

July 31, 2015



An interview with:

COACH SARKISIAN

COACH SARKISIAN: You voted us to be the conference champions, but the reality is we need to go out and prove it. We need to go out and play our best football week-in and week-out. We're appreciative of that, but the reality is we need to put our best foot forward every time we take the field. We've got some great players on our roster. Anytime you have a fifth-year senior quarterback in Cody Kessler, that is very comforting. You've got players like Su'a Cravens, Adoree' Jackson, Juju Smith. We're very fortunate that way, and it's going to take all those guys to try to get this done this fall. This is a very complete conference. This conference is, in my opinion, better than it's ever been. I think the universities and the presidents and the athletic directors have done an amazing job of investing in football, whether it's from head coaches to facilities, to recruiting, to assistant coaches. I think that's a real credit to Larry Scott. Coming into this conference and getting us a TV deal and getting money in place to allow everybody to do that has made our conference really competitive. It's forced everybody to every time you take the field to put your best foot forward every Saturday because if you don't, you can get beat.

So we've got our challenges just like everybody else. It will be -- it should be a fun ride, and hopefully games in November, late November for us matter when it comes to a conference championship.

Q. You mentioned the expectations, does anything change now that the spotlight is on you guys?

COACH SARKISIAN: It really doesn't change for us. We all chose to come to USC to win. I didn't come here to be okay or come here to be mediocre. We came here to win championships. At some point those expectations are going to be what they were. How quickly that

occurred, we don't know. Will it occur this year? We don't know. We have to go play.

But if the expectations were going to be too big, this wasn't going to be the place for you. I think we do a good job of expressing that in recruiting. We do a good job of expressing that when we're hiring assistant coaches. I think Pat did an amazing job of expressing that to me when it came to the hiring process for me. When you come to USC, the expectations are what they are. So for you guys to feel that way about us, that's, like I said, that's great and all but ultimately we have to go perform.

Q. You've been very up front about your expectations for this program since your introductory press conference. Last season finishing games was something you guys really struggled with. What goes into finishing games well?

COACH SARKISIAN: Well, we weren't perfect last year. It took time, and it takes time to build a program philosophically and schematically into what you want to get done. Ultimately we want to be at our best at the most critical moments in the biggest games at the biggest moments. To do that, you have to practice it. I think that's something we really focused on this spring. It will be something that will continue to be a focus this fall as we continue to grow as a program.

But I feel very confident in the fact that what we've implemented and what we've done now for almost two years, our players have such a good understanding of it today. Where a year ago, there was some uncertainty. They had never been in the system on offense. They had never been in the system on defense. They had never run these returns.

So now I just feel like there is a much better comfort level to where guys can relax and play free and be confident and play with belief at those critical moments, because that's what it's going to take to win those big games.

Q. Can you talk about Cody Kessler and how he almost went to Washington when you were there and now you're with him at

USC?

COACH SARKISIAN: I was pissed first of all. No, I'm sorry. It was frustrating because I had developed such a great relationship with Cody and his mom and his dad and everybody involved. When USC got involved really late in the game, I knew we were in trouble. This is a tough place to be, especially for a kid from Southern California. Then when I came on board here and I said to him, I said, hey, you know the job is open, every job is open. You're going to have to earn it. He looked right back at me and said, Coach, you already know me. Said I'm going to compete like crazy, and that's exactly what he did. Cody's got a great mentality, great work ethic. He's a blue collar kid and he's done nothing but just be phenomenal for us on and off the field. I'm thankful that we have him. I'm thankful that we've had him my first two years here in a transitional phase. He's an awesome kid. As good as his numbers are, 39 touchdowns, 5 interceptions, 70%, he's better off the field and he's better in our locker room. So I'm thankful for that.

Q. How did you grade your first year last season and maybe some of the things you would have done differently and some things you did well?

