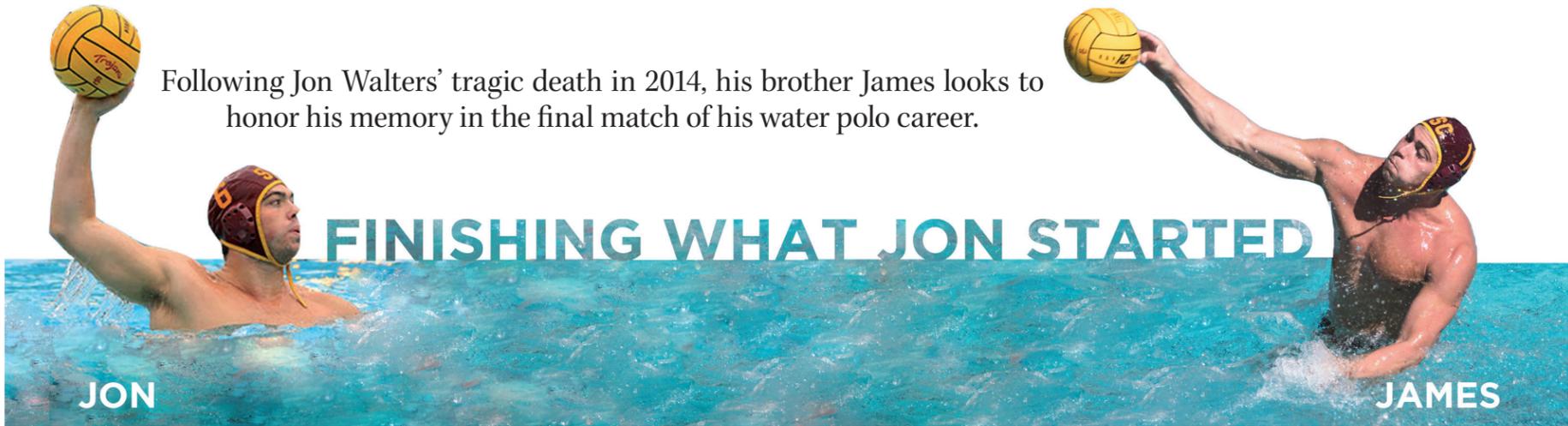




Redshirt sophomore **Daniel Imatorbhebhe** and the football team play for the Pac-12 title on **Friday**.



By **JULIA POE**  
Sports Editor

Every time he dives into the pool, senior water polo captain James Walters carries his brother, Jon, with him.

Jon's initials, JDW, are emblazoned on James' cap, suit and sweats. A plaque memorializing Jon, a 2-meter who was key to the Trojans' national championship victory in 2013, hangs on the wall alongside the supporters' section where James' parents, Jaque and Bill, sit in the stands.

Jon's name is engraved in the NCAA championship ring that hangs on a chain around Jaque's neck. She clutches at the pendant, running her thumb over the letters, when a game comes down to the wire.

Bill has a ring of his own, as do Jon's older siblings. It's one of their favorite memories of Jon — a true freshman, still recovering from an elbow injury, who squared his jaw to lift USC to a victory.

James is the only one without a ring. When his family ordered them four years ago, he refused to accept one of his own. He didn't want to take Jon's ring. James needed to earn his own.

For three years since, James has been looking to redeem his brother's championship. For three years, his team fought its way to a No. 1 ranking, to an MPSF title, to the national championship title game. And for three straight years, the Trojans have fallen just short.

This weekend is his last chance to change that. And for James, this weekend

means more than just redemption. Because four years ago, after winning the national championship, Jon fell into a coma after a New Year's party. He battled pneumonia and a series of heart attacks before dying eight days later. He was 19, a freshman and a national champion. He was also James' best friend.

This weekend, James will captain his team in its final national title run. But he'll play for more than just a title or a trophy. He'll play for his brother, for the final time. And he'll play for a ring of his own.

"I think, at the end of it, I want to make him proud," James said. "I know he's proud of me, but I still want to do this for him. I want to finish what he started."

**ARM IN ARM**

For most of their lives, it was always assumed that Jon and James were twins.

