

The ultimate team player

Thayer Evans, Fox Sports

When Andrew Luck was growing up in Europe, he and his father, Oliver Luck, spent countless hours together with the rest of their family in the car as they explored the continent's countries.

During those drives to Champions League soccer games, ski trips in The Alps and days at the beach on the French Riviera, the elder Luck, who was involved in what is now-defunct NFL Europe, gave his son advice that he calls "dadisms". They taught his son important life lessons like: Money doesn't grow on trees.

The younger Luck still remembers that "dadism", but there's another that he also recites. It's one that helps explain the rare unselfishness of the Stanford star quarterback in this look-at-me era of sports.

"When somebody else toots your horn, it's twice as loud," the younger Luck recalls his father telling him repeatedly.

That's a creed the brainy Luck has taken to heart about his stardom. It's why despite all the talk about him being a lock to be the first pick of April's NFL draft, the front-runner for the Heisman Trophy and the reason his fourth-ranked Cardinal are in the BCS title hunt, he prefers not to discuss any of it.

Instead, the 6-foot-4, 235-pound redshirt junior is more interested in giving the credit to first-year Stanford coach David Shaw and his teammates, talking about his pursuit of an architectural design degree and trying to be just another student at this academically prestigious university.

It's all what makes Luck "a different human being" according to Shaw. That and him deciding last January to pass up millions of NFL dollars to return for this season.

"It's rare," Shaw says. "He's humble by nature. He's competitive by nature. He's not an isolated individual. He's a team guy and I think the guys feel that."

And as cliché as that sounds, it's actually the truth about Luck, the runner-up for last year's Heisman, whose game Saturday at home against No. 7 Oregon (8-1, 6-0 Pac-12) is perhaps the biggest of his career. He is seeking to avenge his team's lone loss last season, a game in which he threw two interceptions.

This season, he has thrown for 2,424 yards and 26 touchdowns with just five interceptions for Stanford (9-0, 7-0).

"I don't know at what point people are going to finally realize this is not an act," says Christopher Juntti, Luck's principal at Stratford High School in Houston. "This is who this guy is."

But before he became the face of college football, Luck was a quiet child who enjoyed spending time with his family. He was raised playing soccer in Europe, where individual success is encouraged, but more so within the framework of the team, unlike in the U.S.

Although Luck was naturally unselfish at an early age, his parents reinforced the virtue.

"We tried to raise kids who are humble and team-focused," says Oliver Luck, West Virginia's athletic director.

A former NFL quarterback for five seasons, the elder Luck is well versed in what it takes to play the position. When his son started following in his footsteps, he emphasized the importance of being selfless even more.

"A quarterback really is only as good as the guys around him," the elder Luck says. "It's a smart business practice, if you will, for a quarterback to really credit his teammates and everybody. Put others first and the quarterback second."

Cardinal at a glance

Cardinal

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While Luck's teammates and their parents had gushed about his potential even when he was a quarterback in middle school, he was unassuming when he arrived with much fanfare at upscale Stratford High in 2004.

"He's such an awe-shucks guy all the time," Juntti says.

One who stuck by his teammates at Stratford High -- where he was one of the co-valedictorians -- no matter the circumstances. In Luck's final high school game in 2007, his team lost 31-27 in the third round of the playoffs.

During the game, Luck's receivers dropped several of his passes, Juntti recalls. When one did on a crucial third down in the fourth quarter, Luck walked over to the receiver and patted him on the back.

“It’s alright,” Juntti recalls Luck telling the receiver. “We’re going to go out and still win this thing.”

For Luck, it has always been about his teammates, as trite as that sounds. When selected to play in the 2008 U.S. Army All-American Bowl, a national all-star game for high school football’s top seniors, he was asked by the game’s organizers to do a photo shoot.

Luck agreed to it, but only on the condition that some of his teammates, including the receivers who dropped the passes, also be included.

“He’s smart enough to know one guy doesn’t win or lose the game,” Juntti says.

When Luck arrived at Stanford in 2008 and was asked by the Cardinal coaches about playing as a true freshman, he deferred to then-starting quarterback Tavita Pritchard, recalls Mike Eubanks, Stanford’s director of football administration.

“He’s the veteran and the guy who really deserves the job,” Eubanks recalls Luck telling Stanford’s coaches. “I don’t deserve it yet.”

Wide receiver Griff Whalen, Luck’s roommate, has become so used to Luck’s selflessness that he changes the channel when the two are watching television and Luck is mentioned.

Even when Luck is told that he played well, he deflects the praise to others.

“He mumbles about how the offensive line did a great job or something like that,” Whalen says.

Last month, in the hours leading up to Stanford’s night game against then No. 25 Washington, Luck heard all about the video game-like passing performances turned in earlier in the day by his peers such as Clemson’s Tajh Boyd and Houston’s Case Keenum. With Luck’s game being televised regionally on a major network, it was his turn to put up eye-popping statistics.