COACH SARKISIAN: Well, we lost two games on the last play of the game. If we win those two games we're playing for a conference championship and who knows after that. So to grade anything is how could I have prepared us better to finish those tight games that we didn't win against Arizona State, against Utah? How could we have performed better when we were ahead 17-0 against Boston College? Because it could have been drastically different.

Like anything, at the end of every season you self-scout your program, and you look at every aspect of your program. I personally start with me first, then I go to our assistants, then I go to scheme and I go to everything else that's involved: I wish I had us better prepared to finish those games. We just didn't get it done for a variety of reasons and that falls totally on me.

I'm confident that that's going to change this fall, and if we can do that, then there are some really cool things out there for us to accomplish. But time's going to tell, quite honestly.

Q. Talk about critical moments in critical games. Last year you did not play well in the UCLA game (No microphone). Are you

thinking about that now or soon to be thinking about that?

COACH SARKISIAN: I don't know if it's ever too soon to start thinking about UCLA, quite honestly. It's a great match-up. It's an awesome rivalry to be part of. It's a rivalry that divides households. I have two older sisters that went to UCLA. I know Coach Mora's daughter goes to USC right now. It's a unique rivalry that way.

But on the same note, we've got 11 other games to go play before that one. So not that we don't think about it. We know the importance of it. We know the value of that game. We know that game could ultimately decide the south division championship, and they're a really good football team. Do I want to win? Yeah, sure, I want to go win that game. But that's not going to define our season. That game's not going to define our season. The entire 12, 13, 14, 15 games we play, that will define us. That game is going to be a piece of the puzzle. Do I want to win it? Of course I do. But one game won't define us.

Q. Have you assessed your secondary and what has to happen there for them to be championship-level caliber?

COACH SARKISIAN: Well, we were young last year, and we were a little inexperienced in the secondary. I think the experience that we got, Adoree' playing as a true freshman, John Plattenburg playing as a true freshman, Jonathan Lockett playing as a true freshman, Leon McQuay playing as a true sophomore. That experience is invaluable for what we're going to get this fall. We need those guys to play confident football. It's critical for us. I felt at times especially late in games we were very conservative in the secondary. We played a little hesitant. We played a little conservative, and we don't need to. Those guys are talented guys.

So for us to really become the program we want to become, we have to be an aggressive unit in the back end. I know Justin is doing a great job of preparing those guys. Keith Heyward is doing a great job of preparing those guys. It's just another piece to the puzzle. We weren't perfect a year ago, and I don't pretend to be that way. We weren't perfect. That was one aspect that I think we can really improve upon, so we'll see what happens this fall.

Q. How do you think this team can handle the expectations?

COACH SARKISIAN: This team has been awesome. We went through a lot a year ago. A

lot of different stuff off the field that forced us to deal with issues that maybe other programs don't have to deal with on a daily basis. Our kids didn't ever make a big deal about it. They just kind of, let's go back to work. Let's go back to practice.

What I was appreciative of last year is when we had a tough loss back to the UCLA game, we came back and maybe played our best game against Notre Dame the very next week. So our guys know how to respond and put things to the side and focus on the task at hand. I think that is exactly how we are dealing with what our expectations now.

So if we're voted to win our conference, we're voted to win our conference. The coaches think Oregon's going to win our conference in the coaches' poll. So it's somewhat of a beauty contest right now. I really don't think our guys are concerned with it. Our guys are concerned about next week when they get back, when they come on board. What is the first practice going to look like? How hard is it going to be? What are we going to do? What guest speakers am I going to show up with for them? I think that's what their focus is. I don't think they're concerned about this is who we're going to be. I came to USC and I can walk around high and mighty. It is, let's get it done. Let's do our job. And if it's good enough, it's good enough. Let's see what happens.

Q. Does this feel like it did back when USC was rolling?

COACH SARKISIAN: I really don't know, honestly. I don't know. I think one of the misconceptions is that that's what we cared about ten years ago. And we really didn't. We cared about practicing really well. We were focused on having a great practice on Tuesday and how tough 9 on 7 was going to be, and how competitive it would be in the team period at the end of practice. It wasn't about what did we look like walking around town. So I don't know the difference.

