

# Meet the man in the middle

By Kevin Gemmell

PALO ALTO, Calif. -- The relationship between a quarterback and his center is a ... well ... an intimate one. Obviously, physical closeness is part of the job requirement. But so is mental cohesiveness.

Faith. Trust.

And for the past two years, Stanford quarterback Andrew Luck had one of the best in the business initiating every play for him. But Chase Beeler, the first team All-American, is gone, now a member of the San Francisco 49ers' practice squad.

These days, Luck is putting his faith in someone new. Sam Schwartzstein, a 6-foot-3, 290-pound Texan from Southlake who appears to have the moxie needed for the gig. He also has the humility.

"Filling the spot of Chase Beeler is a challenge," Schwartzstein said. "He was an All-American and one of the smartest people to ever come through Stanford as a player and a person. But I've got great guys on either side of me. The pressure isn't all on me to do it alone. There are a lot of intelligent guys on the line with me."

Luck, who hails from Houston, already has a great rapport with his new center since both are Lone Stars at heart. Even if their hometowns are separated by a five-hour drive. They immediately bonded over Texas high school football, which both insist is the best in the nation.

But on the field, there is going to be an adjustment period.

"It's a relationship that takes time and game experience to grow," Luck said. "That's what was so great with Chase. We were on the same page 100 percent. But Sam is smart. Football smart. He works real hard to make sure he's on the page with everyone."

"... He's got a great sense of humor. He keeps it light when he needs to be kept light. When it's time to get serious, he puts his best foot forward."

If that's the case, he must have put both feet forward in Week 1 against San Jose State, because Schwartzstein earned rave reviews from head coach David Shaw.

"He was outstanding. Off the charts," Shaw said. "We expected him to play well and he surpassed our expectations."

The initial blocking calls start with the center. From there, the guards and tackles communicate. But everything is initiated by the man in the middle.

So it all comes down to Schwartzstein to make the proper protection call to safeguard the presumptive No. 1 NFL draft pick. And so far, Shaw says he's batting 1.000.

"He made them all right, even when the front wasn't what we expected," Shaw said. "... It's nice when Sammy can say 'this guy was here and this guy was here.' It shows us he has that vision to see the middle and to know and be able to make adjustments. That's huge to coaches."

"For him to have that command -- to be so certain -- and hit all of his targets, he hit everyone he was supposed to block and he blocked them well."

That's as high a praise as one can hope to receive after making their first career start. Schwartzstein, however, didn't echo his coach's opinion.

"I wasn't very satisfied with it," he said. "We had some things schematically that we wanted to do and I think there are a few plays I'd like to have back. But no regrets. We'll try to make everything perfect this week. You can't ever be satisfied, because each week you can always get better."

He knows what's at stake. He also knows that praise can be fleeting. He entered camp this fall locked in a tight race with Khalil Wilkes for the starting job. He wants to justify the coaching staff's confidence in him.

Schwartzstein is one of three new starting offensive linemen this season. Only tackle Jonathan Martin and guard David DeCastro return from a unit that was considered one of the best in the country the previous two seasons. That's a lot of responsibility considering who they are protecting. Along with David Yankey and Cameron Fleming, Schwartzstein acknowledges that they are the pups packed between a couple of returning first-team Pac-10 performers.

But pups grow up fast. "I feel like we're getting close to where we want to be continuity-wise," Schwartzstein said. "But it's going to take some time. We're all working together and watching film together. It's a process. No one knows exactly when we'll be on the same page. Hopefully, it's sooner than later."