They had the same strong frame — broad shoulders, long arms, square jaws. Jon wore glasses, and James was an inch shorter. They were separated in age by a year, yet it was rare to see them apart.

In and out of the water, Jon and James were the perfect pair. Jon was hot-headed, stubborn, quick to act first and think later. Despite being younger, James was the mature one. He woke Jon up in the mornings and reminded him to not forget his glasses or notes on the way to school. They lived in a four-bedroom house and insisted on sharing the same room. Neither one really seemed to make sense without the other.

Even their positions were complementary: James played utility, the polo version of a point guard, feeding the ball to Jon down low in the 2-meter slot. They never felt the need to compete because their roles in the pool were a perfect fit — designed to assist one another.

Sometimes, James remembers, he didn't even have to look at his brother when they were in the pool. He knew where he'd be, how he'd move, which play to run. In three seasons together at Mater Dei High School, the pair never lost a game.

"You had to be on their team because if you weren't, you were going to lose," said senior goalkeeper McQuin Baron, who has played with the Walterses since freshman year of high school. "If Jon and James were on a team, they were winning. They were unstoppable together."

They were on each other's teams from the start, although their athletic careers began on the football field. Bill played defensive line at the University of Kansas, so he signed the boys up for Pop Warner, hoping they'd follow his love for the game.

They took to it immediately, as most little boys do, except for one problem — Jon's size. He was a stocky kid, tall for his age and thick around the middle, and he needed to drop 35 pounds to play in his own age group. Bill knew it was impossible, so he walked the boys home, determined to find something else.

The answer came in that short walk, as the trio walked past water polo

practice at the pool of their recreation center. Jon pointed at the splashing players and asked if they could join. Within a week, Jon and James were water polo converts.

They grew up in the game, spending every afternoon in the pool, reeking of chlorine and gobbling down sandwiches and In-N-Out between swim and water polo practices. James never considered being on a different team than Jon, so he played up an age group for the next five years.

Bill and Jaque knew the boys would always be good at whatever they tried, and it was true from the start. The pair joined a club team that soon traveled the country and secured a national title. They won state championships in high school and declared for USC together during Jon's junior year. For both of them, water polo just made sense.

"We just got so caught up with it from the beginning," James said. "When I think of growing up, I just think of the pool with Jon. It was our everyday, and it just never got old. It still hasn't."

Jon's freshman year both started and ended with tragedy. He injured his elbow within weeks of the first game, grinding a promising start to the season to a halt. As Jon warmed the bench and recovered from his injury, James adjusted to life without his brother. They saw each other on the weekends and talked on the phone, but the distance made things different.

Without his brother by his side, James

lost the first game of his high school career. But it was alright, he said, because next year he would be at USC. They'd play together and win a championship. Just as planned.

Jon recovered in time for postseason play, netting 2 goals in an NCAA semifinal to push the Trojans into the final game. On Dec. 8, James was in the stands watching as Jon won the national title in an overtime thriller over Pacific. It was the sixth straight national championship for USC.

Afterwards, Jon hugged his brother, grinning widely as they celebrated the first of many trophies. The celebration continued weeks later, on New Year's Eve back in Newport Beach. Jon, who struggled with insomnia for years, took Xanax before heading to a party with his brother. They drank champagne and fell asleep, like always, side by side. But that morning, Jon didn't wake up.

For a week, Jon remained in a coma. On the third day, he contracted pneumonia. On the eighth day, he suffered a series of heart attacks. He died on Jan. 8, at the age of 19, exactly a month after winning the national championship.

"It was devastating for all of us," Bill said. "It's like a fog. It fills you and surrounds you, and you don't know how you're going to get out of it. I think we're just waking up now. Years later, I think we're still just waking up."

For James, the weeks following Jon's

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**Football takes on Stanford for Pac-12 Championship**

The No. 10 Trojans face the Cardinal seeking their first conference title in nine years.

By **TREVOR DENTON**  
Deputy Sports Editor

As No. 10 USC prepares to face No. 12 Stanford for the fifth time in three years, some of the veteran Trojan players reflected on the last time they clashed with the Cardinal in a Pac-12 Championship.

