

Talent, smarts and humility? That's pure Luck

By Elliott Almond and Mark Emmons
Mercury News

He was a star college quarterback himself who played four seasons in the NFL. But Oliver Luck can pinpoint when he first suspected that his oldest son, Andrew, was going to be much more accomplished than he had ever been.

"As a fifth-grader," he said, "I could see him already reading defenses in Pop Warner games."

Fast-forward a decade, and the rest of the country has discovered what Dad first recognized: Stanford's quarterback is a rare talent.

Luck, 21, is one of four finalists headed to New York City for Saturday's Heisman Trophy presentation, which honors the country's best college player. He is a long shot to win; Auburn quarterback Cam Newton is the overwhelming favorite.

But Luck is widely expected to win a bigger prize come April if he opts to turn pro early -- the lucrative No. 1 pick in the NFL draft.

Best of all, it couldn't happen to a nicer guy. Luck, who possesses an endearing humility, never has viewed himself as the big man on campus. In fact, he hates the spotlight.

"I understand it's part of playing the position of quarterback and being on a BCS bowl team, but I don't relish it," said Luck, an architectural design major with a 3.55 grade-point average.

Luck becomes visibly uncomfortable when asked to talk about himself and prefers to politely deflect attention to the rest of his Orange Bowl-bound team.

So it's left to others to rave about college football's model student-athlete.

"Everything
Advertisement

about Andrew is amazing," senior wide receiver Doug Baldwin said. "He's not only a phenomenal athlete, but he's a phenomenal person. No one's perfect, but Andrew is pretty close."

Where Luck does fall short, it seems, is in the musical department. Baldwin said the team has a running joke about its leader's off-key vocals, often heard in the locker room shower.

"I can't do a lot of things," said Luck, a valedictorian at his Houston high school. "Singing would just be one of them."

'Down to earth'

While Luck might draw ooohs and aahs on the field, Mary Ellen Luck said those who know her big brother best see him more as a big nerd. Mary Ellen, a freshman on the No. 2-ranked Cardinal volleyball team, said Andrew's idea of a night out is getting frozen yogurt on Palo Alto's trendy University Avenue.

"It hasn't been hard to deal with his fame," she said. "Once you get to know him, he's pretty down to earth."

The Luck kids -- there also is a younger sister and brother -- are particularly close in part because of how they grew up. Oliver Luck was an executive with the now-defunct NFL Europe, so Andrew spent most of his first 10 years in Germany.

While he mostly played soccer and basketball as a boy, Luck sometimes would throw a football with his father in their front yard, drawing curious stares from German neighbors.

But once back in the United States, Luck embraced the "Friday Night Lights" culture of Texas football and blossomed into one of the nation's top high school quarterbacks.

Oliver Luck said his son knew from their first meeting that he wanted to play for coach Jim Harbaugh, a 14-year veteran NFL quarterback who had just arrived at Stanford with big aspirations for a football program coming off a 1-11 season.

Standard setter

Last season, Luck became the first Stanford freshman quarterback to start a season-opening game since 2002. He was content to play in the shadow of Toby Gerhart, the Stanford tailback who came close to winning the Heisman himself. But Luck became the focus of this year's team with Gerhart off to the NFL's Minnesota Vikings.

He led fifth-ranked Stanford to an 11-1 record and a berth in the Jan. 3 Orange Bowl against Virginia Tech.

Luck is the fourth Cardinal quarterback to throw for at least 3,000 yards in a single season. He has completed 245 of 349 passes for 3,051 yards with 28 touchdowns and just seven interceptions. He also displays remarkable quickness for someone who stands 6-foot-4 and weighs 235 pounds -- recording three runs of more than 50 yards -- which is one reason he draws comparisons to legendary Stanford quarterback John Elway.

What makes the quarterback so appealing to NFL teams is how he has mastered Stanford's pro-style offense, which is like a graduate course for playing on Sundays.

Harbaugh, a 1986 Heisman Trophy finalist as a quarterback at Michigan, marvels at Luck's intelligence as much as his dead-center passing. He once said Luck takes notes during quarterback meetings just to placate him.

"You tell him something, and he memorizes it," Harbaugh said.

To which Luck responded, "I definitely need to take notes, not just to appease my coach."

Leading the way

Teammates say Luck has made a conscious effort to become more vocal this season. He showed that take-charge approach during halftime at Arizona State last month with the score tied 7-7.

"He was screaming and yelling, saying we're not doing the things we can do," Baldwin recalled. "We knew that, of course. But he put it into words for the rest of us."

Then Luck led a fourth-quarter drive that gave Stanford a 17-13 come-from-behind victory.

Oliver Luck, a Rhodes Scholar finalist while attending West Virginia, said his son's desire to blend in has enhanced his athletic success.

"Andrew understands that it creates a team unity and chemistry that's instrumental when the grunts see the leader in the trenches right there with them," said Oliver, now athletic director at his alma mater. "You hear about a soldier's general like (George) Patton. That's the type of attitude that Andrew tries to capture."

But his shyness is genuine. When the team recently was honored during a women's basketball game, he quietly stepped to the side to let teammates bask in the adulation at center court.

And when ESPN asked to let a camera follow him around campus for a day-in-the-life story, Luck shunned the opportunity.

"Honestly," Luck said, "I don't think my life is very interesting."