I guess to some degree it's very similar. I really don't think Cody cares. And I'm not trying to diminish anything here about the Heisman or what we're supposed to be. I think the guy just wants to go practice with his teammates. I think Su'a just wants to be in the weight room with Ivan Lewis and getting better.

I really think that's how those teams were too. We can talk about Reggie and Leinart, and all these guys, and curbing, and Clay Matthews. You know what made them great? They worked hard. They worked really, really hard, and that's what made them great.

Now they're talented, but I think our team now has embodied a lot of the similar characteristics of that, more so than how they're viewed in the public around LA. I think they've just got a great work ethic about them that I'm very appreciative of.

Q. Can you talk about Adoree Jackson and what are you expecting from him?

COACH SARKISIAN: Adoree' Jackson, one of, if not the best athletes I've ever associated with. And I'm sure I'll get a call from Reggie about that one too. Adoree's a phenomenal athlete. To think about a guy as a true freshman who started at corner, played wide receiver, returned kicks, was just fantastic all year long. Comes out, participates in spring practice at the same time as practicing for track. Goes out, wins the long jump championship in the Pac-12, which is an amazing accomplishment. Finishes fourth in the hundred meters in the Pac-12, and is the anchor on the 4 by 100 team for our school, phenomenal.

So how are we going to use him? The best way we can without killing the poor kid as the season goes on. He's very, very talented. A lot will be dependent upon how some of our other DBs progress and how much we can use him on the offensive side of the ball. But I would be remiss if I didn't try to get the ball in his hands because he can score at any moment. He's one of those guys when you see him out there and you know the ball is coming to him, you stop. You stop the conversation. You hold your breath. You almost stand up to see what's going to happen.

Q. You brought in a really good recruiting class. How difficult is it to recruit in this conference?

COACH SARKISIAN: Well, I think the thing in our conference of what's going on right now, I said this earlier, I think the conference has really invested in recruiting. That sounds kind of odd to say, but everybody's got facilities. Everybody's got private planes. Everybody's got new gear. Everybody is doing something to try to stay on the cutting edge of what's going on in recruiting.

For us, yeah, sure, we do those same things. We have those same things. But at the end of the day we fall right back on our rich history, tradition, our amazing university, being in Los Angeles. The number two media market in the world. You think about the fact that 11 National Championships, six Heisman Trophies, more NFL Hall of Famers than any other university, so there

is a lot that we can hold on to that I think is very appealing to kids. We're not going to take the field in 13 different uniforms in 13 different games this fall. We're going to wear cardinal and gold. You know what we wear.

So we have to lean on the things that are true to us and who we are. I think that's why kids come here. It is what they're looking for.

Q. You've stressed the importance of the 2015 class over and over again. I know some positions are going to be playing sooner than others. But how soon and how much do you foresee those freshmen competing?

COACH SARKISIAN: It's probably a better question a week or two into training camp, and I know you'll be there and you'll ask me. It's hard to tell. We've got some guys coming off of injury. Jabari Ruffin and Lamar Dawson, Kenny Bigelow, Tre Madden, so I don't exactly know who, what, where, how and why of exactly who's going to fit in and how much they're going to play. I know we're going to give every one of those guys an opportunity to compete. They're going to get thrown in with our first units right off the bat day one, day two. Some guys are going to perform. Some guys are going to be a little wide-eyed and not perform great.

But I do know this class, I think, in the end, is going to win a lot of football games for us. How much they contribute as true freshmen as compared to when they contribute as maybe a junior or senior, I think that remains to be seen quite honestly. That wouldn't be fair to those guys to put all of that on them. We've got a really good team without them. We know that from a year ago. They're only going to add to it and they're going to make us better. How much? We'll see.