After going 5-2 as interim head coach in 2015, Clay Helton was promoted to permanent head coach leading up to the conference title game. It was a move that delighted the roster, but ultimately, the team was unable to deliver, losing to Stanford 41-22.

"We were head over heels for him, but at the same time, we didn't come out and perform like we wanted to," redshirt senior safety and defensive captain Chris Hawkins said.

USC now seeks redemption two years later, with the program in a much more stable position than before. In his first two full seasons, Helton has gone 20-5 with a Rose Bowl victory and a Pac-12 South title. After two brief, yet controversial tenures turned in by former

head coaches Lane Kiffin and Steve Sarkisian, it was the un-flashy, un-flappable Helton who brought USC back to national prominence. Yet in order to silence all doubt that he was the right hire in 2015, and cement this season as a successful one, Helton requires one more win at Levi's Stadium this Friday.

"I feel like last year if we would've went [to the Pac-12 Championship], we would've won it then too, and I feel like everybody in the country thought the same thing," Hawkins said. "But this is a big step moving forward for this program and Coach Helton as well."

Playing Stanford is always a difficult task, with its hard-hitting, physical style of play on both sides of the ball. Playing the Cardinal twice in the same season is even tougher. In the two teams' first meeting in Week 2, USC trounced Stanford, winning by three touchdowns and rushing for over 300 yards. At the time, even Helton was surprised at the way his squad man-handled a David Shaw-coached team.

But this Friday, the Trojans are expecting a different Cardinal



**Katie Chin** | Daily Trojan

**Rinse and repeat** - Redshirt senior safety Chris Hawkins will look to keep Stanford's offense bottled up once again this Friday.

| see **FOOTBALL**, page 13 |

*Helton has shown he is right for the job*

**Julia Poe**  
POE'S PERSPECTIVE



As we reach the end of the season, I've become more and more grateful for head football coach Clay Helton.

I've griped about Helton a good amount throughout this season, believe me. If I hear him repeat the phrase, "We control our own destiny," one more time, I might just go out of my mind. And when I look at our rankings in the College Football Playoff one week before the end of the season, I can't get that dismal line of thought — the litany of different "what if" questions — out of my head.

There's a lot that can be blamed on Helton for the struggles of this season. Our deputy sports editor Trevor

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## WALTERS | James seeks one last victory for his brother

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death felt hollow. He forgot, almost every day, that his brother was gone. Remembering again was the hardest part. When James graduated that spring, Jon wasn't there to see it. He wasn't there to help him move into his college dorm, or to shove him underwater in his first practice as a Trojan. And in the weeks following his brother's death, James became accustomed to firsts without Jon.

With the last of her children away at college, the house was too quiet for Jaque. James knew that, so he called his mom every day, letting her know how his day was going. It wasn't quite enough to fill the space that four children left in her home. But it helped.

In the time that passed, water polo allowed the Walters to heal. The team dedicated its season to Jon, emblazoning his initials on every piece of official polo gear. Head coach Jovan Vavic promised Bill and Jaque that the team would treat James like family. To memorialize Jon, he hung a plaque permanently in the Uytensu Aquatics Center.

The family dove into the game again with a new sort of passion. Bill and Jaque refused to miss a game, cooking dinner for the players and their families after every match. And James quietly followed in the promising steps of his brother, scoring 34 goals as a true freshman.

"I think that's when you need the game," James said. "There's a comfort to it, you know, to it being something that has always been here for me. I found so much comfort in my team and in the pool, especially in that first year when I needed it."

Four years later, the Walters love to talk about Jon.

Not in public. That freaks people out, Bill says. It's awkward. Other people don't know what to say, how to act. There's nothing for a friend or a stranger to say when a family casually brings up their boy who died too soon.

But when they're alone together, the Walters talk about Jon. What he would say or think in a situation. A joke he would probably crack, the line he would probably fall for, the advice he would probably give.

"I don't go an hour without thinking of him," Bill says, and Jaque shakes her head in agreement. "Not an hour."



Katie Chin | Daily Trojan

**Family strength** • James (center), Jaque and Bill Walters will be at the Uytensu Aquatics Center this week for James' final water polo match. James will look to cap his USC career with a national championship.

