

Stanford isn't likely to see someone like quarterback Andrew Luck anytime soon

By Jon Wilner and Elliott Almond, Mercury News

The first pass of his career fell incomplete. So did the second. The third went for a whopping 2 yards. It was Sept. 5, 2009, Stanford against Washington State, and Andrew Luck struggled the way all freshmen quarterbacks struggle in their first game.

Then the second quarter began and Luck threw a 63-yard touchdown pass. Stanford's record and record book haven't been the same since.

Two-plus years and 30 victories later, Luck will take the field Saturday against Notre Dame for what is expected to be his final home game.

A fourth-year junior on track to earn his degree in the spring, Luck announced in July this would be his last season. He is expected to be the first pick in the NFL draft in April.

It has been decades since Stanford had a player like him, and it could be decades before another comes along.

Luck has the most wins by a starting quarterback (30) in school history, the best winning percentage (.833), the highest completion percentage (66.4 percent) and the highest passing efficiency rating (161.5).

Saturday -- perhaps on the first pass of the game -- he will overtake Steve Stenstrom for first place in total offense (more than 9,825 yards).

He needs one touchdown pass to tie John Elway's school record, the difference being that Elway needed four seasons to throw 77 and Luck has needed only three seasons to throw 76.

For all of Luck's dominance of the Cardinal record book, several of his most memorable

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plays have nothing to do with throwing the ball: his bone-crunching hit on USC defensive back Shareece Wright; his collision with Cal safety Sean Cattouse; his one-handed catch of a pass against UCLA. In that game, he also began calling his own plays -- a rarity for college quarterbacks.

"I've never seen or heard of a college quarterback who does what Andrew does for us," Stanford coach David Shaw said. "He's one of a kind."

ANDREW LUCK THROUGH OTHERS' EYES

Much has been written about Andrew Luck the athlete, but a clearer picture of Luck the person emerges after talking to those who know Stanford's star quarterback.

THE VIDEOGRAPHER

As the Stanford football video coordinator, Mike Gleeson has interacted with Andrew Luck on a regular basis for four years.

One of his most vivid memories comes from the 2009 season, when Luck, only a freshman, requested a change in the weekly highlight videos shown to the team on Friday nights before games.

"Andrew asked that he be less of a central figure in what we were showing," Gleeson said. "He wanted us to emphasize the seniors. He felt they deserved it more than he did.

"People ask me what he's like. He's the kind of person where you say, 'Here are the keys to the house and the car. I'm leaving for the weekend.' Then you come home two days later and everything's cleaner than it was before you left. That's what he's like."

-- Jon Wilner

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THE RESTAURATEUR

As the proprietor of Jimmy V's Sports Café in the Stanford athletic department, Jim Viglizzo makes the food that feeds the Cardinal coaches and athletes.

Luck eats in Jimmy V's four or five times per week, all year round. He favors a breakfast sandwich and, for lunch, the turkey club.

"You're never uncomfortable around him," Viglizzo said. "He knows everyone on my staff and addresses them by name.

"He stands in line, and when it's his turn to pay, he pulls out this wallet. It's an old, really worn wallet that's falling apart. I asked him about it once, and he said he's had it since high school. It's seven years old."

Which is about as old as Luck's cell phone.

"That thing is ancient," said Brett Nottingham, the quarterback in line to succeed Luck next season.

-- Jon Wilner

THE ADVISER

John Barton is Director of the Architectural Design Program at Stanford. He also is Andrew Luck's academic adviser.

Barton understands that there's a time for academics and a time for athletics. The question is: Does Luck?

Before the start of the 2010 season, Barton attended a barbecue hosted by the football team. He approached Luck, an architectural design major, to say a quick hello.

"He gave me a big hug and said, 'How are you, John?' " Barton recalled. "Then he asked me which quarter various studio courses would be offered, so he could plan out his schedule for the year.

"I was like, 'Are you kidding me?' It was a month before the fall quarter started. If there was one day he didn't need to be worried about school, that was it."

-- Jon Wilner

THE COACH

David Shaw has witnessed each one of Luck's 76 career touchdown passes. But one of his fondest memories is a sideline conversation during the blowout victory over Washington a month ago.

The Cardinal was in the process of rushing for a school-record 446 yards, which limited Luck's opportunities to throw. Statistically, he was having one of his least impressive games.

"Some other quarterbacks had put up big numbers that day," Shaw said, referring to Luck's Heisman Trophy competition. "I walked over to him and said, 'Andrew, sometimes I have to fight myself to not let you throw the ball more.'

