

Cal, Stanford turn to GMs to thrive



Matt Hayes
USA TODAY Sports Network

The All-American alum officially came home last month, an announcement more about reminiscing than restructuring.

But don't get it twisted. After more than 30 years in the NFL, Ron Rivera is the general manager at his beloved alma mater California for the same reason Stanford named retired NFL legend and Cardinal alum Andrew Luck in November as its GM.

These two bastions of academia, left for dead after the fall of the Pac-12 and the reorganization at the Big Ten and Pac-12, may finally be serious about football. With so much on the line in this ever-changing new frontier, we're about to see how committed the lovable eggheads are to embracing big boy football.

"Just because I'm here doesn't mean anything," Rivera said when he was named Cal's first GM. "The thing that means, is we've got work to do."

It starts with personnel and coaching decisions, it ends with the all-encompassing heavy lift of financial commitment. Both are critical to the process, and work off each other.

Rivera has a coach (Justin Wilcox) who hasn't had a winning season since 2019. Luck just fired Troy Taylor, who won six games in two seasons and was twice investigated by the university for,



Retired NFL player Andrew Luck is now the general manager at Stanford, his alma mater.

GRACE HOLLARS/THE INDIANAPOLIS STAR

among other things, bullying and belittling female staffers. (On Monday, Stanford said former NFL coach Frank Reich will be the interim head coach for 2025.)

If you think Rivera and Luck don't have the power to push drastic change, take a glance at the org chart. Rivera reports to the California chancellor, not the athletic director. Luck reports to the Stanford president, not the former athletic director, current interim athletic director or anyone else who will be hired permanently.

The magnitude of the Rivera and Luck hires and their power is striking, and the reverberations they send throughout athletic departments all over college sports can't be denied. A new level of hierarchy has been implemented, and it's already playing out

with the firing of Taylor.

But that hierarchy still begins and ends at the chancellor and presidential level. It's easy to talk about change and demanding excellence, and declaring nothing is off the table when it comes to football – the front porch of every athletic department.

If Cal and Stanford truly want to win big in the new era of college football, if they want to rise to the top of a winnable power conference and be a fixture in the tournament postseason, it's going to take money. Not the scraps they've been given by the ACC, so the ACC could remain a viable power conference and Stanford and Cal could remain at the adult table. But real, tangible financial support from the billions in endowments at each school.

Who needs the Big Ten and its fat media rights deal when you're sitting on a mountain of generational money, the likes of which the Big Ten dreams about? The Stanford endowment, according to the school, is worth \$37.6 billion as of August 2024, and the California endowment is worth \$29.5 billion as of June 2024. Each can be used, in part, for athletics.

To put that in perspective, Cal and Stanford each receive \$25 million annually from the ACC media rights deal, while Big Ten schools receive double that. But under the terms of the new shared revenue plan with players for Football Bowl Subdivision schools beginning July 1, every school works within the same salary pool. In other words, all FBS schools that choose to partici-

pate in revenue sharing have an estimated \$20 million-\$23 million cap (the total number is being ironed out). The only way to move beyond the cap legally is with private NIL (name, image and likeness) deals.

You want to compete with Ohio State and Michigan, and Georgia and Texas? Open that endowment wallet to fund the revenue share pool, and allow cash earmarked from boosters for other purposes to move directly to NIL deals.

Tailgates at The Farm and Strawberry Canyon suddenly go from wine and cheese to bourbon and barbecue.

Now you're competing, now you have a legitimate chance to change the way each university thinks about football. Now, you're just as dangerous recruiting prep prospects, and talent in the transfer portal, as any Big Ten or SEC school.

Money is the great equalizer. There is no louder voice in the room.

All it takes is the right coach to pull it all together. Like, I don't know, Jim Harbaugh. Or Jeff Tedford.

Get those rare coaches who fit, who embrace the campuses and all they stand for, give them financial backing and tell them to go win championships. Then watch it unfold.

"This is the No.1 public institution in the world," Rivera said. "We exude excellence academically. Why can't we do it athletically?"

Open the endowments, and let Rivera and Luck cook.

Then become more than the lovable eggheads.

Contributing: Austin Curtright

NBA POWER RANKINGS

Sarr makes impressive leap for Wizards

Lorenzo Reyes and Jeff Zillgitt
USA TODAY

The Washington Wizards' rebuild is taking shape, and rookie center Alexandre Sarr is giving it even more promise with his late-season surge.

