

# The Renewal of the Trojan Empire

## *Athletics Builds on Its Glorious Heritage*

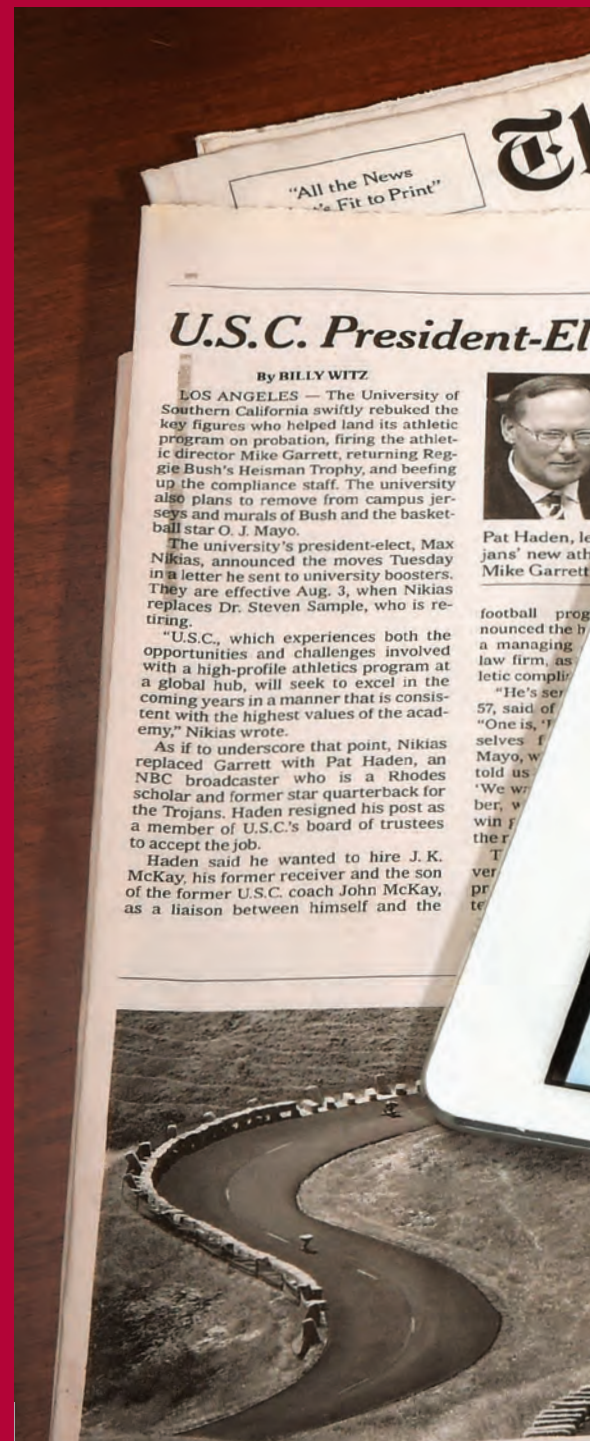
USC's legendary athletics program is the "glue that holds the world-wide Trojan Family together," President Nikias said in his October 2010 inaugural address. And he pledged that in the coming years, "We will celebrate a Trojan heritage of student athletics that will be more glorious than before. Yes, our Trojan student-athletes are indeed students first and foremost. And so our athletic heritage will demonstrate that the triumphs of athletics and the triumphs of education are the same, at their core. Body and mind, working together, in pursuit of excellence."

However, college sports, one decade into the 21st century, was a national enterprise in rapid flux. Many journalists, faculty, and others around the country questioned the role of "big-time sports" on campus, as successful college teams could now be as complex and high-stakes as professional ones.

A few months before Nikias's address, in the summer of 2010, USC had found itself at the center of the storm. The National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) handed down penalties on the Trojan football program for violations that had been committed five years earlier. The sanctions were largely in response to allegations that former USC football star Reggie Bush had received improper benefits from sports agents who hoped to cash in on his expected future professional success. Additional charges against the overall athletics program involved basketball player O. J. Mayo, who was also ruled to have taken benefits from outsiders during his one season at USC.

