

Luck wows with crunch-time cool

Scott Ostler, Chronicle Columnist

Andrew Luck lost his cool twice Saturday night in Los Angeles.

A double meltdown in triple-overtime? Is that any way to impress the Heisman and BCS voters? Is the pressure getting to Luck?

The first flip-out came immediately after Luck threw the worst pass in college football history, a pick-six that put Stanford behind USC by seven points with three minutes left in the fourth quarter.

Stanford coach David Shaw tells what happened next:

"He came off (the field) and he was irate, as upset as I've ever seen him, for about 30 seconds," Shaw said Tuesday at his weekly media briefing.

I asked Shaw if he tried to calm Luck down.

"No. No. I said, 'You all right?' 'Yep!' 'All right, let's go.' And he proceeded to go and hit guys on the shoulder, bang them on the chest and say, 'All right, let's go, we're going to get it done.' "

Sometimes I worry that the Bay Area media, me included, goes too gaga over Luck. He's the Heisman Trophy front-runner, the best college quarterback in years, but do we get too caught up in our own Luck hoopla?

Then I talk to Shaw, who seems to be an even-keel, non-bombastic fellow, and I come away thinking we're underselling Luck. Shaw doesn't even try to go nonchalant when talking about his QB.

I asked Shaw if he was worried during the 30 seconds that his all-solar-system team leader was blowing a gasket.

"Not at all, not at all," Shaw said. "This is a different human being we're dealing with. I've been around a bunch of really good ones, on the college level and on the NFL level. I was not concerned. I've never seen him out of control. I've seen him get upset, but he goes unbelievable quick from upset to focus. I wasn't worried one bit."

So we see. In fact, Shaw and Luck were by far the two coolest cats in the madhouse at that moment, as Stanford faced an epic collapse. The two huddled briefly and seemed to be discussing what they would order at the malt shop after the game.

"This quarterback, in a two-minute drill, I don't know how many times he's ever been stopped," Shaw said. "He's been pretty doggone good for three years, and we weren't overly concerned about whether or not we were going to get down in the red zone. Now, would we punch it in? That was going to be the test. But I felt confident about us being able to move the ball in the two-minute drill."

Are we guilty of dwelling on the past here? A huge hunk of the season looms ahead, with major challenges.

Nah. If we're smart, we media, we will mine nuggets from this game for years to come. And the story isn't all about Luck, but he keeps popping into the picture.

When Luck scrambled out of bounds during the desperation fourth-quarter drive, and was brushed by a USC player, Luck took a phony soccer flop, trying to draw a late-hit penalty. (That little act could cost Luck his sportsmanship merit badge.)

No penalty flag, so Luck popped up, patted the official on top of his white cap, and laughed as the two exchanged pleasantries. I was watching the game on TV and had a Joe Montana/John Candy Super Bowl flashback.

The little incident didn't escape Shaw's notice.

"He got back in the huddle with a smile on his face," Shaw noted. "If you're one of those other 10 guys in the huddle, and we're in a crunch-time situation, and your quarterback is smiling, and has supreme confidence, you can't help but be confident."

In Luck they trust. Just before Stanford's end-of-regulation drive, Shaw flipped his play sheet to the two-minute drill and quickly gave Luck six plays.

Then, as Shaw said, "We called a couple (plays) from the sideline, he called a couple from the field, we got down in the red zone."

Shaw let Luck call some of his own plays earlier in the season, in a rout of UCLA. But this was the tightest situation the rookie head coach had ever faced. The national-championship dream was hanging by a thread and he was letting Luck call plays. Crazy.

I mentioned that there were two Luck meltdowns. The other came after the game's final play. Shaw was weaving through the crowd, searching for USC crybaby - I mean, coach - Lane Kiffin, for the handshake. Shaw was poker-faced, not wanting to go Harbaugh-happy (my term, not Shaw's) on the beaten coach.

Luck blindsided Shaw, bear-hugging him and lifting him into the air as if Shaw was a giant turnip that farmer Luck had yanked out of the ground.

You talk about late hits. Should Luck have been flagged for a personal foul?

"I'm supposed to have a (security guard) jogging with me to protect me," Shaw said, "and (Luck) didn't give me any warning. He got a smile out of me."

Whoa, settle down there, coach. This season is just beginning.