

Revitalized

USC once again has firm footing in the national landscape of sport power

By Josh Steph

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he cover of last year's USC women's volleyball media guide featured three players posing in hard hats against a backdrop of rebar and concrete pilings.

And rebuild they did.

While the university took the better part of a century to complete its new arena—the 10,000-seat Galen Center—the Trojans needed only one to return to national prominence.

Last year, three consecutive national semifinal appearances and two national championships gave way to a No. 17 final ranking in the Molten®/Volleyball Top 20 and a second-round loss in the NCAA tournament.

Going 19-11, the Trojans lost as many matches as they had in the previous four seasons combined. And with the graduation of half its starting lineup, USC expected a gradual re-ascension this year.

"We tried to stay under the radar as much as we could," said sixth-year head coach Mick Haley. "With a new setter and six new players we tried to be low-key."

"No one really knew how we were, so we had the element of surprise," added junior middle Diane Copenhagen.

But fear replaced surprise as the Trojans stormed out to a 17-0 mark against a slate of ranked teams, including Utah, Purdue, Pepperdine and defending NCAA champion Washington.

It took the likes of national power Stanford to hand USC its first loss, a sweep in front of over 5,000 fans at the Galen Center's debut. Two nights later, USC picked up its first Galen Center win against Cal.

"You'd think that we had died because we lost to Stanford," said Haley, whose team was 23-4 through mid-November and ranked No. 7 in the Molten®/Volleyball Top 20. "We could lose several more



USC freshman setter Taylor Carico

times, but that doesn't mean we're not getting better. We can win in December if we're patient enough."

For a program accustomed to coming home late for winter break, the Trojans learned to bide their time last season—when almost nothing went right.

"We got hit with every possible thing that could happen," said Haley. "Injury, illness, kids left the program—which has never happened before."

Those circumstances forced Haley to experiment with strategies and move players into positions they'd abandoned since high school. The result, according to Haley, was a loose, adaptable squad that learned to compete even when wins did not come 52 at a time, like in their legendary streak from 2002-2004.

"They battled the entire season," said Haley. "The effort was the greatest I've seen in collegiate volleyball, and it has carried us into this season."

While the spirit of 2005 lives on, it does so in a stronger,

healthier lineup, and it has extended to the squad's six newcomers, most notably freshman setter Taylor Carico and junior opposite Asia Kaczor, a recent transfer.



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USC libero Debora Seilhamer

CAA Player of the Year honors. The 6'4" Kaczor has anchored the offense, averaging nearly five kills per game.

At just over four kills a game, Copenhagen ranks second on the team, followed by junior outside Jessica Gysin, who returned to the lineup after an ACL injury last year.

Copenhagen described the Trojan offense as fairly straightforward, with enough firepower that Carico doesn't always need to be creative.

Carico has, however, shown the sort of competitiveness that transcends setting choices and strategies.

"She's one of those elite kids that make teams better," said Haley. "She doesn't panic."

"There's definitely pressure and it's intense," said Carico. "But what else would you play for?"

Copenhagen says the team's atmosphere is tight and congenial, so Carico has guidance if she needs it, but her biggest ally on the court may be senior libero Debora Seilhamer. Ninja-like in her black, long-sleeve jersey, Seilhamer seems to sneak up on her own teammates while pursuing tips and diving for digs.

Despite USC's sub-par season last year, Seilhamer was an ASICS/Volleyball All-American second-team choice.

opposite Asia Kaczor, a recent transfer.

A 2006 Junior Olympics MVP, Carico played at nearby powerhouse Mira Costa High School and was first recruited as a sophomore. Kaczor arrived in South Los Angeles by a less conventional route, arriving from Wroclaw, Poland, after stopping at the College of Southern Idaho to collect NJ-

Though she said she is "not too into individual statistics," Seilhamer is again averaging over six digs per game and recently broke the USC record for career digs.

The Trojans' only weakness, according to Copenhagen, is their blocking, but, she said, "When we block well, we're unstoppable in transition."

Even so, the Trojans' skills are hardly unique in a Pacific-10 Conference in which fifth place is good enough for a top 15 national ranking.

"This conference is the best it's been in our sport's history," said Haley.

But the Trojans aspirations go beyond the battle for the Pac-10. "Our goal is to get to the (national semifinals)," added Haley.

Though they might not have chosen which rafter yet, the Trojans are hoping to hang the first championship banner in the Galen Center, a lavish, \$140 million affair replete with luxury boxes, a Jumbotron, and NBA-style theatrics.

"It feels amazing," said Copenhagen. "We've all been hearing about (the arena) since we were recruits."

Donor Louis Galen has even half-joked that USC has been promising an on-campus arena for 100 years.

Of course, the Trojans hardly need the proverbial boost that comes from a new facility, especially one with thousands of empty seats.

But Haley thinks the Galen Center could help with the future of women's college volleyball.

"I won't miss the intimacy of the Lyon Center," said Haley of the Trojans' former home in the USC recreation center. "We need to bring our sport to the level of basketball and football. Maybe someday we will fill all 10,000 seats."

No matter their surroundings, the Trojans do not intend to let grandeur affect the tradition that they have built.

"We can't forget where we came from," said Haley. "We have to put up our own equipment, sweep our own floors, and enjoy the heck out of it."

And they might want to keep a few of those hard hats handy, just in case they need to do a little decorating. ■

Katelyn Bishop is one of four key junior performers for USC.



Building A Winner

A look at how the USC women's starting lineup came together



Name	Position/Yr.	How She Got To Troy
◀ Jessica Gysin	Outside/Soph.	2004 recruit; injured last two seasons
Taylor Carico	Setter/Fresh.	2006 recruit
Bethany Johansen	MB-Opp./Jr.	UC Santa Barbara transfer
Kelli Tennant	MB-Opp./Soph.	2005 recruit
Katelyn Bishop	MB-OH/Jr.	2004 recruit
◀ Asia Kaczor	OH-Opp./Jr.	Junior college transfer
Diane Copenhagen	OH/Jr.	2004 recruit
Debora Seilhamer	Libero/Sr.	2003 recruit

