

With a little Luck, Whalen rises to starting wide receiver

By Associated Press

STANFORD, Calif. — Griff Whalen's connection with Andrew Luck goes well beyond the normal receiver-quarterback relationship, and it shows every time the two take the field.

"They absolutely play like they're roommates," fullback Ryan Hewitt said. "It's not like Andrew favors Griff in any way, but they almost know what each other is going to do."

Take Whalen's first touchdown this season.

The undersized receiver cut his post route short, caught the ball over the middle between two defenders on a perfectly thrown pass by Luck and sprinted for a 30-yard score in Saturday's 48-7 whipping of Colorado. Luck high-stepped toward the pile and picked up Whalen, leading the celebration in the end zone.

"There are mannerisms and little details that we can recognize in each other," said Whalen, listed at a generous 6-foot-1, 185 pounds. "It's a well-established relationship."

If it seems like the two are on the same page, that's because they are.

Whalen has gone from walk-on to starting wide receiver for No. 7 Stanford in three years, developing a bond rooming with Luck during that time that has shifted to the field. Whalen's four catches for 92 yards against Colorado were the most by a wide receiver in weeks, an area the Cardinal (5-0, 3-0 Pac-12) look to continue to explore Saturday at Washington State (3-2, 1-1).

With Luck spreading the ball around to a trio of tight ends, running backs and fullbacks — not to mention other wide receivers — the Heisman Trophy runner-up has grown accustomed to teammates asking for more touches. In Whalen's case, the nagging is a little different.

"I guess living with Griff," Luck said, "I have to listen to him talk more than anybody else."

The bond that began as freshman friends has turned into a vital relationship on Saturdays.

Not many figured it ever would.

While Luck came highly recruited out of his Texas high school, Whalen shined more in lacrosse than football. He had offers to play both sports at Syracuse or an Ivy League school, and instead decided to take a chance at Stanford.

A former quarterback at Southview High School in Sylvania, Ohio, Whalen earned a non-scholarship spot at Stanford in 2008 in a variety of roles. Coaches tried him at defensive back and running back before he finally found his niche at receiver.

Whalen excelled so much that former coach Jim Harbaugh rewarded the receiver with a scholarship before last season.

"As soon as they put him at wide receiver, we knew it was the perfect fit for him just because how smooth he is and how athletic he is," cornerback Johnson Bademosi said. "I'm not going to talk bad about other guys, but I think he's comparable to some of the best receivers in the conference."

Whalen's rise has no doubt been boosted by Luck's presence.

Luck is hesitant to credit their roommate relationship for the success on the field because he doesn't want to sound, as he put it, "cheesy." While they rarely talk about football once they leave the athletic facilities, both admit they spend so much time together that it's just easier to plan voluntary workouts or film study.

As for living in the same room, well, they do have their differences. "I go to bed way too early and don't clean enough," Luck said, chuckling. Added Whalen: "I'm always doing projects and I make big messes in the room. He's always going to bed early."

For an offense anchored by the NFL draft's projected No. 1 overall pick, it seems a bit strange that the Cardinal lack a go-to receiver.

Only three of Stanford's 15 touchdown catches this season have been made by a wide receiver. Coach David Shaw said that's a product of personnel — notably the mismatches created by tight ends Coby Fleener, Zach Ertz and Levine Toilolo — and a rotation of four running backs who all want to score.

Still, Luck hasn't had the same chemistry with other receivers — even speedster Chris Owusu — this season that he has had with Whalen. That is, in part, because Owusu has missed time in his Stanford career with injuries while Whalen has stayed relatively healthy.

Of course, Whalen and Luck spend enough time together anyway. "It wasn't like a goal of ours, 'Hey, we should be roommates because we'll be better on the field,'" Whalen said. "We're just roommates because we get along well. Football is the hard part."