

THE Responsibility OF Talent

AN INTERVIEW WITH
Andrew and Oliver Luck

Andrew Luck played football in high school and at Stanford University, where he studied architectural design. As one of the most talented players in college football, Andrew could have joined the National Football League with a lucrative contract without graduating from Stanford.

But Andrew chose to stay in school and study, setting an example for others and expressing values he believes in.

Because of his prowess on the field, Andrew was the first pick of the N.F.L.'s 2012 draft. He signed a contract to play quarterback for the Indianapolis Colts, a storied team, replacing Peyton Manning, a legendary quarterback and winner of countless awards and one Super Bowl. For any player, Manning's are big shoes to fill. For a young player fresh out of Stanford, those shoes might seem even bigger. Yet, Andrew is not intimidated. He is confident, though not cocky; intelligent, but not conceited; dedicated to the game, with a good sense of proportion and a calm, easy manner. And he is supremely realistic about himself, sports and the place of sports in life.

**Father and son:
Andrew and Oliver Luck**



“You don’t change your personality in order to lead.”

You could say Andrew Luck learned it all at home. His father, Oliver, was a quarterback for the Houston Oilers who went on to law school and then to leadership roles with the N.F.L., including management positions with N.F.L. Europe. Oliver was chief executive of the Harris County-Houston Sports Authority; president of the Houston Dynamo, a professional soccer team; and is now director of athletics at West Virginia University, his alma mater. Though passionate about sports, Oliver, like his son, does not let sports overwhelm his life, his family or his values. In fact, the Lucks appear incapable of being overwhelmed, or of taking themselves too seriously.

What follows is a conversation between Andrew and Oliver Luck; Robert H. McNabb, executive vice

president of Korn/Ferry International; and Joel Kurtzman, editor-in-chief of the Korn/Ferry Institute’s *Briefings on Talent &*

Leadership. The conversation took place on the Stanford campus shortly before Andrew’s graduation.

You just finished Stanford University and are going to play professionally in the National Football League. How important is playing football to you?

Andrew: That’s an interesting question. I’ve enjoyed playing football — a lot more than I enjoyed studying! But you know, I realize, obviously, that I’m not going to put the sport ahead of my family, or my integrity, or my moral fiber, or my character, or my education. So the answer is, football’s very important to me. But there are things ahead of it.

Have you thought about the qualities you will need as the leader of your team?

Andrew: It’s different for different people. But one of the things I learned from former Stanford Coach Jim Harbaugh, who’s now coaching the San Francisco 49ers, is that you don’t change your personality in order to lead. If you’re a boisterous guy, you can lead boisterously. If you’re a quiet guy, that’s how you lead. Some of the best guys I’ve played with have been quiet and said maybe four words in a month — but they did everything right, so when they did speak, it was effective. People listen. I also think your values are important. I think you have to understand that hard work pays off, trying to do the right thing pays off, and so does having a strong backbone. But in addition, you have to be willing take critical advice and coaching.

Oliver, you also played professional football, like your son. And you’ve had leadership roles on the business side of sports. From your experience, is Andrew’s leadership list of values and qualities complete?

Oliver: I would add being decisive. I think when you’re leading, you have to make decisions and keep your troops behind you. You can’t ever get too far ahead of them, or you’re going to lose touch. You also have to look backwards as much as you have to look forwards to see what worked and what didn’t. But, if you’re leading an organization — particularly in times of turmoil — you have to be decisive.

How do you uphold your values when the pressure is intense — either in an organization or in the middle of the game?

Oliver: I’m not sure you can teach people to keep their cool. In Andrew’s business, as a quarterback, if you lose your cool, you don’t play. You’re on the bench. But that’s not the case in normal life. I believe in the power of logic. If you explain why you’re doing something and have your staff there to hear the reasons, they’ll get it and they’ll act. So it’s a matter of explanation. But remember, leadership in business is not like the military or when you’re playing sports. You can’t just order someone to do something. In football, in the huddle, you call the play and your teammates have to do it. But in most organizations, you need “buy-in,” which means people have to understand what you’re doing and where you’re headed.

