

Luck Stays on at Stanford

by Ivan Meisel, ESPN.com

STANFORD, Calif. -- In January, Stanford quarterback Andrew Luck -- at the time the subject of every sports talk show in America -- stuck his head in the doorway of Stanford assistant coach David Shaw's office. It would be a few days before Cardinal head coach Jim Harbaugh would resign to coach the San Francisco 49ers, and a few days more before the university named Shaw to replace him.

All of Sports Talk America wanted to know where Luck would play this fall. Of course, the experts surmised, Luck would forgo his college career and make himself eligible for the 2011 NFL draft. No one smart enough to attend Stanford could be dumb enough to turn down being the slam-dunk first pick and the millions that come with it.

"Coach, you got a minute?" Luck asked.

"Yeah, come on in," Shaw said.

Luck told Shaw that the next day he would announce that he had decided to return to Stanford.

"I've already made my decision," Luck said, "but what would you have said if I wanted to hear your opinion before that?"

Shaw, who played three sports at Stanford, spent years in the NFL as an assistant coach. He explained to Luck at length that he could be ready for the NFL only if he had gotten college football completely out of his system.

"If you're not done with college football," Shaw concluded, "then you need to come back, because if there's still stuff you love about college football, you're not going to get it. It's never going to come back."

"Yeah," Luck said. "Yeah, I had figured that. I made my decision midway through the year."

"You son of a gun," Shaw said, admiring Luck's ability not to tip his play off at the line.

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Sitting in a small room in the football offices recently, Luck said, "I didn't want to make it a distraction. I didn't feel the need for it."

"In true Andrew fashion," Shaw said after recalling the visit, "he also knew if he announced it during the football season, that's all anyone would talk about. It would take away from the team. But he knew while it was still out there, still nebulous, it would come up every once in a while but it wouldn't be a distraction. That's just the way he thinks. It's just the way that he is. He wants to deflect all the praise and all the attention to everybody else.

"I look at him all the time," the coach said. "I'm like, 'Where did you come from? You're just not normal.'"

Luck's announcement, met with derision from the bards of the airwaves, sent the Stanford community into paroxysms of joy, defining proof that the pairing of the quarterback from Houston and the university in northern California has been an ideal marriage.

Stanford has done for Luck what it does for 6,800 undergraduates every year. It has taken an exceptional raw talent and helped him mature and develop, with the added bonus of shielding him from the demands of celebrity.

But Luck also has been the ideal student-athlete for Stanford. He is the living, backpedaling embodiment of the philosophy that Stanford can succeed on intercollegiate athletics' biggest, messiest stage without cutting corners.

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--Stanford coach David Shaw on quarterback Andrew Luck

Speaking at a reception in the campus alumni center last February, university president John Hennessy sounded almost schoolgirlish about Luck.

"As I told our young quarterback on the day he announced that he came to Stanford to get an education, I am the proudest university president in the country," Hennessy said.

Hennessy is a Silicon Valley guru, an engineer and an academic who has achieved great professional and financial success. The first place

he would choose to spend an autumn Saturday afternoon, says someone who knows him well, is not Stanford Stadium.

"It is not true that I am 'uninterested' in athletics, as you suggest," Hennessy protested last week via email. "As president, I am proud to be the Cardinal's number one fan."

Perhaps Hennessy has seen how the success of Luck and his teammates energized his constituency. Miami -- where Stanford defeated Virginia Tech 40-12 in the Discover Orange Bowl -- is in the part of the country with the lowest density of Cardinal alumni. Yet nearly 11,000 Stanford graduates, students and fans traveled to the game.

"Andrew Luck is very much the quintessential Stanford student," Hennessy wrote. "He is bright, accomplished and interested in many things."

Luck appreciates that the president of the university knows who he is. But he fails to grasp that the entire football-speaking public knows, too. The idea that he embodies an entire philosophy for the university does not compute.

"I'm just a little guy in this whole thing," Luck said. "I'm just here to play football."

That is not faux humility. When someone says something nice about Luck, he looks for somewhere to hide. Luck clings to his lack of ego as a baby bird clings to a branch on the edge of the nest.

[+] EnlargeLuck

AP Photo/Paul Sakuma Luck surprised many in January when he announced he would forego the NFL draft and return to Stanford, despite being the likely No. 1 pick.

It is not that he doesn't believe in his ability. Far from it -- the only hint of self-regard that Luck provided came in his explanation of what attracted him to Stanford. As the valedictorian at Stratford High in suburban Houston, Luck's interest in education is evident. But he signed to play for a program that went 1-11 in his junior year of high school.

Luck knew exactly what he was doing.

"Maybe not take the easy road," he said. "Go to a place where they're struggling a little and see how good you really are. Can you help turn a program around?"

Luck can check that one off his list. Stanford, with Luck under center, is coming off its most successful season in 70 years. He threw for 3,338 yards while completing 70.7 percent of his passes. He threw 32 touchdowns and only eight interceptions.