"He was standing there with a big smile and he said, 'Coach, don't ever worry about that. I saw everything. I made the right checks. I made the right reads. I think I just played my best game.' "

-- Jon Wilner

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THE UNDERSTUDY

Sophomore Brett Nottingham of Alamo has become comfortable as Luck's primary backup this season. But it didn't start that way.

"I was trying to soak up everything, just like my dad told me," Nottingham recalled of his freshman year. "I'm saying, 'Yes sir, yes sir, no sir.' Andrew is like, 'Dude, just calm down. Just have fun out there. Learn what you can, but just kind of relax a little bit.'"

Since then Nottingham has focused on picking up little details from a potential Heisman Trophy winner. That included taking Andrew Luck voice lessons so that Nottingham and the other backup quarterbacks could mimic the cadence to which Stanford's offensive linemen are accustomed.

The backups recorded Luck's voice last spring and studied it like a foreign language. "It's definitely baritone," Nottingham said. "He's got a good voice for a quarterback. He's got some gravel in his throat out there."

-- Elliott Almond

THE SOCCER STAR

Lindsay Taylor doesn't recall exactly who started the trash-talking with football players four years ago as freshmen, but she remembers this: "They kept saying they could beat any girls team at any sport. Then they started specifying the soccer girls. That's when we decided we'd play them."

Luck, who has an extensive soccer background having grown up in Germany, led the football players in an annual "Battle of the Sexes" match in the offseason. The quarterback recruited teammates Harold Bernard, David DeCastro, Delano Howell, Chris Owusu, Chase Thomas, Michael Thomas, Nate Whitaker and Daniel Zychilinski for the match.

Luck would arrive on the pitch wearing an authentic soccer jersey from his collection; his father, Oliver, was president of the Houston Dynamo before becoming athletic director at West Virginia. At 6-feet-4 and 235 pounds, Luck is built like a central defender but played in the midfield and up top.

"He had skills," said Taylor, the leading scorer on Stanford's No. 1 ranked team. "He wanted to shoot and cross."

After four years, it's difficult to say who won.

"They do better when the field is large where they can use their speed," Taylor said. "But when you simplify it down to skill, they have no chance."

-- Elliott Almond

THE CLASSMATE

Cameron Lehman met Luck when the students sat next to each in an engineering class. It didn't take long before they became study mates and friends. They collaborated on a project involving emerging forms of energy technology. Lehman and Luck chose to study cow poo.

They presented a paper on the mechanics of how manure can be converted into methane gas, or other bio-gases, and eventually used as electricity.

Lehman, whose father was the St. Louis Blues team physician, liked to cook dorm dinners for Luck and his friends. The gang often included Luck's girlfriend, Stanford gymnast Nicole Pechanec, and Cardinal teammates Griff Whalen, Sam Schwartzstein, Thomas and DeCastro.

"They were my food guinea pigs," said Lehman, now in the Anheuser-Busch sales program. "Nicole is wheat allergic. I had to cook a lot of meals without pasta."

-- Elliott Almond

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THE ROOMMATE

Chemical engineering major Babacar Ndoye didn't know his freshman roommate was a star football recruit until someone told him well after the first quarter started in 2008.

His favorite memory involves returning from class to find Luck watching a game on his laptop in their common room. "He was watching soccer -- not football," Ndoye said. "He was also wearing cowboy boots."

Before leaving for his next class, Ndoye spotted the boots and asked Luck why he was wearing them inside on a hot day.

"He just gave me an honest smile and said, 'They're really comfortable. You should try them sometime.' "

-- Elliott Almond

THE TECH TITAN

Hewlett-Packard chairman Ray Lane was a classmate and friend of Oliver Luck's at West Virginia University in the late 1970s.

Lane, also managing partner of the venture capital firm Kleiner Perkins Caufield & Byers, has seen Andrew throughout the years at Stanford because of his friendship with the quarterback's father. But his favorite memory involves a dinner in southwestern Pennsylvania where he met Andrew's grandmother, Gisela Steppuhn Luck.

"She's the matriarch of the family," Lane said in recalling the West Virginia board of governors dinner. "You could see how the DNA in that family, the ethics and high integrity," come from Gisela, a German native living in Cleveland.

"I've always given Oliver the credit for just having his son do what makes sense as opposed to just run to the money," Lane added of Andrew's decision to return to Stanford this year before entering the NFL draft.

"It starts with grandma."

-- Elliott Almond