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Andrew Luck has Stanford focused on history with Oregon next

By David Leon Moore, USA TODAY

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STANFORD, Calif. – He is [Prince Charming](#), [John Wayne](#) and [Johnny Unitas](#) all in one, and isn't it college football's good fortune, in an era so full of scandal and calamity and sorrow, that a young man like [Andrew Luck](#) came along and led an unlikely charge to a potential national championship?

At *Stanford*, of all places.

OK, you might know that Stanford produced a Heisman Trophy-winning quarterback in [Jim Plunkett](#) and a prospect of a generation in quarterback [John Elway](#), both of whom became [Super Bowl MVPs](#).

But did you realize that Stanford has finished in the top 10 in the major-college football polls twice in the last 39 years? The Cardinal finished No. 9 in both polls under coach Bill Walsh in 1992 and No. 4 in both polls last season after a 12-1 finish in coach [Jim Harbaugh's](#) last of four seasons.

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Aside from that, it's been a lot of lean years on what's called The Farm. As recently as 2006, Stanford went 1-11.

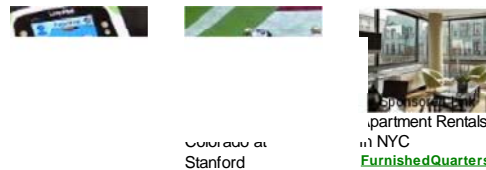
But four years ago, Luck, then a high school player in Houston who is the son of former [West Virginia](#) and [NFL](#) quarterback [Oliver Luck](#), was being told by fiery Harbaugh, also a former NFL quarterback, that he could come west and change all that.

Luck believed Harbaugh's rap, and a few years later it has come to this: Stanford is undefeated (9-0, 7-0 Pac-12 Conference), ranked No. 2 in the USA TODAY Coaches Poll and will host No. 6 Oregon (8-1, 6-0) in a prime-time, nationally televised showdown Saturday for the inside track to the inaugural Pac-12 championship game Dec. 2.

If Stanford gets to 10-0, it would be its best start since 1940.

If Stanford can get to 12-0, it might also play in its first [Bowl Championship Series](#) title game.

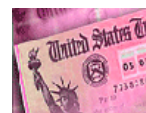
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Quarterback Andrew Luck has guided the Cardinal to a 9-0 start and a No. 2 ranking entering this week's showdown with Oregon.

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If Stanford can get there, the Cardinal might win it all, and who ever thought that could happen at Stanford?

Actually, Luck did, even though Plunkett could do no better at Stanford than 9-3 and Elway no better than 6-5.

"Yeah, I did," Luck says. "No one goes to college expecting to lose or expecting to be part of a losing program. Everybody wants to win. Maybe it was a little bit naïve on my part thinking we could win. But I guess it worked out."

It worked out, all right. On Saturday at 50,000-seat [Stanford Stadium](#), Luck, the [Heisman Trophy](#) front-runner, will try to lead the Cardinal past formidable Oregon and star running back [LaMichael James](#). It would be Stanford's 18th consecutive victory, the longest winning streak in the country.

It might not be the game of the century, like last week's 9-6 [LSU](#) victory against Alabama in a 1-vs.-2 clash. But given Luck's talent, history and competitive drive, it's likely there will be at least a touchdown or two scored, and maybe a lot more.

Numbers tell story

Last year, Stanford led Oregon at the Ducks' raucous Autzen Stadium 31-24 at halftime, then collapsed in the second half and lost 52-31.

The Cardinal have not lost a game since.

This year, the Luck-led Stanford offense has been off-the-charts in efficiency.

Consider:

- Stanford ranks second in the Pac-12 in total offense with 505.8 yards a game, just behind Oregon's 510.7. Stanford is all about balance, passing for 281.1 yards a game and rushing for 224.7.
- In the red zone, Stanford ranks first nationally and is 52-for-52 in scoring opportunities (41 touchdowns, 11 field goals).
- In its last three games, Stanford has scored 159 points: 65 vs. Washington, 56 vs. [USC](#) (in triple overtime) and 38 vs. Oregon State.

Oregon coach [Chip Kelly](#), whose team's only loss came vs. LSU in the opener, calls Luck the best quarterback in the country and the Cardinal's red-zone production "pretty phenomenal."

USC coach [Lane Kiffin](#), whose team lost to Stanford 56-48, says Luck "is perfect at everything."

Stanford is first in the Pac-12 and third nationally in scoring, averaging 48.2 points a game. The Cardinal are on a pace to break the school scoring record for the third consecutive year.

The Cardinal also are excelling defensively, leading the Pac-12 in scoring defense and total defense. But even linebacker A.J. Tarpley advises not to give the defense too much credit.

It's Luck, he says, who will take Stanford where it is going.

In Stanford's one close game this season, against USC, Luck led the Cardinal to touchdowns on their last four possessions.

"We just kept making sure that Luck got the ball back," Tarpley says.

Not concerned with status

Luck, as a third-year sophomore last season, was runner-up to Auburn's Cam Newton in the Heisman voting and was expected to be the first pick in the NFL draft. Except that

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Luck, to the surprise of nearly everyone who *didn't* know him, didn't enter the draft.

"Being the No. 1 pick just didn't mean as much to me, I guess, as my feeling that I just wanted to come back and finish school," says Luck, who is on track to receive a degree in architectural design in the spring. "I want to play in the NFL. That's my dream. I would love to be the No. 1 pick."

This year has been everything he'd hoped it would be. Though his celebrity has grown even more this season and he has a security detail to escort him after games and practices to keep the crowds of admirers from completely engulfing him, he says he does not feel suffocated on a campus filled with high achievers and offspring of the rich and famous.

"Presidents' children and children of foreign dignitaries come here, people who are way more important than some football player," Luck says. "There are people here who are concerned with trying to cure cancer and dealing with atomic energy. They don't go out of their way to embarrass a football player walking across campus."

Academics make Stanford different than most schools that can challenge for a football national title. The football program had an Academic Progress Rate of 977 in the spring — No. 1 in the Pac-12 and No. 11 nationally. Stanford had 65 players with grade-point averages of 3.0 or higher in the spring. Among the team's upperclassmen, 18 are engineering majors.

Stanford first-year coach [David Shaw](#), a soft-spoken man who is nearly a complete opposite from loud, charismatic Harbaugh, has engineered a seamless transition and has just about run out of positives to attribute to Luck.

Shaw calls Luck "rare" and "humble by nature" and "a different human being."

There is no question the 6-4, 235-pound junior is a player of unusual ability.

But it is the intangibles associated with Luck that make him such an appealing and rare package, and first among those is the striking humility.

In Luck's case, it is as genuine as the smile on his beard-framed face. He says he came by it naturally, particularly from his dad, who, after his playing career, became a successful sports executive and is the athletics director at West Virginia.

"My dad was my hero," he says. "I wanted to be like him."

One of the sayings he remembers his father passing down: "When someone else toots your horn, it sounds twice as loud as when you toot your own horn."

Luck does almost no tooting, not even when people call him, as they called Elway, a prospect of a generation.

"That's a nice compliment, but I try not to buy into what other people say," he says. "You start thinking about those things and you'll let your team down. You'll do something stupid once you think you're bigger than you really are or bigger than the team. That's what I love about football. It's the best team sport. No one is bigger than the team."

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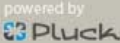
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