



Everything New Orleans

Stanford's Andrew Luck is 'man to beat' for Heisman Trophy

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By Ted Lewis, The Times-Picayune

THIBODAUX — When Andrew Luck phoned his idol, Peyton Manning, shortly after Luck's masterful dissecting of Virginia Tech in Stanford's 40-12 Orange Bowl victory that propelled Luck to the top of every draft board, it wasn't to ask advice on whether he should come out or return for his junior year in college.

Luck had already made that decision. He was staying.

Rather, it was to seek Manning's counsel on how to handle things. Both the praise which would make him the poster child for what's good in college football during a time of endless scandal, and the incredulity that Luck would risk millions to again play for free at the Farm.

"I just wasn't ready to leave," said Luck, who has spent the weekend working at the Manning Passing Academy. "I wanted to get my degree, I have a special group of teammates I wanted to stay with, and football-wise, we have the chance to make this a very special season in the history of Stanford athletics.

"So why not come back?"

But what about the money — even if the expected NFL labor settlement will net him significantly less than \$78 million, \$50 million of it guaranteed, that 2010 top pick Sam Bradford received?

"Whatever it is, it'll be there," Luck said. "I really can't get my arms around what the difference is."

Manning, whose own decision to stay for his senior season at Tennessee worked out for the best, said Luck shouldn't be second-guessed.

"It's always OK to stay," he said. "Andrew's big, strong, good-looking, with a passion for the game and a passion for his school.

"I expect him to be a great quarterback for the NFL for a long, long time."

Barring catastrophe, Luck is the odds-on favorite to be the No. 1 pick in the 2012 draft. NFL analysts say Luck's combination of size (6 feet 4, 235 pounds), mobility, arm strength, football savvy and just about every other intangible makes him the most NFL-ready quarterback since, well, Peyton Manning.

"He's built like a linebacker but with tremendous movement for a big guy," said former coach and current NFL analyst Jon Gruden, who also was at the camp. "And he plays in a pro system with so many plays that the center has to wear a wristband, so they can write them all down.

"But the thing I really like about Andrew is his work ethic. He's always looking for a way to get better — reading defenses, finding the receiver or taking care of the ball. His passion for the game blows me away."

Not that that passion is always apparent. In conversation, Luck comes across as someone with a life apart from football but not some secular version of Tim Tebow espousing the virtues of being the ideal student-athlete when too many in the sport are viewed as anything but.

"If I can be a help, I'll be a help," Luck said. "But I don't always say the right thing all of the time."

Well-traveled

Although he played high school ball in Houston (where he was heavily recruited by LSU among many others), Luck has a cosmopolitan view of the world mainly because he spent his formative years in Germany and England while his father, Oliver Luck, now the athletic director at West Virginia, was president of NFL Europe.

And at Stanford, Luck is able to take a California cool approach, down to the full beard he plans to

shave soon because it would be too much for his chinstrap.

"At Stanford, you can be yourself," said Luck, who will graduate next spring with a degree in architecture. "People aren't pulling you over to make a picture with their cell phone or whatever.

"I'm going to school with musical geniuses and people splitting the atom and curing cancer. They're all amazing people and stars in their own right."

But for now, few, if any, shine brighter than Luck.

Besides being the 9-2 betting favorite to win the Heisman Trophy (fellow Manning Academy counselor Landry Jones of Oklahoma is second at 13-2), after being the runner-up to Cam Newton last year, Luck is in position to guide Stanford to its first national championship in football (the school has been No. 1 in overall athletic performance for 17 consecutive years and this year won national titles in men's gymnastics and women's water polo to bring its total to 100).

Lofty goals

The Cardinal, 12-1 last year, suffered major losses in the defensive front, at wide receiver and on the offensive line and has a rookie head coach in former offensive coordinator David Shaw.

But it is a consensus preseason top-10 team, and, given Oregon's ever-widening trouble in the Willie Lyles case, can be considered the favorite in the expanded Pac-12, especially with the Ducks coming to Palo Alto on Nov. 12.

"We talk a lot more about being Pac-12 champions than national champs," said Luck, although adding he wouldn't mind getting a peek at the Superdome, site of this year's BCS championship game, before leaving Louisiana. "We've got a lot of good teams to play, not just Oregon. But we also feel like the sky's the limit."

One thing that Luck is quick to point out is that he had no hesitation about staying in school despite Stanford Coach Jim Harbaugh jumping to the San Francisco 49ers and turning over the reins to Shaw, whose profile is so low that at least one team preview still listed Harbaugh as the coach.

"Coach Shaw recruited me, and the players made it clear we wanted continuity in the program," Luck said. "He's obviously a different

personality, but we're running the same offensive system we were before because it's his.

"You never expect to lose your coach. But this has been great for us."

Similarly, Luck isn't sweating the Heisman, pointing out that the last runner-up from the year before to win was Herschel Walker in 1982, 29 years ago.

"When you're the quarterback of one of the top teams in the country, that's going to come with the territory," he said of the Heisman hype. "And going to New York last year was an unforgettable experience.

"I don't want to discredit anybody's opinion, but there are so many great players out there. It's not something I'm giving a lot of thought to."

Some have, though.

As Luck spoke Friday, across the room was Jones, his rival so to speak, for the Heisman and last season's third-place finisher.

"We'll see how it goes," Jones said. "But that guy over there is definitely the man to beat."

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