

DAILY TROJAN

Trojans leaving flames on the ice

Hockey coach Mark Wilbur leads the Trojans in a pursuit of their fourth straight Pac-8 Championship.

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Turn back the calendar to February 1998. Oregon fans, draped in green and gold, flocked to their home ice rink, the site of the Pacific-8 Tournament. The Trojans entered the tournament as clear-cut favorites for coach Mark Wilbur's first Pac-8 Championship.

But before the Trojans had a chance to skate the sheen off the ice, the underdog Ducks banged two pucks into the net and USC was staring at a 2-0 deficit just three minutes into the game.

Wilbur called for his one and only timeout.

"I'd never done that before and I've never done that since. It's just one of those anomalies," Wilbur said.

A stiff, uptight team gathered around Wilbur on the bench.

It braced for a tornado of a tongue-lashing.

Wilbur leaned into the group and said, "You guys gotta help me out here. I can't remember. Were we going to spot them two or three goals?"

The whole team burst into laughter.

USC shook off the pressure that had crept up and never gave up another goal. Final score: USC 4, Oregon 2.

Fast forward through four Pac-8 titles in five seasons, including an unprecedented three straight from 2000 to 2002, and it is clear Wilbur has found the right mixture of passion and compassion, producing a 70 percent winning percentage during eight seasons as well as a 100-percent graduation rate.

Wilbur has built a trust between himself and his student athletes. Unlike most college teams and even some professional sports teams, when his club goes on road trips, there is no curfew.

"I'm a believer that if you treat them like adults, they'll act like adults," Wilbur said.



File photo

The puck drops here. Junior forward John Blair is poised for a breakout season after a solid 2001-02 campaign when he finished fourth on the team with 21 goals and 49 points.

Also, because ice hockey at USC is a club sport and exempted from the restraints the NCAA puts on recruiting, allowing coaches to get to know their players better. Wilbur is able to nurture not only his player's hockey skills but also their personal well-being.

"He can take a kid out to dinner and ask him how he's doing," assistant coach and former teammate Manny Ramirez said. "He gives advice and helps kids out. It's important we have a relationship with the players while they're in school."

Former player and USC graduate Jamin Johnson recalled a time during his sophomore year when he was unhappy with school. Wilbur picked up on his feelings and took Johnson out to dinner. Johnson found the talk helpful and remembered the meeting as a big step in deciding to switch majors.

"Not only is Mark a great coach, but he's a great friend," said Johnson. "He watches your back and helps you out. He's very approachable and I never hesitate to call him back."

Current players echo the same sentiments.

"We respect him as a coach," said captain and second year player Raffie Kalajian. "But we also respect him as our friend."

Coupled with this softer side of Wilbur is an intense passion for the game of hockey and a burning competitive nature.

"He lets us loose and we have fun," Kalajian said. "But when it comes to playing the game, it's hockey time."

Wilbur's fire for the ice has burned much longer than the eight-year span as coach of the Trojans or even his three-year career as a USC defenseman from 1983-1985.

His father, Jim Wilbur, remembers Mark as a tough youngster always playing one division above his age.

"I knew he would always be friendly to (hockey)," Jim said. "I told him if it's not fun, don't do it."

Friendly to the game of hockey maybe, but Jim remembers when Mark wasn't always a good sport to his opponents.

While playing in a pee-wee hockey game in Minnesota, a state known for its assembly line of hockey players, Mark threw down his gloves and got into a scuffle with a player from the other team.

Jim remembered Mark's coach screaming at him, "Quit!, Quit!, Quit!" as Mark continued to wail on the object of his fury.

Finally, Mark's coach pried him away from the poor child getting pummeled. The coach turned Mark around and asked, "Why didn't you stop when I told you to?"

Jim remembered Mark's eyes, glossed over with blaze. Mark replied in between gasps, "He was still moving."

Now, decades later, Wilbur is bringing that same zeal and near craze to USC.

Nick Nickson, last season's team-leading goal scorer, compared Wilbur to USC's mascot.

"He loves USC," Nickson said. "Everything you think of that is a Trojan, he is."

It's not surprising to find out that Wilbur, practically bleeding cardinal and gold, is one of 17 on his family tree to graduate from the university. The first, Claude Woollomes, graduated from the dental school in 1908.

Wilbur, earning a bachelor's degree in business administration and accounting as well as a master's degree from USC, now sits on USC's Board of Governors and serves on the advisory boards at the Marshall School of Business and the Leventhal School of Accounting.

And with all that decoration came a sense of responsibility, and Wilbur's desire to represent his university well.

While playing a tournament in Iceland during the 2000-2001 season, Wilbur issued a mandate to his players regarding autograph signing.

"I laid down the law on this," Wilbur said. "I don't care if it's an hour. I don't care if it's two. I don't care if you're here until the sun rises. You sign every one of them."

Soon enough, Wilbur said, children from a nation more than 4,000 miles away from USC's downtown campus were wearing cardinal and gold, cheering on their new heroes.

Winning, also, is helpful in breeding popularity but Wilbur insists that his hockey program is about more than just chalking up notches in the win column.

"We've won a whole lot," Wilbur admits. "But it's never been without class. We've got a great bunch of guys."

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