Andrew, as you lead a team, how do you know when you’re doing the right thing?

Andrew: If you go to bed at night and know you worked as hard as you could and did as much as you could, then you know you did the right thing. Let’s face it: you’re going to lose sometimes. And, yes, that’s disappointing. But you have to get over it and you move on. But if things don’t work because you didn’t try hard enough, because you didn’t give it enough effort, then that’s a different story and you need to do something about it. Emotionally, I think you have to be on an even keel. You can’t get too depressed in the bad moments, but you shouldn’t get too elated in the great moments, either.

Teams are a unit, but they’re made up of individuals, and the individuals keep changing in professional sports. How do you deal with that?

Andrew: It’s different in college and in the N.F.L., and I only know college right now. You go to college and you’re there for four years, and you know who you’re going to be with the whole time. You know this year these guys are going to graduate, and next year those guys are going to graduate. But it’s different in the N.F.L.

Oliver: In the N.F.L., players can change from day to day.

Andrew: I’m as curious as anybody to see how that whole dynamic unfolds. It will be new to me.



You're going from college football to the N.F.L. You're also replacing one of the league's legendary quarterbacks. What will you do, as a rookie, to establish leadership on a team as storied as the Indianapolis Colts?

Andrew: First, you have to do the right thing the first day you walk into the locker room. You have to keep your mouth shut, and you have to listen. I learned that in high school, and I also learned it in college. Pay attention and listen. But that's not enough. You also have to show you're good at the game of football. Showing you're good at football is the quickest way to gain respect as a leader. You can be a great guy and people might like you, but if you're not performing on the field it's difficult to command the kind of respect from your teammates you need as a leader.

Professor Warren Bennis, who studied a lot of leaders, said ultimately leadership is about the fit between the leader and the group. Do you agree?

Andrew: That's an interesting question. But it's not like you're showing up on the day of the battle with a bunch of guys you don't know. The playing portion

of a game is minute compared to the hours you spend on a practice field, in the meeting rooms, in the locker room BS'ing with everybody, or going out with each other. And I think you learn to respect each other's personalities. I think, if everybody has a common goal, there's no reason you shouldn't be able to find a way you can all fit together to achieve that common goal. I think time is part of it. And part of building a team comes from the general manager or the head coach finding the right guys. I'm not the one getting the guys together. It's the general manager who does that. He's the one who sees me and thinks my personality can fit with the other guys on the team. So I think there's a master plan from someone way above the quarterback that takes fit into account. But I also think you have to expect you'll go through some tough times and that, for lack of a better word, you'll have to "impress" the veterans. And that's not going to be a cakewalk. But when guys have a single-minded goal, a common theme to rally around, it works.

Oliver: I don't think you can approach it any other way but to remain genuine, authentic, true to yourself.

Andrew Luck calls plays for Stanford.

And if that works, great. If it doesn't work, it's usually the coach who has to sort it out and pay the price. Because, ultimately, the coach — as Andrew said — is responsible for putting the team together. And of course, there are a thousand anecdotes about a bad guy in the locker room blowing up a team. Fixing that is the coach's role. But here's the thing: When you put 11 guys in a huddle to play a game, it doesn't matter where they're from, where they went to school, what they studied, or what their economic background is. When you put a helmet on them and put them in a huddle, they're all getting paid to do the same thing — play football. And they all have one goal — winning. That's it. And that's where fit counts. We're not talking about quantum physics. We're talking about winning, which is why they have to perform. And if they can perform, even at a moderate level, then everyone's going to say, "That's my guy" and rally around him. So in a locker room after a game, after practice, players are

all over the map in terms of interests, music and what they want to talk about. But the reason they're professionals is because they care about one thing and that's it. Now, I guarantee they'll size Andrew up the first two or three weeks and they'll say, "Oh, he's got it" — which I think they will. But don't forget, they've all been in Andrew's shoes walking into the locker room for the first time, in college, in the N.F.L. And they all know what it's like.