They moved several years ago, to a lavish house overlooking the ocean by Crystal Cove. Jon never lived here, but it's hard to tell. Pictures of him and James cover the wall of a hallway. Family portraits, awkward poses after water polo games, a faded picture of the pair back before they lost their baby fat. Jon's obituary, which filled the cover of the *Daily Trojan* four years ago, hangs in between.

"There's no new pictures, so we have to cherish all the old ones," Jaque says, running her hand across a framed picture of Jon when he was young, his curly blonde hair falling into his eyes. "He died, and there's no new pictures. It's just memories."

### MOVING FORWARD, NOT MOVING ON

James never planned for a life without Jon.

He knew, in detail, what he wanted from life. He wanted to play in the Olympics alongside his brother. He wanted to graduate USC, start a real estate business with his siblings and father. He wanted to buy a house with Jon living right next door, so the pair could eat dinner, get married, raise their children

together. When he thought about the future, he thought about ending each day of work by going home with his brother and best friend.

For the first 20 years of their lives, Jon and James were two halves, two pieces of a puzzle. Now, it's been three years and James is still getting used to being on his own.

It's amazing, Baron says, because if you meet James now, you'd never know what he went through. He's warm, friendly — the type of guy who is quick to help and easy to laugh. In the pool, he's still the same as before, fierce on defense and calculating on offense. He's a true captain, Baron says, the guy everyone else wants to follow.

James is still living the life he and Jon had dreamed. He'll graduate this year as a two-year captain and go into business with his family, just as planned. He'll still buy a house and raise a family, just without his brother next door. But there's one dream that James won't let himself live.

When they were young, Jon and James were expected to become a star duo for the U.S. national team, natural athletes who traveled along with Baron with the Olympic development teams throughout high school. Now, James turns down any

invitations to the team. Baron now plays for the U.S. on his own, the final remainder of the trio from high school.

After college, James will leave water polo behind. The Olympic team might have allowed him to play for years into the future, but now, he's OK with his time in the pool coming to an end. That was their dream, not his.

But for now, there's still a few more games to play. If James has his way, his career will end on Sunday, in the pool dedicated to his brother.

Most of this team didn't know Jon. For them, this weekend is a chance at redemption for their seniors, at revenge against Cal and UCLA teams that have upset them in the past. But for the team that has become a family for James, every player knows the weight that a championship would hold.

Win or lose this weekend, James will play for his team and his family, for his brother and for the ring he feels he still must earn. And win or lose, Jon will be watching from the best seat in the house.

"There's still days where it hits me in waves and I'm not sure how I'm going to do it," James said. "But you just keep doing it. You move forward. You don't move on."

## POE

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Denton touched on the mishandling of key injuries, such as those of sophomore linebacker Porter Gustin, that have held up players on both sides of the ball this season. There have been poor play calls on offense, struggles with redshirt sophomore quarterback Sam Darnold's ability to stay cool in the pocket.

But the end of Helton's second full season as our head coach, I still believe that we've found a keeper.

I felt this the most strongly on Sunday as I watched the Tennessee football program self destruct. The program, which has struggled in recent years, announced the hire of head coach Greg Schiano.

Within hours, a Twitter mob had formed. Schiano was accused of involvement but legally cleared in the Penn State case against Jerry Sandusky, and although this accusation hadn't affected him in past positions, Tennessee fans became incensed at the hiring decision. At breakneck speed, Schiano's offer was revoked, and Tennessee's football program was left floundering even more than before.

In moments like this, I'm proud to have a man like Helton in charge of our football program. There's a reason that his players talk about him with that tell-tale tone of protective admiration. Helton is everything you want out of a coach: stable, humble and passionate about his players.

If his approach to his team isn't enough for you, his 20-5 record over his first two seasons outflanks that of Pete Carroll, who went 17-8. Helton might not have stood up to this year's preseason hype, but I think the numbers reflect that he's doing alright.

At the end of the season, we are still looking forward to the Pac-12 championship game. And while it may not have been what we expected, I think that's something for which to be grateful.

*Julia Poe is a junior majoring in print and digital journalism. She is also the sports editor of the Daily Trojan. Her column, "Poe's Perspective," ran Thursdays.*

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