The NCAA's Committee on Infractions charged the university with insufficient oversight and penalized it heavily, in ways that critics would increasingly call excessive over the coming years. These sanctions called for USC to vacate a number of past wins; to sit out two seasons of bowl eligibility; to lose 30 football scholarships over three seasons; and to disassociate from Bush and Mayo.

President-elect Nikias faced a delicate but vital balancing act: He sought







In July 2010, media across the nation reported dramatic changes in USC's athletics department, as a new president prepared to lead the Trojan athletic program into a stage of revitalization.





In a widely praised move in his first days in office, President Nikias brought back USC football legends Pat Haden (left) and J. K. McKay (right) to oversee a new era in Trojan athletics.

to ensure that USC's athletic tradition would remain committed to the highest levels of excellence and achievement, while also addressing perceptions that the Trojans could have been more diligent in overseeing compliance with NCAA rules.

Nikias would later recount that—though many observers saw the severity of the sanctions as unprecedented and unfair—he had needed to move swiftly to protect the integrity and reputation of a university that had come so far in recent years.

On the morning of July 21, 2010, about two weeks before he officially assumed office, Nikias released an announcement detailing a number of actions he would take as president. Chief among them was bringing in Pat Haden as the new athletic director. A university trustee, Trojan football icon, Rhodes scholar, and respected businessman and broadcaster, Haden immediately brought a fresh tone to Heritage Hall, the home of USC Athletics. Nikias also announced the formation of a larger and stronger compliance team, headed by esteemed lawyer David Roberts. Both Roberts and Haden would begin their posts on August 3—the same day as President Nikias.

Nikias also stated that USC would return Bush's 2005 Heisman Trophy. It was one of seven Heismans displayed in Heritage Hall—a number that



The Trojan Warrior presides over the Hall of Champions, the centerpiece of USC's renovated Heritage Hall, which underwent a multimillion-dollar program of enhancements in 2013 before reopening the following year.





had temporarily tied the university with Notre Dame and Ohio State for the most won by its players. As Nikias explained, “The Trojan Family honors and respects [only] the USC sporting careers of those persons whose actions did not compromise their athletic program or the opportunities of future USC student-athletes.”

The actions drew notice in the national media and sports community as a sign that USC would be aggressive and unflinching in how it moved forward. “Credit to the new guy, president-elect Max Nikias,” wrote *Los Angeles Times* columnist and former sports editor Bill Dwyre. “He either knew or listened to





the right people. Either way, he got it right....Haden is a once-in-a-lifetime person who transcends fan loyalty and school bias. He's a class act."

"USC President-Elect Cleans House," read *The New York Times* headline on a major story about the announcements. "USC, which experiences both the opportunities and challenges involved with a high-profile athletics program at a global hub, will seek to excel in the coming years in a manner that is consistent with the highest values of the academy," it quoted the incoming president as saying. And ESPN wrote, "Though he doesn't start his new job until August 3, Nikias is already at work reforming the Trojans' image."





In the face of unprecedented adversity over an extended period of NCAA sanctions and penalties, the USC football team played with uncommon pride and passion, poising itself for a swift return to national prominence.



President Nikias frequently meets with USC's student-athletes to teach and encourage them on and off the field. Here he draws upon his Greek heritage to remind football players of the deeper meaning of the ancient legends of the Trojans.

### New Era, New Leadership

Seeing the athletics program through the period of NCAA-mandated sanctions and probation was one of the most crucial jobs of the new administration. Even in a small college town, it's hard to keep tabs on whether student-athletes may be hearing the siren songs of unscrupulous sports agents or overeager boosters. Under the bright lights of Los Angeles, and with an active media, the task is far more difficult. And this time, an infraction of NCAA amateurism rules could have resulted in catastrophic, long-term penalties. But, led by Haden, and Roberts and his compliance office, USC came through probation safely; in fact, Trojan athletics on the whole had been renewed and strengthened. The facilities, coaches, and support were now in place for enduring success.

