

Former West Charlotte QB enjoying his Luck

By Rick Bonnell, Charlotte Observer

Former West Charlotte High quarterback Pep Hamilton has quite the life. He teaches some of the smartest kids on the planet. He gets to live in Palo Alto, Calif., a place with such perfect weather he rides a bike to work nearly every day.

And, he gets to coach Stanford quarterback Andrew Luck at least one more season.

Luck was so good last season that he would have been a prohibitive favorite for the Carolina Panthers' No. 1 overall selection. And yet it didn't surprise Hamilton that Luck passed on the NFL draft. That was partially about Luck's makeup and partially about the Stanford experience. There's a joke among Stanford grads that anyone smart enough to be admitted wouldn't be dumb enough to pass it up.

"You have to understand - Andrew is the epitome of what the NCAA student-athlete should represent," said Hamilton, whose team plays at Duke Saturday (3:30 p.m., ESPNU). "He didn't let opportunity interfere with his desire to get a degree from Stanford.

"He's no big-man-on-campus; he rides a bike like every other student. I've heard him say it: Every student at Stanford is a superstar at something. He wanted to keep being a part of that."

So did Hamilton, who passed on an offer last winter to go with coach Jim Harbaugh to the San Francisco 49ers. Hamilton spent nine seasons as an NFL assistant, and though he misses the pros at playoff time, he thinks he fits better with the culture of college football.

"College football is more personal relationships with the players - you're a coach, but you're also role model and mentor," Hamilton described. "In the NFL, every player and coach is essentially an independent contractor."

Hamilton never intended to coach. An internship the summer before his senior season at Howard led to a job offer from Bank of America. A management-training program and a return to Charlotte was enticing. Then the coaches at Howard asked him to come by spring practice to tutor his successor at quarterback.

Hamilton showed a knack for teaching, so coach Steve Wilson offered him a graduate assistantship. That didn't trump a job in banking, so Wilson raised the ante: a full-time coaching position. That was intriguing enough for Hamilton to consult with his mentor at Bank of America who delayed the management-training slot to the following spring.

"If that hadn't happened," Hamilton recalled, "I'd be a banker now."

The Howard job led to an internship with the Kansas City Chiefs, which led to coaching jobs with the 49ers, Chicago Bears and New York Jets. Fifteen years later, it seems a dramatic rise from an undersized high school quarterback for coach Tom Knotts to offensive coordinator for a Top-10 college team.

Ask Hamilton what got him this far, and he brings up his father, Al, a retired Charlotte policeman still active with the Police Activities League. Al kept repeating something to Pep that became his mantra:

"God gave you two ears and one mouth. So learn to listen twice as much as you talk."

Knotts, now coach at Dutch Fork High in South Carolina, remembers Hamilton just that way.

"He always looked and listened carefully. I'd call him an evaluator," Knotts recalled. "He played with (running back) Brian Knuckles, who was a handful. They'd get into some mischief together, but when it came to making life-affecting decisions, Pep always gave Brian good advice."

As a senior in 1991, Hamilton passed for 2,523 yards and 30 touchdowns, leading the Lions to the 4A state championship game.

As was the case at West Charlotte, being a good listener has been important at Stanford, where inordinately smart players tend to ask "why?" a lot. Hamilton said he isn't threatened by them questioning his reasoning. Rather, you embrace that intellect as a strength.

"One of our seniors, Griff Whalen, said we win because we execute at a high level. We don't make as many mistakes as our opponents," Hamilton said.

No Cardinal epitomizes that more than Luck. Hamilton says it's the student in him - he has a 3.4 grade-point average in engineering - that distinguishes him.

"What's special is how he prepares for games, how he functions in meetings," Hamilton. "He might be the greatest note-taker I've seen."