But in Stanford’s 65-21 blowout victory, the Cardinal rushed for a school-record 446 yards. Because of his team’s success running the ball, Luck was a pedestrian 16 of 21 passing for 169 yards with two touchdowns, all season lows this season.

“I’ve got the best quarterback in the nation and we hardly threw the ball,” Shaw says.

After the game, Shaw sought out Luck not to apologize, but just to talk to him. During that conversation, Shaw was stunned by what Luck told him.

“Coach, I think I played just about my best game,” Shaw recalls Luck telling him. “Forget about the yards. As far as seeing what the defense was giving us, making the right run checks, making the right pass and protection checks, I’m really excited about what I did today.”

Luck’s evaluation of his play left Shaw at a loss for words.

“He had every right to say, ‘Gosh, how come we couldn’t throw the ball more?’” Shaw says. “But that doesn’t come to him. What comes to him is, ‘Hey, here’s what I was asked to do and I did it really well and I’m happy about it. Not to mention a lot of my friends played well today.’”

It’s that type of attitude that Shaw says makes Luck so successful.

“If you’re a quarterback who’s a selfish person, eventually it’s going to come out,” Shaw says. “If you’re not, that comes out even bigger. The guys know that he is legitimately concerned about them. He wants to help them. He doesn’t want to take the praise. As soon as he gets it, he puts it on somebody else. It’s genuine and they know it.”

So much, that Luck’s teammates often confide in him about their problems.

“Usually you have to try to help guys get through things and mature,” Shaw says. “We don’t help him get through anything. He helps his teammates get through things. To have that guy in that position is really, really special for us.”

Three days after Stanford’s dramatic triple-overtime victory at USC last month, Luck was his usual low-key self at the Cardinal’s weekly media luncheon. After a roundtable interview with reporters and a couple of video tapings in which he praised his teammates, he grabbed a black plate of ham sandwiches and potato salad.

In between bites, he explained that he doesn’t relish attention. He credited that to how he was raised by his parents and recited verbatim his father’s “dadism” of, “When somebody else toots your horn, it’s twice as loud.”

He says he has always tried to pattern himself after his father.

“It never looks good, I think, when you’re searching for attention or trying to find the spotlight,” Luck says.

That limelight has come to include the “Suck For Luck” phenomenon in which NFL fans root for their respective teams to lose this season

in hopes of ending up with the worst record to be able to draft Luck with the first pick of April's NFL draft. He calls the campaign "a little stupid."

"Why would fans want a team to lose?" Luck says. "I don't understand that part."

Luck is so nonchalant that when asked a question and unable to answer immediately because he was chewing his food, he apologized.

"Sorry," Luck says. "I thought that was going to be a lot smaller bite."

Luck's answers to football-related questions are self-deflecting, but he's chatty about his class schedule. After this quarter, he will be two classes short of having his degree in architectural design.

He plans to take the winter quarter off in preparation for the NFL draft, but return to Stanford during the spring quarter to finish up his degree. He's currently enrolled in three classes this quarter, two of which are art history courses.

One is on architecture since 1900 and the other is about archaic Greek art.

"We've looked at going all the way to 1000 B.C. with the vases, funeral pyres and all that," Luck says of his archaic Greek art class.

Luck likes his architecture since 1900 class more, but is most interested by his third class, one about urban sustainability. He recently submitted a topic for a final presentation in the course on "how stadiums are connected within the fabric of urban life."

"It's going to cover the first stadium at Olympia to The Coliseum to Zeppelin Field in Neuereburg where the Nazis held all their rallies and Camp Nou in Barcelona and sort of how that fits in with the whole Catalonians versus the fascist government in Spain at the time and that as an outlet for political expression," Luck says.

Although Luck doesn't have much free time during football season, he uses his iPad to stay informed on soccer leagues throughout the world, the U.S. presidential race and the financial woes in Europe.

"I don't understand much about economics except the supply and demand curve," Luck says. "But I just think it's interesting to see what's going on."

On Stanford's picturesque campus, Luck is more Joe College than Big Man On Campus. He fits right in riding his bicycle while dressed in sweats and wearing a backpack.

"He is what we call the anti-celebrity," Eubanks says. "Nothing stands out because the whole point is what he tries to do is not stand out."

And while Oliver Luck is proud of his son's football accomplishments, he is most pleased by his son's high character. He insists his son's coaches also deserve credit for it.

"I'm glad he listened," the elder Luck says. "At some point, it was reinforced and Andrew said, 'Oh yeah, the old man is right. This is the best way to go about it.'"

This past summer, Luck and his family returned to where he first heard his father's "dadisms" — Europe for vacation. During the trip, they visited the canals of Venice, took cooking classes in Italy and saw shows in London.

"He loved it," Oliver Luck says.

Even better, Luck wasn't recognized by fans the entire trip. Not that he was complaining about the lack of attention.

That's just exactly how he likes it.