Did playing at Stanford prepare you to play professionally?

Andrew: When you play in college, I think you get to know what's expected of you, and what will be expected of you in the N.F.L. But I've also been learning what to expect from talking to the guys on the team I'm joining.

How will you put your stamp on that team?

Andrew: Look, I'm not going on to a team where there aren't any leaders and there isn't a direction. There are

Luck family plus one. Front row, left to right: Andrew, Addison, Indianapolis Colts owner, Jim Irsay. Back row, left to right: Emily, Oliver, Mary Ellen, Kathy.



Courtesy/Indianapolis Colts

both. There are coaches. There are veterans who have been around a long time, and guys who played in the Pro Bowl and Hall of Fame players. There are people who have been on the team for years. So what I have to do is go in, and keep my mouth shut, do the right thing, and establish that I can play a little football. Then, after that, I can start to assert my personality. Then, if I feel like my opinion needs to be heard, I can voice it. But it's not a boom-boom, all-at-once effort. I think it takes time to establish yourself as a leader, especially on a team like the Colts.

You have the rare benefit of a father who also played professional football and has had leadership roles in professional and college sports. Did the two of you ever talk about what it is like to lead a team?

Andrew: No. Never.

Oliver: I can honestly say we've never had a conversation about leadership.

But you acknowledge the role of leadership in playing football?

Oliver: Oh, yes. When you start playing football — and even better than that, when you start playing quarterback — you have to be a leader. In American football, the quarterback position is the leadership position. It's more so than the pitcher in baseball, who only plays once every four or five games. In football, the quarterback is the guy talking during the huddle, laying out what everybody should do. And there's a lot of legacy and a lot of lore regarding the importance of leadership in the quarterback position. You hear about it from coaches. You hear it from former players. You hear about it from current players. So I think it's relatively easy to begin to step into the role of leader, if you are a quarterback, because you know what to expect, and so does the team. It's already been defined.

Do you agree with your father's comment?

Andrew: Yes. I don't ever remember having a sit-down talk with either of my parents about leadership. But I think maybe the effect of just watching my dad operate in the world, going to events with him and with my family and seeing how he interacted with people, taught me a lot. I think that made far more of an impression on me than if he sat down and said, "Son, this is how you walk into a room, these are the people you go to first, this is what you say to them." Lessons like that were never forced on me or on any of my siblings. I think it was all very organic, more watching than talking. And I think my mom has as much to do with it as my dad does. I just watched them and learned from them.

Oliver, how eager were you and your wife to have Andrew play football?

Oliver: Andrew's mom and I raised all of the kids to be good students, to be respectful, to be hard workers. And, if they wanted to do athletics, well, that's great. But if they didn't want to do athletics, that was fine, too. So I don't think there was any emphasis placed on Andrew or on any of our other kids to develop them as sports leaders. It just wasn't the way we operated. We let them do what they liked, and we let them learn.

"What I have to do is go in, keep my mouth shut, do the right thing and establish that I can play a little football."

Andrew, a lot has been written about the quarterback as a strategist. Do you enjoy the mental side of the game?

Andrew: The mental aspect of football appeals to me. It always did. I liked it when I first got into college and then later on in college, too. The mental game is a chess match. Each team has a defense coordinator, and that coordinator's personality is imprinted on its defense. The same with the offensive coordinator. Our offensive coordinator has been around for years in the N.F.L., and he has a philosophy, just like the defensive coordinator has a philosophy. So, the question is, how do you pick up on what's going to happen, and what's not going to happen, based on who's on the other side of the ball, against you? How do you take into account the personalities on the other team? As a quarterback, showing that you can go into the huddle, call the play and know what everybody is going to do, appeals to me. I mean, you're not going to know what everybody's doing all the time, but you're going to have a pretty good idea because you're the one calling the plays. And if someone has a question and you can answer that question, then that helps to legitimize your role as a player. So, mentally, I think

“Sports is a meritocracy. If you’re better than the other guy, you’ll play.”

the quarterback’s job is knowing everybody else’s job and what they’re doing, and then letting everyone know that what they’re doing is important.