In recognition of Nikias's efforts to renew USC's athletics heritage, in 2010 *The New York Times* named him one of a small number of national figures "who make sports' little corner of the world a better place."

"After Major Probation, USC's Compliance Office Among Best in Nation," read a June 2014 headline in the *Los Angeles Times*. "At the time USC was penalized [in the summer of 2010]," the article noted, "the university had five compliance employees. Now, it is twice that size—among the largest in





USC's storied football program has maintained its strength and prestige through several years of transition.

TOP LEFT: President Nikias and Athletic Director Pat Haden visit with Lane Kiffin (center), head coach from 2010 to 2013. Kiffin's organizational skill and planning allowed the Trojans to navigate sanctions while maintaining winning records and high expectations. His tenure included a 10–2 record in 2011, punctuated by a 50–0 drubbing of rival UCLA.

TOP RIGHT: Ed Orgeron led the Trojans to a 6–2 record as interim head coach in 2013, which included a dramatic last-second win over fifth-ranked Stanford.

BOTTOM: Clay Helton served two successful stints as USC's interim head coach. He led the Trojans to a 45–20 victory over Fresno State in the Las Vegas Bowl at the conclusion of the 2013 season. After again assuming the interim head coach role midway through the 2015 season, he guided the team to a 5–2 record, a significant victory over UCLA, and the championship of the Pac-12 conference's southern division. After the UCLA game, Athletic Director Pat Haden named him USC's permanent head coach.

college sports. Administrators also have worked to foster a relationship with NCAA leadership and to be transparent when things do inevitably go wrong.”

### **Fighting on, Against the Odds**

The NCAA's sanctions were unusually severe in proportion to the allegations, which led both fans and the media to repeatedly raise issues of fairness and consistency in the following years. Yet USC's approach was to emulate the attitude of the ancient Trojan warriors, even under the most severe pressure. As Nikias advised members of the football team at training camp during one season of the sanction period, “Fight on, and do not complain to the media or the public about the unfairness. Just fight like champions.”

Nikias, the Greco-Roman classicist, often reminded the student-athletes that the very spirit of being a Trojan involved a relish for challenges that others avoid, a thirst to conquer obstacles from which others retreat. At the outset of his presidency, word among the university's rivals and competitors was that USC athletics had been “dealt a fatal blow,” he said. But he exhorted student-athletes to take inspiration from the determination of the ancient Trojans, to “fight on against all odds, and even bend the will of the gods in their favor.”

And—against the odds—the next years were some of the most productive for Trojan sports. One key victory came in fundraising: Between 2010 and 2015, despite the soft economy, supporters contributed \$300 million in financial donations for student-athletes, Trojan teams, and training facilities—an all-time school record.

This income funded some much-needed improvements. While USC's student-athlete program capitalized on its location in the dynamic city of Los Angeles, many schools in less-glamorous settings could boast facilities that were far more modern and expansive.

In 2011, the university began construction on a \$70 million sports complex that was designed not simply to make up ground that had been lost to rivals but to move past them. The new John McKay Center opened its doors just a year later, attracting substantial media attention. “It sends a message nationally,” Nikias said. “It makes a statement about how USC intends to be the single greatest destination for those who aspire to make their mark athletically and academically and in life.”





Following NCAA sanctions in 2010, David Roberts joined USC as vice president of athletic compliance. Within a few years, the university's compliance programs were cited as among the best in the nation.

In addition to guiding the McKay Center to rapid completion, Athletics Director Haden led the renovation of USC's venerable program headquarters, Heritage Hall, as well as the upgrading of the Uytengsu Aquatics Center, among other capital projects.

Haden also pressed the notion that USC's sports participants should be fully engaged in the social and cultural life of the university and promoted community service in particular. By 2015, annual volunteer work by student-athletes exceeded 4,000 hours collectively, a new school record, through more than 300 separate events serving the local community.

