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

Sports Editor

As No. 10 USC prepares to face No. 6 Stanford for the fifth time in three years, some of the veteran Trojan players reflected on the last time they faced the Cardinal in a Pac-12 Championship. After going 3-2 as an intern head coach in 2015, Clay Helton was promoted to permanent head coach leading up to the conference title game. It was a move that de- lighted the roster, but ultimately, the team was unable to deliver, losing to Stanford 40-22.

“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 ti- tle. After two brief, yet controver- sal tenures in by former head coaches Lane Kiffin and Steve Sarkisian, it was the un-flappably 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.

I feel like last year if we wouldn’t have won [to the Pac-12 Championship], we’d won it then too, but I feel everybody in the country thought the same thing,” Hawkins said. “But I feel like USC, the players are just so excited for this Friday. I feel like last year if we wouldn’t have won [to the Pac-12 Championship], we’d won it then too, but I feel everybody in the country thought the same thing,” Hawkins said. “But I feel like USC, the players are just so excited for this Friday.

Playing Stanford is always a difficult match, with its hard-hit- ting, 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 turned Stanford, winning by three touchdowns and rushing for over 500 yards. At the time, even Helton was surprised at the way his squad manhandled a David Shaw-coached team.

But this Friday, the Trojans are expecting a different Cardinal

Even their positions were com- plementary. Jon played center, the pivot on a point guard, feeding the ball to Jon down low in the 2-meter slot. They nev- er felt the need to compete because their roles in the pool were a perfect fit — designed to assist one another.

Sometimes, Jon remembers, he didn’t even have to look at his broth- er when they were in the pool. He knew he’d be there, too, when he needed him.

You had to be on their team because if you weren’t, you were going to lose,” said senior goalkeeper McQuin Faron, who has played with the Trojans since the blond brown-haired Jon’s freshman year of high school. “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. Faron defensive line at the University of Pittsburgh, so he signed the boys up for Pop Warner, hoping they’d follow his love for the game.

They took it to 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 15 pounds to play in his own age group. Faron knew it was impos- sible, so he walked the boys home, deter- mined to make it happen.

The answer came in that short walk, as the two walked past water polo practice at the pool of their recreation center. Jon pointed at the splashing play- ers and asked if he could. Within a week, Jon and James were water polo con- vers.

They grew up in the game, spending every afternoon in the pool, soaking in chlorine and gripping down sand- castles. Jon grew up with the Trojans since his freshman year of high school. “Jon and James were on a team, they were winning. They were unstoppable together.”

“Just go out and play with each other,” Jon would tell him every afternoon in the pool, reeking of chlorine and dripping with sweat. Jon continued to walk beside his brother as they talked about the distance made things differ- ent.

With his brother by his side, James knew he was just like his brother, Jon, and he wanted to be the best for him.

There’s a lot that can be blamed on Jon’s freshman year both started and ended with tragedy. Jon injured his elbow five years.

For a week, Jon remained in a coma. On the third day, he contracted pneumo- nia. 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,” said Faron.

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

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

By JULIA POE

Sports Editor

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Jesse initials, JFIV, are emblazoned on Jon’s cap suit and sweatshirt. A plaque me- morializing Jon, a 2-meter who was key to the Trojans national championship victory in 2013, hangs on the wall along- side the supporters’ section where James’ parents, Jaque and Bill, sit in the stands.

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WALTERS | James seeks one last victory for his brother

dead fell hollow. He forgot, almost ev-er 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 shine him under his first start as a Trojan. And in the weeks fol-low ing his brother’s death, James became accustomed to exist without Jon.

With the loss of his children away at college, the house was too quiet for James. He 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 his home. But it helped.

In the time that passed, water polo allowed the Walters to heal. The team dedicated its season to Jon, embarking on its initial on every piece of official polo gear. Head coach Joan Varec promised Bill and Jaque that the team would treat James like family. To memorialize Jon, he hung a plaque permanently in the Uytengsu 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 meaningful steps of his brother, scoring goals at an impressive freshman.

I think that’s when you need the games the most,” Baron says. “For Jon, it’s about 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 that connection most.”

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

Not in public. That finisher people out Bill says. It’s awkward. Other people don’t know what to say, how to act. They don’t know nothing for a friend or a stranger to say. There’s nothing about the space that four children left in her home. But it helped. It was going. It wasn’t quite enough to fill the space that four children left in her home. But it helped.

She is also the sports editor of the Daily Trojan. Her column, “Poe’s Perspective,” ran Thursdays.

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