You studied architectural design, not an easy subject at Stanford. So you obviously took studying seriously. Did you enjoy studying architecture?

Andrew: There were harder subjects than what I studied, and there were easier ones. I’m also not going to act like it was the hardest subject in the world — it wasn’t. But, yes, I enjoyed it, which made it worthwhile.

Is there a link between architecture and athletics?

Andrew: I don’t know. I don’t want to be too cheesy and say that seeing space and lines in

architecture helps in throwing the football. Maybe it does, but I don’t know.

Oliver, what did you study?

Oliver: I studied history. No lines there!

Do you still follow it?

Oliver: Yes. I read a lot of history. I like history. Past is prologue, as they say. When I read for pleasure, it’s usually history.

Oliver, you’re the athletic director at West Virginia University. What’s the balance in your life between sports and other things?

Oliver: Sports is important, and of course we’re all proud of what Andrew has accomplished, as well as what his sister and younger brother have accomplished in sports. But it doesn’t dominate our family conversations. We really don’t talk about sports much if we’re sitting around a table. Sports is great and physical fitness is great, but there are very few kids that have a chance to make a career being a professional athlete. And in the N.F.L., you have a relatively short productive lifespan. Five years is long! So I don’t think we should overemphasize sports. If anything, in our family, we underemphasized it.

You didn’t talk about sports at home?

Oliver: Oh, no, we did talk about sports. We didn’t talk about it all the time.

Andrew: It was always casual talk. The way you talk about it to anybody, the way you talk to your friends, the way you describe any game that happened. We didn’t have lesson plans. There were no sport lessons at the dinner table each night. Our talk about sports was casual.

Oliver: We never pressed Andrew, when he lived at home, to talk about how his high school practices went.

Andrew: Or why I threw a touchdown or why it was intercepted.

It sounds like it was a pretty normal family. Would you say that’s correct?

Andrew: Yes. Every family’s got its idiosyncrasies. Ours is no different. But I’d say our family is pretty normal.

So what is it that you like most about sports?

Andrew: At the end of the day, sports is a meritocracy. If you’re better than the other guy, you’ll play. That’s pretty basic. It doesn’t matter where you come from. It doesn’t matter who you are. It doesn’t matter who you know. I think that’s obvious. If you can go out and help the team win better than the other guy, you’ll play. That’s what I’ve always liked about football.

Are you competitive?

Andrew: That’s an interesting question. I’m disciplined. I was never forced to play sports as a kid. But if I joined a team, I had to finish the season. That was always a great lesson. It may be terrible, you may not like it, but if you start the season, you have to finish it. If you have practice — unless you’re sick — you’re going to go to practice. I don’t care if you don’t like the kid who plays next to you or the coach, you always finish what you start. But as far as being competitive — I don’t know. In youth sports you learn hard work pays off. If you work at something — you get better at it. You progress. You practice. You apply it in a game. When you put in so much work and then you’re measured for it, you don’t want to think, “I put in all that work to be labeled a loser.” So that’s where I think the competitive nature starts coming in, after you put in all the work.

Not everyone has talent. How do you think about yours?

Andrew: I’ve always had athletic talent, but I know I had no control over that whatsoever. I just happened to have been fortunate enough to realize, O.K., throwing a football is a talent I have that a lot of people don’t have. It’s a talent I can use to make a living. I was lucky enough to realize at a young age that I’m pretty good at football.

Does responsibility come with talent?

Andrew: Yes. I think so. I take it as a responsibility, and I don’t want to squander it. I am certainly more responsible about it now than when I was 13 years old. But there’s something else, too. I have fun applying my talent. You know what I mean? I enjoy it. I hope I still I enjoy it when I play in the N.F.L. I hope it never comes to “I’m doing this to pay the bills,” or, “I’m doing it to finance a vacation that I’ve always wanted to go on.” I hope that if it ever comes to that, I’ll have the wherewithal to say, “O.K., you probably shouldn’t be doing this anymore. Time to try something else.”