### **Athletic Achievements and New Frontiers**

In the first five years that Haden served as athletic director, the Trojans won 10 national championships in team sports and 32 in individual competition. During this time, the school also was home to five Academic All-American first-teamers; four Honda Sports Award winners (honoring the best female student-athletes in a dozen different sports); and three Crosstown Cup trophies, which recognize the annual winner of overall athletic competition between USC and its neighboring rival UCLA.

In London in 2012, USC—already the top producer of Olympic competitors and medalists among American universities—celebrated its most



As a student-athlete, Cynthia Cooper-Dyke helped lead the USC women's basketball team to two national titles. Returning as its coach in 2013, she led the team to its first-ever Pac-12 championship, and its first NCAA tournament berth in nearly a decade.





successful Games ever. Trojan athletes competed in seven sports, representing 18 nations. They won 25 medals, a new USC record, and the highest number for competitors from any school. Among these were 12 golds, meaning that the university's gold-medal-winning streak, dating back to 1912, now spanned a full century. Had it stood as its own nation, the school would have placed sixth in the gold-medal standings and 11th overall.

USC had publicly committed to future successes in athletics that would be as bright or even brighter than ever. This effort involved an unceasing quest for excellence in those sports that the university had historically dominated, but it also meant getting into the game in new activities that were growing in





popularity. Among these was lacrosse, which enjoyed a high profile at many of the Ivy League schools with which USC was increasingly competing in the academic arena. Accordingly, Nikias established funding for a women's Division I lacrosse team, with plans for a men's team later.

Haden, meanwhile, introduced women's sand volleyball to the athletic program in 2012, and a court was created on the eastern edge of the University Park Campus. The new team quickly came to dominate the sport, winning the AVCA national title in 2015.





At the 2012 Olympic Games, Trojan track star Allyson Felix wins a gold medal in the 200-meter dash for the United States. USC athletes added to the university's unparalleled Olympic record by bringing home 25 medals from London—more than any other school that year, and the most ever for USC.



Trojan swimmer Rebecca Soni celebrates one of her two gold-medal victories in London. Soni has won a total of six Olympic medals (including three gold), six NCAA titles, and a roomful of other medals and trophies.

Two of USC's marquee programs underwent overhauls in April 2013, when Haden hired Andy Enfield and Cynthia Cooper-Dyke as head coaches of the Trojan men's and women's basketball teams, respectively.

Cooper was already a Trojan icon, who as a student-athlete helped lead USC to two national titles. She was also an Olympic gold medalist, the winner of four WNBA titles, a member of both the USC Athletics Hall of Fame and the WNBA Hall of Fame—and now a coach who had lifted three separate programs to new levels of excellence. Making an immediate impact, she guided the Trojan team to some of its strongest seasons in years, including a Pac-12 title tournament and NCAA berth in 2014.

Enfield had made his name as the architect of the high-flying Florida Gulf Coast team that became the first 15-seed in history to make the Sweet Sixteen round of the NCAA tournament. At USC, he gradually rebuilt the Trojan program into an exciting athletic club that began to gain national attention as the 2015–2016 season unfolded.

### **Triumphantly Weathering the Storm**

In the years following the 2010 sanctions against the Trojan football program, journalists and sports observers increasingly noted that in proportion to the





USC men's basketball began a major rebuilding effort in 2013 when it brought in Andy Enfield, a rising star in the coaching ranks of college basketball, to serve as head coach.

violations that the NCAA had found, USC had been penalized more severely than any school in history.

In 2011, ESPN's Ted Miller wrote, tellingly, of an encounter at an airport with an administrator from a rival athletics program: "He told me, after some small talk and off-the-record, that 'everybody' thought USC got screwed." The administrator had voiced that "USC was punished for its 'USC-ness,'" which included a resentment of the way the media glamorized the university, its Los Angeles environs, and its popularity with celebrities.

Two years later, Miller wrote about his own continuing frustrations about the inconsistency of the NCAA's dealings with USC. He recounted that at one point, while talking to Haden, "I started to rant about USC's NCAA case. You know what Haden said? 'Let it go,' he told me. And he was right."

