

# Andrew Luck manages to stay grounded

By Mark Purdy  
Mercury News Columnist

So far, so good for Andrew Luck. Monday, he completed the first practice of his final season at Stanford. He suffered no noticeable injury to any body part and no noticeable inflation of his ego.

That last part could be a danger, you know, for a 21-year-old quarterback who owns the entire college football world. Figuratively, anyway.

Luck is a leading Heisman Trophy candidate, on merit. His Stanford football team is ranked sixth in one preseason poll. (Yes, that's sixth in the nation, not in the Pac-12.) After his decision not to enter the NFL draft last spring, Luck was universally applauded for his academic bent. He spent the summer being featured in national magazines and being lauded from coast to coast as the best quarterbacking thing since sliced Manning.

Surely, this must affect his relationship with teammates a little bit. Right?

Evidently not.

"Am I allowed to tell him he threw a bad pass?" asked senior receiver Chris Owusu, repeating a question. "I don't think I'd ever tell him that, because I don't think he's ever thrown a bad pass. But I wouldn't be afraid to tell him if he did throw one. It wouldn't hold any weight, though, because we know how good he is. There's no one like him in college football."

Luck begged to differ. "They'll still speak their minds and say mean stuff to me," Luck maintained after leaving the practice field Monday. "We still have arguments."

About what? "I don't know -- football, girls, whatever college kids talk about," Luck said. On the field and off, he seems determined to downgrade any random accusations of glamour against him. Luck has rid himself of the floppy hair and thick beard he wore the past few months and now sports a buzz cut and razor stubble. Gives him more of a football feeling, Luck said. He also is eager to be critiqued by new coach David Shaw and his staff.

"Thank God he has the personality that he has," Shaw said Monday.

Yes, that personality is no rumor. Luck remains one of the most grounded great athletes to pass through the Bay Area. The suspicion here is that his father has at least something to do with it.

At the University of West Virginia from 1978-81, Oliver Luck was a three-year starter, set school passing records, threw for 43 touchdowns and led the Mountaineers to a bowl victory over Florida. In fact, you could easily make the case that before his senior season, Oliver Luck was a bigger deal in the state of West Virginia than his son currently is in the state of California. Or even the half-state of Northern California.

In West Virginia, the Mountaineers football team is by far the No. 1 sports attraction. In the Bay Area, Stanford's football team has to fight through the pro-sports clutter to get attention. One would imagine that Oliver Luck had to deal with some pretty heavy ego-stroking and fawning attention -- and that he might have advised Andrew about how to avoid getting too impressed with yourself.

Andrew says they haven't discussed it once. Any influence Oliver had over Andrew in that regard has occurred by osmosis.

"I guess I'm fortunate that the wise parenting I received over the previous 20 years has carried over, because we've never talked about that sort of thing," Luck said. "My dad hasn't said much about his college days. Oh, a few times, he might start telling stories. And I've seen some highlight film of him from college. I remember thinking he looked really small. Which is funny, because growing up, I thought he was a pretty big guy."

Some of his dad's stories, said Andrew, are about how tough a place Mountaineer Field could be for opposing teams because of the packed seats and the loud, liquid-courage-fueled fans. Stanford can only wish for such an atmosphere. Despite the preseason buzz around the team, plenty of good seats remain available. Season-ticket purchases are up 43 percent -- but at 25,000 sold, that still constitutes just half the capacity of Stanford Stadium. A fast start surely will boost single-game sales.

There's some irony, of course, in the fact that Stanford's keep-sports-in-perspective attitude will allow Luck to go through the autumn without feeling crushed by adulation. He hasn't instituted a no-autographs-in-sociology-class policy for a simple reason. He is hardly ever asked to sign one.

"I do appreciate the level of anonymity here," Luck said. "But you know, there are so many students here who are so amazing in what they do, it's like, why bother the jock in the last row?"

Maybe to tell him he threw a bad pass? Oh, right. Not in the syllabus.