me. I'm jumping higher, running faster and I've just felt more athletic. I can see mad results. ... The resistance bands and such get you stronger and add explosiveness and speed."

Fudge, a Panama City, Fla., native, has always known he wanted to help athletes tackle their limitations when he was done tackling the likes of Edgerrin James. And seeing renowned NFL trainer Tom Shaw do his thing up close while Fudge was with the New Orleans Saints in 2000 focused Fudge's future vision.

"Tom Shaw is the man," Fudge said. "He's the best trainer out there. ... I knew then that's what I wanted to do."

Fudge has been training athletes at Fudge Fitness Center (3009 Leisure Lane) for approximately six months. He's worked with cheerleaders, softball players, gymnasts, boxers, wrestlers and kick-boxers. His pupils have included Tennessee Tech baseball player Bo DelGaico (Science Hill), University of Charleston football player Matt Duncan (Daniel Boone) and former Northeast Tennessee basketball Player of the Year ~~John~~ ~~Good~~ (Michigan College). Former Auburn signee Mario Ragland began working with Fudge this week.



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Mario Ragland helps Tennessee State signee Alex Payne stretch Thursday at Fudge Fitness Center.

Fudge has sensed a collective skepticism that's derived, in part, from training such a broad range of athletes.

"A lot of kids and coaches don't believe in what I do," Fudge said, "but when parents and kids see my professional workout, their eyes light up."

Fudge has stayed in Johnson City since his football career ended with an arena league team in Roanoke in 2003.

However, he nearly left Johnson City long before his ETSU career was over. Florida State made it known they'd like for Fudge to transfer to Tallahassee following his stellar freshman season for Mike Cavan.

"Chuck Amato was the linebackers coach at Florida State then, and they wanted me after my freshman year," Fudge said. "It had always been my dream to play for Bobby Bowden at Florida State."

But Fudge liked East Tennessee, not to mention the solidified starting spot. Fudge got the attention of pro scouts with his performance during ETSU's loss at Miami in 1998.

"Edgerrin James was the best back I faced, but he remembers No. 33 for ETSU," Fudge said. "I think I had eight solos on him, and I had a sack on (Scott) Covington."

Former ETSU teammate Brian Edwards, who will be in town to speak at Fudge's center Saturday at 1 p.m., had a half offer from Miami when he was in high school in Ocala, Fla.

Fudge said he and Edwards, ETSU's No. 2 all-time leading rusher, were recruited to ETSU by Troy Douglas, who is now with Butch Davis at North Carolina.

Fudge sees a lot of potential for Payne at Tennessee State. With proper training, Fudge says, Payne could play defensive end or linebacker at that level.

"He's athletic enough to play both," Fudge said. "He has strength, and once you have that flexibility, it automatically makes you faster."

Payne is excited about attending the Nashville school. He'll quickly tell you it's the alma mater of Olympic gold medalist sprinter Wilma Rudolph, former Dallas Cowboys defense lineman Ed "Too Tall" Jones, Oprah Winfrey and 2008 first-round NFL pick Dominique Rodgers-Cromartie.

Payne said fall camp opens Aug. 3. Oddly enough, a steady diet of Fudge in the meantime should help him get a leg up on the competition.