During the probationary years, the president and first lady took the Trojan football team under their wings. The Nikiases were a constant presence on the sidelines, whether at the Coliseum, or in South Bend, Indiana, or East Rutherford, New Jersey. They missed only one game, which coincided with USC's biennial Global Conference in Asia. During the two years that the university wasn't eligible to participate in a bowl game, they hosted the team at President's House in San Marino for a December holiday party, to express



Jovan Vavic, coach of both the women's and men's water polo teams at USC, celebrates one of six consecutive national titles with his men's team.





their appreciation for how the student-athletes represented USC during these difficult times.

The football team fought on admirably through the probation, though during four of those five seasons, it often had 15 to 20 fewer players available than opposing teams—due to scholarship cuts and an NCAA injunction that allowed USC players to transfer to other schools with the promise of immediate eligibility.

The team, led by new coach Lane Kiffin, in 2010 posted 8 wins, and in 2011, a highly successful 10-win, top-10-ranked season, which led to overly









USC launched two new women's athletic teams in recent years, both quickly achieving success. The women's sand volleyball program was introduced in 2012 and, just three years later, won its first national championship. In 2013, the university launched women's lacrosse.

high expectations within the media for the following year. The 2012 team finished with a 7–6 tally. The 2013 team managed an almost miraculous 10–4 record, during a time marked by instability and coaching changes. The ability of the Trojans to embrace uncertainty manifested decisively on the field that fall. During the final year of sanctions, 2014, Steve Sarkisian took the helm as head coach and led the team to a 9-win finish.

Many observers viewed the five years affected by scholarship cuts as a “virtual death penalty.” Yet USC had not even one losing season. Every other major program that had faced such a degree of sanctions had posted at least one losing record during their penalties. The Trojans had indeed fought on.

USC finished those five searingly difficult seasons with a total of 44 wins and 21 losses. That compared favorably with performances over the same years by archrivals Notre Dame (45–20) and UCLA (39–27)—even though each of those programs was undergoing a renaissance—as well as another traditional powerhouse, the University of Texas Longhorns (36–28).

When USC met Notre Dame in the Coliseum in November 2014, it marked the last regular season game in which the football team would labor under the sanctions. The Trojans won convincingly, 49–14. They next took on the storied Nebraska Cornhuskers in the 2014 Holiday Bowl in San Diego. USC prevailed 45–42, and then set its sights on the future.





*Clockwise from top left:* The USC men’s basketball team has been reinvigorated under new coach Andy Enfield; women’s soccer has twice reached the NCAA tournament in recent years; Trojan track and field squads are stocked with current NCAA champions

and future Olympic heroes; Tommy Trojan and mascot Traveler; hurdler Felix Sanchez, also known as “The Invincible” and “Superman,” takes the gold in the 2012 Olympics.





*Clockwise from top left:* Bryshon Nellum earned a silver medal in London—just a few years after doctors told him that a leg injury would keep him from returning to elite status—and was chosen to carry the American flag at the closing ceremony; Trojan swimmers and

divers have won 19 titles over the last five seasons; USC tennis has captured four team championships and three singles and doubles titles since 2010; a USC pitcher plies his trade at Dedeaux Field; the USC women's crew team prepares for action.





Todd Dickey, senior vice president of administration, guided negotiations that led to USC taking on a 98-year master lease for the Los Angeles Memorial Coliseum in 2013. Two years later, USC announced plans to restore and renovate the venerable stadium.

Within a few months, that future looked considerably brighter. No sooner had the NCAA penalties been lifted than the Trojan football program found itself in a position that had been quite familiar for it during most of the previous 15 years: USC signed the top group of high-school recruits in the nation, by several analysts' measure, dramatically demonstrating the enduring power of the university's brand in athletics.

