

As Luck Would Have It

Antonio Gonzalez, AP

STANFORD, Calif. - Andrew Luck was a freshman, just a few weeks into his first college football season, when then-Stanford coach Jim Harbaugh called the quarterback to his office.

It was good news. Harbaugh was ready to make Luck the starter.

His reaction, however, was nothing like Harbaugh expected.

"He told me he didn't think he had earned it," Harbaugh revealed to The Associated Press this week. "He didn't think he had beaten anybody out. And as excited that he would be to start, he didn't feel like he had won the job by beating anybody out."

Luck ended up redshirting in 2008, and who knows what might've transpired if he didn't?

If Harbaugh had his way, Luck might already have played his last college game or even won a Heisman Trophy.

"That's profound right there," said Harbaugh, now the San Francisco 49ers coach. "That always resonates with me."

When it comes to making big decisions, Luck doesn't go the conventional route.

The strong-armed and quick-footed junior turned down a chance to be the NFL's top pick to stay with the Cardinal this year, announcing his desire to return in a one-sentence news release by the school in January. While he could be cashing in on millions already, Luck's life is far less glamorous.

The architecture major pedals around campus on a rather ordinary mountain bike to his usual parking space: a rusty rack outside Stanford's football facility. On a recent morning, he had a quick workout in a stained white T-shirt with the sleeves cut off and worn-down black shorts. Afterward, he grabbed a ham and egg sandwich on ciabatta bread with an iced coffee from "Jimmy V's Sports Cafe" inside the athletic offices and scarfed it down all while doing yet another interview with a reporter.

Then it's off to class. Football meetings. Practice. And, of course, studying.

"It's just the way we do things around here," he said.

Luck wouldn't have it any other way.

The unique setting at Stanford is his personal bubble, a place filled with future online innovators, venture capitalists and politicians that allows him to live a life of relative anonymity. Even though Luck's stature has grown in popularity on campus, it's not even close to what it would be had he turned pro.

"There are times people are sitting at the table in the dining hall talking about him," senior linebacker Shayne Skov said, "and they don't even realize he's sitting at the table with them."

Luck relishes that environment.

The way he sees it, the NFL will always be there. Soaking in Stanford's nuances is something he'll never be able to do again, and he's not wasting a final opportunity.

Luck takes part in a soccer scrimmage each spring with other football players against the women's team. The guys lost 5-4 this year. He has lived down the hall from golfer Michelle Wie, run into former Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice inside the football gym, attended Olympic sporting events and mingled with executives from most major Silicon Valley companies — all on the Stanford campus.

Yet his favorite chance meeting? Talking with actor Steve Carell during a charity football event at Stanford days after "The Office" television series filmed its final episode.

"I wanted to cry," Luck said.

"Yup, that's Andrew. He's kind of goofy," said Luck's sister, Mary Ellen, a sophomore on the Stanford volleyball team. "We tease him all the time."

Luck's true love comes in the same place as so many other Stanford students — in the classroom.

Among the reasons he returned was to finish his degree in architecture, an appreciation that stemmed from spending the first 11 years of his childhood growing up in Europe. His father, Oliver, a former NFL quarterback and the current athletic director at West Virginia, was a

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longtime executive in the World League of American Football and NFL Europe.

The family lived in different parts of Germany and later London, and Luck was constantly scribbling mock-ups of the centuries-old buildings and futuristic soccer stadiums in his notepad. During annual winter road trips, he would sit in the back seat of his parents' car with Mary Ellen designing ski resorts.

"Always scribbling," Oliver said.

Luck enjoyed soccer far more than football — like most kids in Europe — and playing the sport in his early years helped him develop the footwork so many have compared to Peyton Manning, whom Luck spoke with for guidance before making a final decision to return to Stanford. Only when the family moved to Houston did Luck's football stardom take off.

He also was never shy in the classroom, part of the reason he was attracted to Stanford, and his father believes the high marks often led some to question his son's passion for sports — which is still the one criticism he gets at times. For those who know Luck best, he's more competitive than anybody.

When Luck and his father drove out from Texas to Stanford to move out the Honda Accord before his sophomore season, they made a pit stop at the Grand Canyon. Luck wasn't satisfied just gazing at one of Mother Nature's most spectacular views. He persuaded his father to hike down to the bottom and back up — all in the same day.

"Everything with Andrew turns into an athletic competition," Oliver said.

The first time Harbaugh ever met Luck was on a recruiting trip to his Houston high school. Searching for the coach's office, Harbaugh bumped into Luck while he was bouncing around the weight room.

"He was just getting after it. He was running from machine to machine," Harbaugh said. "I came by, it was kind of as he was running to another machine, and he shook my hand and said, 'Coach Harbaugh, nice to see you. I'd love to talk, but I've got to get my workout in.'"

That competitive drive has lifted Luck and academics-first Stanford into the ranks of college football heavyweights. Luck, the Heisman runner-up to Auburn's Cam Newton, enters this season as the overwhelming favorite for college football's most famous award, a player many believe is the most NFL-ready quarterback in more than a decade. Coming off a 12-1 season capped with an Orange Bowl victory over Virginia Tech, the Cardinal were one bad half against Oregon from playing for the national title.

Luck set school records for TD passes (32), completion percentage (70.7 percent) and passing efficiency (170.2) last season to help the Cardinal finish fourth in the final AP poll, the school's best ranking since the unbeaten 1940 team finished second. He already has been mentioned alongside John Elway, Jim Plunkett, John Brodie and Frankie Albert as one of Stanford's great quarterbacks.

"With Andrew coming back, it's led to some nights where it felt pretty good going to bed," said new coach David Shaw, promoted from offensive coordinator. Not that Luck brags about his accomplishments. Instead, the celebrations with friends and family are the ones he truly cherishes.

He enjoys Sunday night dinners with Mary Ellen, usually starting because "she just wants to borrow my car." When his roommate, Griff Whalen, went from walk-on receiver to scholarship player before last season, "Andrew was happier than me," Whalen said.

And after learning he was second at the Heisman ceremony last year, the first thing Luck did was call teammate Owen Marecic to tell him he was 10th.

"He doesn't like attention," Mary Ellen said. "He's much happier for others and to celebrate with others about their accomplishments." Deflecting the spotlight could be tough for Luck this season. At least everywhere but Stanford. The Cardinal will likely be a preseason top-10 pick when the AP poll comes out Aug. 20 and are the heavy favorite to challenge Oregon in the North Division for a spot in the inaugural Pac-12 championship game. Injuries are always a concern, although Luck doesn't spend any time wondering what could go wrong.

Stanford athletic director Bob Bowlsby and Luck's parents had to bug him to sign an NCAA insurance policy that could protect him for up to \$5 million after he didn't immediately sign the paperwork. Luck's family also bought private insurance that could protect him for millions more.

Of course, the biggest fallback Luck sees will come in his degree next spring. With the Stanford symbol at the top, that might be worth more than anything when his playing days are over anyway. "Most people here," Luck said, "will probably make more money than any football players ever will."