

Star quarterback Andrew Luck stuns National Football League by retiring at 29

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Andrew Luck, quarterback of the National Football League's Indianapolis Colts and a four-time Pro Bowl player, announced his retirement August 24, moments before the Colts' preseason exhibition game with the Chicago Bears. Luck is just 29 years of age.

His announcement was scheduled to take place the following day, but as news of it began to appear on social media, Luck and the Colts were compelled to confirm the reports. Many experts considered the Colts to be a legitimate Super Bowl contender this season and Colts fans were in a state of shock and disbelief as word of Luck's retirement quickly spread through the stadium. As the game ended, Luck, who attended in street clothes, was booed by many spectators as he walked off the field with teammates.

At a news conference after the game, Luck told reporters he had been mulling leaving the game for a week and a half as he battled a chronic ankle injury that jeopardized his chances of playing in the Colts' season opener against the Los Angeles Chargers.

He indicated the Colts' front office, including general manager Chris Ballard, was supportive of his decision. "This is not an easy decision. Honestly, the hardest decision of my life. But it is the right decision for me," Luck said during his news conference. "For the last four years or so, I've been in this cycle of injury, pain, rehab, injury, pain, rehab, and it's been unceasing, unrelenting, both in-season and off-season, and I felt stuck in it. The only way I see out is to no longer play football.

"I haven't been able to live the life I want to live. [It has] taken the joy out of this game, and after 2016, when I played in pain and was unable to regularly practice, I made a vow to myself that I would not go down that path again. I find myself in a similar situation and the only way forward for me is to remove myself from football and this cycle that I've been in."

Luck, the former Stanford University star and first player selected in the 2012 draft, was one of the premier quarterbacks in the NFL during his relatively short career. For the bulk of his career, however, Luck took a physical

beating. From 2012 to 2016, he absorbed more sacks and hits than any quarterback, resulting in a multitude of injuries that included a sprained shoulder, lacerated kidney, partially torn abdominal muscle, torn rib cartilage, concussions and a torn labrum. Luck sometimes played through "significant pain" with the help of injections. At other times, the toll of the injuries caused him to miss games. He was unable to play at all during the 2017 season.

Luck returned in 2018 and set career-high totals in several categories and was named the NFL Comeback Player of the Year. In March of this year, however, Luck continued to suffer pain in his calf. The condition persisted and the pain was later determined to be ankle-related. It was aggravated whenever Luck put pressure on his foot. The Colts at one time reported Luck had a broken bone in his foot, but later described it as an ankle injury. It was this undiagnosed injury that convinced Luck that he had had enough.

Many current and former players were supportive of Luck. Green Bay Packers quarterback Aaron Rodgers expressed the sentiment of many players when he said, "Him getting booed, the word leaking out the way that it did, I thought that was a little disgusting, because here's a guy who's making a quality of life decision. I can totally relate to that, having a couple of major injuries myself where you miss a ton of time."

"Very disappointing that the fans booed him tonight," texted former NFL lineman Tony Boselli (with the Jacksonville Jaguars and the Houston Texans), the onetime No. 2 pick whose own career was cut short after six-plus seasons by a shoulder injury. "One of the things I loved about watching Luck was that he was fearless and laid it all on the line. He was a great QB."

"It stinks because he's such a great dude and amazing player," Los Angeles Rams safety Eric Weddle said, "but I respect him and feel happy for him."

Luck, who earned \$97 million during his seven-year career, could potentially have made between \$400 and \$500 million more if he had played until his late 30s or early 40s like quarterbacks Drew Brees of the New Orleans Saints or

Tom Brady of the New England Patriots. This is the amount that Colts owner Jim Irsay said Luck is leaving on the table by retiring. This figure is based on the amount left on Luck's present contract and the possibility of his signing two additional five-year contracts at what was expected to be a salary of \$40 million a year.

Terminating his contract as he did resulted in Luck's owing the Colts \$24 million for a prorated signing bonus, as well as a large portion of this upcoming season's salary that he had already been paid. Irsay indicated he would not require Luck to pay back any of this money. This is in contrast to the actions of the Detroit Lions, who insisted that Calvin Johnson, the greatest receiver in Lions' history and who retired in 2016 at age 30, reimburse the team for \$1 million of his signing bonus.

Irsay's gesture may have been in recognition of all that Luck has done for the Colts and the sacrifices he has made. Others suggest the Colts are hoping Luck will have a change of heart after a year or so and want to play again, and that the team does not want to create any bitterness making it more difficult to sign him if he decides to resume playing.

Luck's retirement follows the retirement in March of the New England Patriots' Rob Gronkowski, considered to be the best tight end in the NFL. Gronkowski, who is also 29, was a three-time Super Bowl champion who explained that the pain and injuries he had suffered throughout his career with the Patriots had taken a serious toll on his mental health. "I was not in a good place," he said. "Football was bringing me down, and I didn't like it. I was losing that joy in life."

The retirement of players like Luck and Gronkowski at a relatively young age attests to the severe physical and mental toll that professional football exacts on its players. Several other NFL players have also quit the game in recent years, citing similar reasons. That list includes San Francisco 49ers linebackers Chris Borland (24) and Patrick Willis (30), Pittsburgh Steelers linebacker Jason Worilds (27) and Tennessee Titans quarterback Jack Locker (26).

When Johnson retired in 2016, he told the media it was not worth playing for the Lions, who had not won a championship since 1957, given the punishment his body was taking.

The phenomenon of early retirement from professional football brutality is not entirely new.

In December 1992, Phoenix Cardinals quarterback Timm Rosenbach, 26, according to the *New York Times*, "did what some thought was unthinkable: He walked away from professional football and \$1.05 million, the salary for the fifth and last year of his \$5.3 million contract. He left the field and the money because he had developed fears that he might be crippled if he continued to play and because he

began to 'despise,' as he said, the dehumanizing aspects of football that 'can turn you into an animal.'"

Rosenbach described playing football in language that brings to mind comments by veterans of America's imperialist wars suffering from PTSD: "I thought I was turning into some kind of animal. ... You go through a week getting yourself up for a game by hating the other team, the other players. You're so mean and hateful, you want to kill somebody. Football's so aggressive. Things get done by force. And then you come home, you're supposed to turn it off? 'Oh, here's your lovin' daddy.' It's not that easy. It was like I was an idiot. I felt programmed. I had become a machine. I became sick of it."

At the time of Borland's retirement in March 2015, *Forbes* magazine noted that he had "consulted with concussion researchers who shared some of the staggering data about the risk of head injuries in pro football. For instance, more than 30 percent of NFL players end up suffering from Alzheimer's or dementia—and the frequency of routine, subconcussive blows appears to play a major part. More than 70 ex-NFL players also have ended up being diagnosed with chronic traumatic encephalopathy, also known as CTE, a progressive neurodegenerative disease that steadily destroys your brain and may lead to violent behavior."

The truth about professional football and CTE has been known since at least 2002. After systematically denying any linkage between football concussions and CTE, the NFL finally acknowledged this well-established scientific finding in 2016 and agreed to settle a lawsuit brought by former players in order to limit the league's future liability.

Given this record and reality of physical and mental devastation, it is entirely reasonable to expect that Luck will not be last player to retire long before his athletic skills diminish, especially if the given individual has some degree of financial security.



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