

Demands High for Stanford Quarterback

by Jon Wilner, Mercury News

Andrew Luck emerged from the Stanford locker room late Saturday night, grabbed a box of postgame pizza and greeted his other team.

“Hey guys,” Luck said to three security guards wearing Secret service-style earpieces and waiting for the Heisman Trophy favorite with a golf cart.

The junior quarterback hopped aboard and was whisked out of Stanford Stadium and into the darkness, destination undisclosed — all while avoiding a throng of autograph-seeking fans camped outside the stadium.

On a campus filled with Nobel laureates and a former Secretary of State, it’s rare treatment indeed for an athlete.

But it has become a necessity for Luck, the No. 1 college football player in America and the best-known Bay Area college athlete since Jason Kidd attended Cal in the early 1990s.

“It’s tough for him, coming back from the stadium,” Stanford coach David Shaw said.

Stanford provides Luck with security after both games and practices — but not because of the threat of physical harm. Rather, it’s a means of managing requests for autographs that can, at times, be overwhelming.

Luck is uncomfortable with the security detail — with special treatment of any kind — but has come to accept it.

“The older I’ve gotten, the more I understand that sometimes you have to take extra steps,” he said.

It’s not an unusual step at the proverbial football factories like USC, where stars like Reggie Bush and Matt Leinart attracted hoards of autograph seekers after games and practices.

But in the Bay Area, where professional sports dominate, Luck is believed to be the first collegian to require security since Kidd, who faced long lines of fans after every Cal basketball game.

Luck’s refuge — the place where he can be what he covets most: a regular college student — is Stanford’s campus.

“Stanford kids respect other students,” he said. “It’s part of the culture.”

When Luck puts on his football helmet, his privacy vanishes — especially on the road.

The first sign of chaos came on a trip to Notre Dame early last season, when Luck was a Heisman Trophy candidate and the projected No. 1 pick in the NFL Draft.

Stanford arrived at its hotel in South Bend at 10 p.m. on a Thursday night and was greeted by so many autograph seekers that “you couldn’t get off the bus,” according to Matt Doyle, assistant athletic director for football operations.

The following week, the Cardinal visited Oregon. While attempting to spend a few minutes with family members after the game — his only chance to see them all weekend — Luck was mobbed by fans seeking both autographs and pictures.

A few days later, Luck’s parents, Oliver and Kathy, broached the topic of security with Doyle, and a plan was implemented:

An officer from the Palo Alto police department would travel with the team and remain with Luck after games while he spent time with his family; at home, security guards would escort him from the stadium back to the main campus.

“It got progressively tougher for Andrew to talk to his parents for 10 minutes before getting on the bus,” said Oliver, the athletic director at West Virginia. “For some of the away games, it was out of control.”

Autograph seekers also began approaching Luck before and after practice, with some camping out for an hour. In response, Stanford assigned a member of its guest services staff to accompany Luck on the 50-yard walk between the locker room and the practice field.

“What gets us in trouble is that it’s tough for Andrew to say ‘no,’” Doyle said. “And if he says yes, the floodgates open.”

Those floodgates sometimes involve unscrupulous characters.

Luck was besieged by autograph seekers at Kennedy Airport last year for the Heisman Trophy ceremony. The same kids were camped outside the midtown hotel where the finalists were staying.

“It was far too organized to think they were seeking autographs for their own collection,” said Jim Young, Stanford’s senior assistant athletic director for communications, who accompanied Luck on the Heisman trip. “The profiteers pay kids to be their frontmen.”

And that's a problem. The NCAA prohibits athletes or schools from profiting from the sale of autographed memorabilia. (Alabama and Ohio State are involved in scandals of that nature.)

Megan Boone, Stanford's assistant athletic director for compliance, spends 10-15 hours per week reviewing appearance and autograph requests and monitoring internet sites like eBay for items signed by Luck and other Stanford athletes.

If something is discovered, she sends a cease-and-desist letter.

And if that doesn't work?

"At that point, the school has fulfilled its obligation," said Mike Matthews, the Pac-12 Conference's director of compliance. "The NCAA rules don't apply to third parties."

Luck personalizes autographs ("To Joe ...") in an attempt to devalue his own signature. Either that, or he signs something that has a teammate's autograph on it, as well.

But unless the situation is overwhelming — after games, for instance — or shady, Luck will sign autographs anywhere, anytime for as long as possible.

That was evident during a 45-minute team autograph session during training camp. At the end of the allotted time, hundreds of people were still in line for Luck and star linebacker Shayne Skov.

They kept signing.

After 90 minutes, Doyle approached.

"You OK, guys?"

"Yep, no problem," Luck said. "We're good."

After two hours, they were able to walk away.

There was nobody left in line.