

Stanford QB Andrew Luck strikes image of Raider

Bruce Jenkins, SF Chronicle

So it's 3rd-and-26 for Stanford, not the greatest set of circumstances, with the Colorado game still in doubt. Andrew Luck rolls to his right, throws on the run, and nails the sprinting Griff Whalen with a perfect strike.

Gain of 27.

Such was the essence of the Cardinal's 48-7 win Saturday, another study in precision by the nation's best quarterback and his bottomless well of receivers. We have reached the point where the Oregon game cannot come too soon (it's Nov. 12, at Stanford), for the rest of the Pac-12 is in a separate and very envious class.

The death of Al Davis was on everyone's mind this day, and as Luck unveiled his priceless set of tools, carving up yet another secondary with a 26-for-33, 370-yard performance, one couldn't help but imagine Luck as the Raiders' quarterback.

Nothing against Jason Campbell, but when it comes to the next NFL draft, even the lowly teams set at quarterback (Carolina, St. Louis, Philadelphia, Indianapolis, assuming the return of Peyton Manning) would have to seriously consider Luck if handed the No. 1 pick.

With his scraggly beard and tough-guy aggression, ready to throw a block or simply trample somebody, Luck strikes the look of a classic Raider. You could imagine Davis asking the QB to talk architecture (Luck's academic passion), or to see how much he knows about World War II. A fanciful image, perhaps, but such is the pervasive impact of Davis' career - a prime topic of conversation Saturday and for years to come - and Luck's potential.

For the moment, we find him a man among boys in the collegiate game, looking for Whalen - or fullback Ryan Hewitt, or one of his three elite-level tight ends - and delivering laser beams on the numbers. This is a Stanford team that has committed only three turnovers all season, one of them by the kickoff-return squad. Luck has thrown just two interceptions, and better yet, neither was his fault (a tipped pass against Duke and a drop by Chris Owusu, right into the hands of Colorado's Terrel Smith).

It must be said that Stanford got a huge break last week when Paul Richardson, Colorado's difference-making sophomore wide receiver, hurt his knee in practice and was declared out for three weeks. If you watched the Cal-Colorado game, you'll recall Richardson catching 11 passes for a school-record 284 yards, a veritable Cliff Branch-like display, and Richardson already has 11 touchdowns in his career.

Richardson would have added some spice to the proceedings, but little of consequence. A Stanford Saturday has become the surest bet in Bay Area sports, even if it remains a veritable mystery to distant time zones. (In the wake of 7:45 and 7:30 p.m. starts against Arizona and UCLA, respectively, Saturday's game was on the Versus channel; same deal next Saturday at Washington State.) But the scores and statistics do not lie, and they burn hot across the Internet. If there's a Heisman Trophy discussion that does not begin with Luck, it is the province of fools.

Colorado head coach Jon Embree looked a bit stunned after the game. He knew how Jim Harbaugh changed the entire dynamic of Stanford football, turning a traditionally soft team into a bunch of attack-mode hitters, and he knew beforehand that the Buffaloes' vaunted pass rush, responsible for 18 sacks coming into Saturday, wasn't going to penetrate an offensive line that has protected Luck so well (two sacks) all season.

"The way Luck checks off at the line of scrimmage, reads everything that's going on, makes it so tough," Embree said. "You put too much pressure on him, it exposes your corners. If you're loaded against the run, he'll pass. Set up for the pass, he'll run the ball. You can't disguise it. He's just the best quarterback, no doubt."

Outside the locker room, two members of the Colorado contingent were raving about Luck.

"I can't believe the velocity he gets when he throws on the run," one said. "Just unreal."

"And right on the chest," said the other.

"So which throw was better - when he ran to his right, or to his left?" referring to a touchdown pass to Hewitt for a 34-7 lead in the third quarter.

Consensus: The one to his right. That was 3rd-and-26. Gain of 27. The latest defining moment in an ongoing masterpiece.