

My Sportsman: Andrew Luck

By Michael Rosenberg, Sports Illustrated

Sports Illustrated will announce its choice for Sportsman of the Year on Dec. 6. Here's one of the nominations for that honor by an SI writer.

I've always loved college sports, because hey, I loved college and I love sports. It's really as simple as that: Two of our most enjoyable institutions, mixed together into one glorious cocktail. And that is why Stanford quarterback Andrew Luck is my Sportsman of the Year. He reminded us that college sports do have redeeming value, in a year when the whole enterprise seemed to be covered in slime.

Luck began the year by destroying Virginia Tech in the Orange Bowl, then returning to school. Why did he come back? Not to win the Heisman Trophy, though he deserves it. Not to improve his draft stock, since he might have gone No. 1 overall in April. Not even to win a national title. No, Andrew Luck stayed in school because ... he loves school. Imagine that. Heck, even Luck's coach, Jim Harbaugh, turned pro last year.

Luck loves his teammates and his classes and playing for Stanford. He isn't idolized on that campus like some other college stars are, because Stanford doesn't wrap its identity up in its football program. The school would do just fine without a football team, and everybody there knows it.

Without even meaning to, Luck brought sanity back to a sport that has lost its mind. And he did it while playing football better than anybody else in the country. Luck's numbers this year are indisputably great: 70.6 completion percentage, 29 touchdowns, seven interceptions. But they don't really do justice to how good he is.

A Luck backlash was inevitable, and it probably started when Oregon whipped Stanford for the second straight year. Let the questions pour in: He doesn't throw enough deep balls; the Cardinal is a run-first, pass-second operation; Luck lost the biggest game of the Pac 10/12 season for the second straight year.

Nonsense, all of it. Watch the games. Stanford does not have the speed to match up with the best teams in the country -- especially Oregon, which turns football into downhill skiing. Luck elevated his team to the point where it was actually favored to be a much more talented Oregon squad; it's not his fault that talent won out.

Luck should win the Heisman because I believe he is the best player in the country -- and the most valuable. But you get the sense that if Luck finishes second or third, he'll smile and get on with his life.

It's a refreshing attitude, and it's what college football needs -- the sport is a hot mess right now. Joe Paterno, the most respected coach in the sport for many years, was fired for failing to report child molestation. Jim Tressel, revered in Ohio for the last decade, was forced out after lying to cover up illegal benefits.

Schools abandon conferences and longtime rivalries purely for money. They play games in pro stadiums purely for money. Both of the teams in last year's national championship game are ensnared in controversy, because of money -- Cecil Newton, the father of Auburn star Cam Newton, was accused of shopping his son to the highest bidder, and Oregon wrote a big check to "scout" Willie Lyles for reasons that are highly suspicious.

Oregon booster Phil Knight spent millions to make the Ducks a national contender, and it worked. Oklahoma State booster T. Boone Pickens did the same for the Cowboys, and that worked. And yet, if you suggest that maybe all this money should be redirected toward the players who generate it, or that supposedly "amateur" athletes should be treated like amateur athletes, too many people scoff.

It doesn't make sense for universities to employ football and basketball players as "scholar-athletes," or to pay an enormous sum to a guy who teaches the bubble screen. But it damn sure is fun, so we watch and we cheer and we don't really worry about whether the players are getting an education or whether the system treats them fairly. Like Andrew Luck, we always go back to college sports. He is my Sportsman because I like his reasons a lot better than ours.