The 2015 season involved growing pains for the USC football program, though the ultimate result was a stable new coaching regime led by longtime assistant Clay Helton and a decisive victory over rival UCLA. After a narrow loss to a solid Wisconsin squad in the Holiday Bowl, the Trojans began preparations for a season-opening 2016 showdown against national champion Alabama, a match that would certainly be a benchmark for a program intent on returning to the apex of the college football world.

### **The Long View**

As the landscape of intercollegiate sports continued to experience seismic pressure waves and shifts, President Nikias regularly urged the student-athletes to make the most of their USC experience, and to understand how it would fit into the larger scope of their lives. In meetings held at the beginning of each school year with all the incoming sports program participants, the president offered context for the role of athletics today at a great research university. The ancient model, he said, went back to the Greeks' original Olympic games, which celebrated both physical and intellectual achievements as the essence of civilization. In the first of these annual speeches, he said:

The athletic quest was not divorced from the intellectual quest in that great ancient society, which gave birth to so much of modern civilization. They believed that for human beings to reach their potential, they had to achieve excellence in the mind and body



# USC National Championships 2010–2015

*In 127 years of intercollegiate athletic competition, USC teams have won 97 national titles in men's sports and 26 in women's sports, more than all but two other schools. Between 2010 and 2015 alone, the university's student-athletes won 11 NCAA championships in team sports. This success came at the same moment that USC was undergoing dramatic academic growth, confirming the Trojan community's belief that excellence in athletic competition breeds excellence in all other areas of a great university's mission.*



Men's Water Polo: NCAA Champions, 2010, 2011, 2012, 2013



Men's Tennis: NCAA Champions, 2010, 2011, 2012, 2014



Women's Sand Volleyball: AVCA title, 2015



Women's Water Polo: NCAA Champions, 2010, 2013



Women's Golf: NCAA Champions, 2013





and spirit. Excellence in all things: Like no other university community in America, the USC Trojans have brought that approach here in our day. So is it any surprise that USC has produced more Olympians than any other school?

Nikias praised them for choosing to attend a university intent on establishing the “platinum standard” for combined excellence in academics and athletics. He acknowledged that they faced extraordinary pressures as student-athletes at a university such as USC and cautioned that they faced extra scrutiny in a media capital such as Los Angeles. He urged them to make it their highest priority to grow in character and to display that character both when under the spotlight and beyond, “because character is destiny.”





USC All-American quarterback Matt Barkley celebrates with fans after a historic, 50-0 victory over UCLA in 2011. Barkley, a rare four-year starter at Troy, led the football program bravely through some of its most challenging times. In 2009, he became the first true freshman quarterback in USC history to start in a season opener.



TOP: The president and first lady, a regular presence on the sidelines at Trojan athletic events, visit with USC's famed Song Girls.



BOTTOM: Football team captains Antwaun Woods (99), Anthony Sarao (56), and Cody Kessler (6) walk with game captain James Toland IV (26) to midfield for the coin flip before USC's contest against Utah in October 2015. The Trojans upset the third-ranked Utes, 42-24, in Clay Helton's first home game as interim head coach that year.





He also often spoke to them about taking a truly long-term view of their educational and sports careers. In his 2015 address, he told them:

For USC, everything that we do—everything!—is done with an eye toward who you will be over the long course of your lifetime. Remember: Most of your life will come after your playing days. The crowds will grow silent as you grow older. Your life will then consist of what you have begun to build here—good relationships, good education, and above all a good reputation.

Trojan Marching Band director Art Bartner leads “the Spirit of Troy” in a 2015 lakeside rally in Chicago for the USC faithful before the team’s matchup with Notre Dame in South Bend, Indiana.





By 2015, USC student-athletes enjoyed numerous resources not available to past generations of Trojans. The new and upgraded facilities provided a far higher quality and quantity of infrastructure. The vastly expanded compliance initiatives allowed the athletic program to navigate regulatory challenges and promote the university's core values within every sport. And new teams in sand volleyball and lacrosse added breadth to USC's competitive tradition.

The path was now clear, as Nikias had said in his 2010 inaugural address, to build a "Trojan heritage of student athletics that will be more glorious than before."