There are reasons for Wizards' optimism, starting with Sarr.

The No. 2 overall pick in the 2024 NBA draft, Sarr has improved offensively as the season has progressed. In 42 games before the All-Star break, Sarr averaged 11.4 points, 6.6 rebounds, 2.2 assists and 1.6 blocks and shot 39.3% from the field, 30.8% on 3-pointers and 64% on free throws. Since the All-Star break in 17 games, Sarr is averaging 17.2 points, 6.6 rebounds, 2.3 assists and 1.5 blocks and shooting 41.4% from the field, 35% on 3-pointers and 68.8% on free throws.

He had two games scoring at least 20 points before the All-Star break, and he has had seven games with 20 or more points since the break.

Washington also has rookies Bub Carrington (acquired with the No. 14 pick), Kyshawn George (acquired with the No. 24 pick) and AJ Johnson (the No. 23 pick by Milwaukee and sent to the Wizards in the Kyle Kuzma trade deadline deal). Second-year wing Bilal Coulibaly took on greater responsibility this season, and it's easier to see potential with the Wizards under a front office led by president Michael Winger and general manager Will Dawkins.

The rubble has been replaced by foundation, and the Wizards are in line for another quality player with a top-six lottery pick in the 2025 draft.

Here's the latest edition of the USA TODAY Sports' rookie power rankings, with odds to win Rookie of the Year and

stats through Sunday's games (odds courtesy of BetMGM):

5. Heat center Kel'el Ware

2024-25 stats: 9.1 points per game, 7.1 rebounds per game, 56.3% field goal, 31.7% 3-point, 69.1% free throws

As Miami battles to stay competitive in the play-in window, Ware has been an efficient double-double machine, capitalizing on easy buckets as a lob and low-post threat. On Saturday, in a victory over the 76ers, he became just the third rookie in NBA history to record a double-double without missing a single shot. In the game, Ware converted all six field goal attempts and finished with 13 points and 14 boards.

Odds: +8000

4. Grizzlies guard Jaylen Wells

2024-25 stats: 10.6 ppg, 3.3 rpg, 42.5% FG, 37.5% 3PT, 82.7% FT

Although he has started 69 games and has been a steady presence for Memphis, Wells has seen other rookies outperform him. He has increased his scoring in recent games, but Wells has gone through multiple stretches this season in which he struggled significantly from the floor. Over a three-game stretch in mid-March, he shot 17.9% on his 28 attempts.

Odds: +4000

3. Hawks forward Zaccharie Risacher

2024-25 stats: 12.4 ppg, 3.7 rpg, 45.2% FG, 35.0% 3PT, 71.7% FT

He has been a big reason for Atlanta's slow crawl up the Eastern Conference, and Sunday's victory over the Bucks –



Wizards forward Alex Sarr, taking a shot over Pacers center Myles Turner, has been on fire since the All-Star break.
DANIEL KUCIN JR./IMAGN IMAGES

the team ahead of the Hawks in the standings – was a perfect example. Risacher scored a career-high 36 points as a true inside-out threat; not only did he slash and attack the rim at will, he also laced 5 of 11 attempts from beyond the arc.

Odds: +1000

2. Wizards center Alex Sarr

2024-25 stats: 13.1 ppg, 6.6 rpg, 40.0% FG, 32.2% 3PT, 66.0% FT

In Sarr's past 10 games and at 27.7 minutes per game, he is averaging 19.6 points, 6.6 rebounds, 2.2 assists and 1.8 blocks and shooting 44.9% from the field, 36.9% on 3s and 76.9% on free throws. Sarr also has five games with at least 20 points in that stretch, including a career-high 34 points against the Den-

ver Nuggets on March 15.

Odds: +900

1. Spurs guard Stephon Castle

2024-25 stats: 14.2 ppg, 3.3 rpg, 42.5% FG, 38.4% 3PT, 71.4% FT

Though the Spurs have fallen on hard times, Castle has remained the bright spot of the season. He will still have the occasional inefficient shooting night that results in single-digit scoring, but Castle has scored at least 15 points in 15 of his past 18 games. One of the more promising indicators about his future is his propensity to draw fouls and get to the line; he leads all rookies with 4.0 free throws per game, though that number has jumped to 5.9 per game over his past 18.

Odds: -800

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