"That guy's ridiculously good," Washington coach Steve Sarkisian said in April. "Ridiculous. Yeah, physically he's good. But it's all right here." Sarkisian pointed at his head.

Luck led the Cardinal to a 41-0 victory over the Huskies in October.

"It's almost disheartening when we played him," the Washington coach said, "because he audibled every time. You could hear it during the game, and he audibled to the" -- Sarkisian began enunciating each remaining syllable in the sentence for emphasis -- "exact right play every time. Every time! You just felt there was nothing you could do."

But the rest of the trappings that come with being the Heisman Trophy runner-up and the quarterback most coveted by the NFL? Luck keeps his head down and averts his eyes.

Shaw tells the story of introducing a starstruck Luck to actor Jamie Foxx in the team hotel in Miami Beach in January. Shaw relates how Luck, a huge fan of "The Office," met comic actors Steve Carell and Dana Carvey at a charity auction they co-hosted for the Lucile Packard Children's Hospital at Stanford in April.

"Typical Andrew response," Shaw said. "'Oh! Steve Carell!' He got giddy. He was so goofy. Oh, he was just so excited. Here I am, towing Jamie Foxx over to meet Andrew. Andrew sees him, 'Oh, my god! Mr. Foxx ...'"

"I told him," Shaw said, "'No, you don't understand. That's what you do to people.' Jamie Foxx is a huge Andrew Luck fan. But in his mind, he can't fathom that. There's no way."

Luck said he enjoyed meeting the actors but that he didn't talk to them.

"I didn't want to bother them," he said.

For a few more months, at least, Luck can be swaddled in the ethos of campus life at Stanford, which is just right for a player who views the demands of celebrity as he would a blitzing linebacker. When you have students who create Yahoo! and Google, a preseason All-American quarterback is just another guy in T-shirt, shorts and flip-flops, backpack slung over shoulder, in line at Subway in Tresidder Union.

"We had a sitting president's daughter [Chelsea Clinton] on campus here some years ago who was highly respected and valued," said Julie Lythcott-Haims, dean of freshman students and an ardent football fan, "but she wasn't ogled, either. We're accustomed to having excellence around us and we don't take ourselves overly seriously here at Stanford. We have this wonderful blend, what I like to call the complete congruence of intellectualism and irreverence."

"There are so many special people here, it's harder to stand out," said associate athletic director Earl Koberlein, who played basketball for the Cardinal in the 1980s. "People will give people space. You're not going to be idolized and put on a pedestal like at other places."

Luck has been on both sides of the equation. He recalled his reaction when he learned last year that professional golfer Michelle Wie would be living in his dorm.

"I'm a sports fan," Luck said. "I'm like, 'Oh, wow, Michelle Wie! That's awesome!' It's crazy. She'll walk around campus, and people will let her be. She'll walk into the dorm and people will let her be. Great girl, I get to talk to her. I was nervous. 'Oh, I'm not going to talk to her.' She's probably the most famous female golfer in the world, I think, at least, but people just let her be. That speaks volumes about how the students and faculty act on this campus."

Luck may be about to test Stanford's ability to be cool amid the excellence. He said he has begun to notice a few more stares as he walks across White Plaza. His teammates keep an eye out for him, too. At one party last winter, a female student held up her phone to take a picture of Luck. Another Cardinal player gently pushed the phone down and said to her, "You really don't want to do that."

But Luck is fully aware that it will be much worse in the real world. He is on schedule to graduate next spring with a degree in architectural design. Celebrity life, with all of its fame, fortune and lack of privacy, is waiting outside the gates of The Farm. Luck is content to let it.

The scholar: Andrew Luck returns

College football is still played by actual college students, though saying that usually elicits eye rolls. Each year, conferences and other organizations announce various all-academic teams that garner almost no attention. But even the most hardened cynic would have a hard time disputing the fact that the sport's biggest name in 2011 -- a Heisman front-runner and projected No. 1 draft pick -- takes his course reading as seriously as his hot reads.

Andrew Luck is the quarterback at Stanford, which in and of itself requires a certain academic aptitude. But when the Houston native put off the NFL last winter to come back for another season, he did so for more than just another shot at a BCS bowl. He came back to finish his degree in architectural design, which last spring included presenting a design for the school's planned 90,000-square foot arts center. "This is a special place no matter how the football team is doing," Luck said. "It's exciting to go to school here."

The somewhat goofy, mild-mannered 21-year-old grew a farcically long beard over the summer (though sadly trimmed it shortly after Pac-12 Media Day) and is often described as "just a regular guy." That may seem corny to some and hard to believe to others, but Stanford first-year head coach David Shaw says it's true.

"We're so used to great stories being written about guys that end up not being what people said they were," said the Cardinal's former offensive coordinator who replaces Jim Harbaugh. "I often run into people who have run into Andrew and the first thing they said to me is, 'Gosh all the stories are true.' He's humble, he's genuine, he's a good kid. He's a great ambassador for college football."