

# With more Luck, Stanford has chance to alter reputation

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One is a 49-year-old whose chiseled features suggest he could take the field tomorrow. The other is a redshirt junior taking his time.

The common denominators, then, are both limited and fairly obvious for Walker and Luck. Their shared bond is college football. Well, that and Heisman Trophy experiences. Both have finished as Heisman runner-ups. Walker is the last player to win the award the season after finishing No. 2. That was almost 30 years ago (1982).

Only three other players have accomplished the feat. Luck, CBSSports.com's 2011 preseason All-American quarterback, could be the next. Stanford's NFL-ready leader goes into the season as a prohibitive favorite to win this season's Stiff Arm. His was the name one spot below, but 1,184 voting points behind, 2010 winner Cam Newton.

"We sort of knew what was going to happen," Luck said of the anti-climatic trip New York experience with fellow finalists Kellen Moore and LaMichael James. "We're not stupid. We sort of had a relaxing trip."

Relaxing no longer can be in the Stanford vocabulary. We know the school's academic mission is sustainable. Can Stanford become a college football power? Coming off arguably its best season -- a 12-1 season ended with an Orange Bowl victory against Virginia Tech -- Stanford is at a key moment in its history.

The game's opinion makers believe in the Cardinal. Stanford ended 2010 ranked fourth. It begins 2011 at No. 7. A school that produces some of the best and brightest minds in the country can also produce smart, accomplished football award winners as well. But can it be done often enough to make the top 10 take notice year after year?

"The kids who do well here are naturally competitive," new Stanford coach David Shaw said. "They're also driven. They're coming here with an agenda, which leads us to having a locker room full of guys who are motivated and know how to work together and achieve a goal."

Stanford has been good enough to produce the past two Heisman runner-ups (also Toby Gerhart in 2009), but inconsistent enough to win only one outright conference title since 1971. That was the year after Jim Plunkett won his Heisman. It has been good enough to lure Bill Walsh and Jim Harbaugh, but steppingstone enough to lose both to the NFL.

"I don't miss him," Luck said of Harbaugh, now with the 49ers. "He was a great guy, he did awesome things for me. Not to knock him but I don't miss him."

There is no animosity there. With Luck's help, Harbaugh set a new standard for Stanford. The Cardinal became SEC-like in their physicality and attitude. Luck stayed committed, turning down perhaps No. 1 overall money to chase football excellence and his architectural design degree.

He believes the winning can continue under Shaw, a cerebral 39-year-old who played receiver for the Cardinal under Dennis Green and Walsh (during his second coaching stay).

"He's a little more quiet," Luck said. "But there is a fire inside of him that burns just as bright."

Revamping an offensive line that allowed only six sacks last season suddenly isn't impossible. That's because the returning starters -- left tackle Jonathan Martin and guard David DeCastro -- were all-Pac-10. Departed receivers Ryan Whalen and Doug Baldwin combined for 99 catches in 2010. But Luck has complete faith in senior Chris Owusu and roommate Griff Whalen, who has worked himself from being a walk-on.

There is a load of depth at running back. Stanford must find strength in the middle of the defensive line that was key to the Cardinal finishing in the top 10 in scoring defense.

Luck says there will be no drop off. Only four quarterbacks were more accurate last season than Luck at 70.7 percent. Only two had a higher touchdown percentage (TD passes divided by attempts). He just always seemed to be there when the Cardinal needed him.

Now he is here when college football needs him. Only 14 other Heisman runner-ups have returned. Only nine of those have gone on to finish in the top six the next season.

"He's in a situation where he doesn't have to go undefeated [to win the Heisman]," according to Chris Huston, who runs the comprehensive heismanpundit.com. "Being a Stanford quarterback helps. He was the runner-up last year, but he wasn't an overhyped runner-up. He's in a sweet spot as far as exposure is concerned."

Everyone seems to agree that Luck and the Cardinal aren't going away in 2011. The consensus is that Stanford is pretty much the league's second-best team next to Oregon. A berth in the league's first championship game might be at stake in a Nov. 12 home game against the Ducks.

"I was here with Denny Green, we went from 5-6 to a bowl game," said Shaw, who played from 1991-94. "The difference was we were physical. When it turned around [Shaw's sophomore year], we had the biggest offensive line in the nation. We had Tommy Vardell, the most physical runner in the nation. We pounded people between the tackles."

Maybe linking Walker and Luck in the same sentence doesn't sound so outrageous. The same year Herschel won that Heisman (1982), a different Stanford quarterback finished second.

Some believe to this day that the difference in the Heisman race that year came down to Cal's Kevin Moen weaving his way through the Stanford band for the game-winning touchdown. You might have heard about it.

That loss was John Elway's last game for the Cardinal. Georgia, Walker, Elway and the SEC have done OK for themselves since then.

Stanford is still on the road to finding itself. Have perceptions changed?

"I'd like to think so," Luck said. "We take pride in what people think of us as a football team.

"A good foundation has been set."