

Andrew Luck poised to make his mark at Stanford

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Saturday, August 6, 2011



It's hard to imagine a star football player embracing his college experience more enthusiastically than Andrew Luck has.

Widely considered the top college player in the nation, he's on track to graduate in June in the demanding major of architectural design. Some NFL-bound players go through the motions academically, but this quarterback throws himself into his studies.

He's also a huge Stanford sports fan. He shows up not only at women's volleyball matches - his sister, Mary Ellen, is a sophomore on the team - but also at basketball, baseball, even women's gymnastics competitions.

"It's a very close-knit community of athletes on campus," he said. "We try to support each other when we can."

To many people on the outside, his decision to play one more year at Stanford was mind-boggling. He might have been the top pick in last April's NFL draft. That spot fell to Heisman Trophy winner Cam Newton, who now has a contract that guarantees him a little more than \$22 million over four years from the Carolina Panthers.

Why stick around?

Why risk a serious injury that could blow the big money when your goal, after all, is to play in the NFL?

In some quarters of the blogosphere, Luck's decision was construed as "one of the stupidest decisions such

a supposedly smart guy can make" (Bleacher Report), "the most stupid decision in the history of mankind" (Serious Beef) and "one of the dumbest decisions a public sports figure has made in recent memory" (Scientific Sports Picks).

In an interview, Luck said the decision "wasn't too tough." He ticked off some of the reasons: "I wasn't ready to move on. Still enjoying (college ball). Probably a better player (after one more season). I still wanted to play with the guys I came into Stanford with. I'd like to leave a better mark on Stanford and finish up school as well."

It helps, too, that unlike many college football stars, Luck comes from a monied family. (His father, Oliver, is a former NFL player and football executive who is now the athletic director at West Virginia.) He simply didn't need to leave. And his family bought an insurance policy worth \$5 million in case he's hurt.

Directing workouts

This summer, he's taking Engineering 10, an introductory course, besides doing independent study in his major. He also was in charge of his teammates' summer workouts, which coaches aren't allowed to attend.

"He's the guy they're all accountable to," head football coach David Shaw said. "He sets the tempo. He tells them what they're supposed to be doing. If guys do it wrong, he's the one that's out there correcting them."

Sizing up Stanford's heralded freshman class, Luck said, "They're wide-eyed, but very good workers." He recalled that when he arrived on campus as a freshman he readily agreed to spend the season on the sidelines, determining that, at least for the time being, he wasn't "good enough to play college football."

How things have changed. By the end of the season - sorry, fans, but he won't use his final year of eligibility in 2012 - he'll hold many of the passing records at a school that has been graced by such gifted quarterbacks as John Elway, Jim Plunkett and John Brodie.

Under his leadership

Luck, at 6 feet 4, 237 pounds, is big enough to run over would-be tacklers and his passing touch helped him set a conference record for completion percentage last season - 70.6. Under his leadership, the Cardinal finished last season with a 12-1 record and ended the season ranked No. 4 in the country.

"What I love about him," Shaw said, "is that (his goal) is not to be great to get to the NFL. It's to be great right now. He's trying to be great every day. He sets a high standard. If our best player is pushing himself and working hard every single day, there's nobody on our team that gets to take a day off."

Shortly after deciding to stay, Luck called his buddy, four-time NFL MVP Peyton Manning, for advice. Manning, the Indianapolis Colts' quarterback, had resisted the urge to leave the University of Tennessee before his senior year, instead staying for a final season.

Peyton Manning's advice

Manning counseled Luck not to look back and, according to Luck, to "understand that people aren't going to just lay down because you came back to school. Put your work in and enjoy it."

Luck worked at Manning's passing camp in Thibodaux, La., early in the summer and also went on a family vacation to northern Italy. It was while growing up in Germany and England (his father was working in football leagues there) that he became interested in architecture. He's interested in designing stadiums, but they're far from the only kind of structure that rings his chimes.

Asked if he'd rather be the next Peyton Manning or the next I.M. Pei, he said, "Peyton Manning. I like football more than school."

What gives him the most pleasure on the field isn't throwing a touchdown bomb. Rather it's simply "when you put a lot of work into something and then you see it come to fruition," he said.

'It's neat to see'

It could be a touchdown drive in which he does nothing but hand off. "If it works out, it's neat to see. 'Look, we've worked on it all week, and it works on Saturday as well.' "

When he had time to relax this summer, he read "A Game of Thrones," the epic fantasy novel by George R.R. Martin, or played a soccer video game.

"I haven't played a football video game since high school," he said. "I get enough football."

One to watch

Stanford football opens practice Monday with Andrew Luck at quarterback. He is a top contender for the Heisman Trophy. The award, for the nation's top

player, has been won by only one Bay Area athlete - Stanford's Jim Plunkett in 1970.

-- Luck, 21, is 6 feet 4, 237 pounds.

-- He finished second in the Heisman Trophy voting last season.

-- Stanford had a school-record 12 wins last season.

-- A senior academically, this is his third football season.

-- Luck was valedictorian at Stratford High in Houston.

-- His father, Oliver, played four seasons in the NFL.

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