Q. Where are you in terms of number of players?

COACH SARKISIAN: We're about mid 70s. There's always attrition and things that occur, whether it's academically, medically with injuries, whether it's transfers, different things happen. But we're not quite there yet, and we really won't be there next year because we actually have a pretty big senior class, so it's probably going to take us two more years to get to that 85 number.

But as I've said before, that will never be a crutch for us. I'll never use that as an excuse. We're good enough to win. It's our job to make sure we get it done.

Q. You mentioned you're going to be wearing cardinal and gold every Saturday.

Does that mean you're not going to consider any ultimate uniforms?

COACH SARKISIAN: I didn't say that (laughing). But I can tell you this fall, we're wearing cardinal and gold.

Q. Also what is your personal challenge?

COACH SARKISIAN: My personal challenge is you chose to come to USC. You came here to win championships. Let's make sure that we accomplish what we came here to do.

Q. What's it mean to have a National Championship (No microphone)?

COACH SARKISIAN: I'm sorry, say that again?

Q. With the National Championship being played in Pac-12 country, does that add any --

COACH SARKISIAN: I honestly didn't know that. But okay, keep going.

Q. So I guess that wouldn't add any level?

COACH SARKISIAN: Right. Honestly, we don't think that way. Our guys know when they go to practice how hard it's going to be. They know the guy across from them is the best or one of the best at his position coming out of high school and how hard it is going to be to compete against him. They know the guy behind him in line, if he rolls an ankle or doesn't perform, that guy might be as good or better than him when he steps in.

So our guys are more focused on doing really good the next day rather than what it's going to look like in early January. Does that make sense?

I think that's what makes us unique to some degree. I think that's what's made USC unique for decades. Our practices are awesome, and that's what makes it fun every single day is to go out there and watch these guys go at it knowing we still have a game on Saturday. But Tuesday and Wednesday are unbelievable.

Q. Can you talk about where your offensive line is right now versus last year?

COACH SARKISIAN: It's drastically different. We started three true freshmen offensive linemen last year, which was a little scary, I have to admit. But I feel great about where we're at now. I feel good about the fact that we're ten deep on the offensive line. That we have a real true two-deep

offensive line group. As good as it's been here in a while. We felt so good about it, we moved Jordan Simmons to the defensive line who is a very talented offensive lineman, but felt like he could help us on the defensive front.

So I feel great about it. I love Max Tuerk as our center. I think he's the best center in the country. Toa Lobendahn, Damien Mama, all these guys are fantastic players and that's what shapes you as a program, ultimately. You have to be able to run the football, protect the quarterback, and I think we can do that.

Q. Are you guys going to be further along in fall camp because you've got them coming back? Does that help you in any way?

COACH SARKISIAN: I think we're just further along in general. The simple fact that it's year two in a system and everybody's comfort level is better. This was new for everybody a year ago. It was new for our fans, right? We're in the gun a lot more. We're going faster. Is this USC football? What are we doing? I think in general everybody's comfort level is better. The offensive line is just a piece of that. They're going to be more comfortable. These are true freshmen that a year ago were just trying to get in a stance and block Leonard Williams and now they're into year two and they're communicating, talking, and everybody's on the same page.

Q. How close is Jack (No microphone)?

COACH SARKISIAN: He'll be ready to go.

Q. For fall camp?

COACH SARKISIAN: Yep.

Q. What do you want your offensive identity to be this season?

COACH SARKISIAN: Score a lot of points (laughing). We are a run-first team. And I know sometimes everybody thinks USC and Cody and 39 touchdowns and all this stuff, we're going to run the football. I've been a head coach for six years now. I've had a thousand-yard rusher every year. We're going to run the football. But because of our dedication and our commitment to running the ball, we're able to create some things in the passing game to create big plays. I think that's been something that USC has been a trademark for. We're going to run it, but yet we've got talented wide receivers. We've got a really good quarterback that when we utilize the play action pass or we utilize your commitment to stopping the run, we can throw the ball down the field and create big plays. We are not a dunk-and-dunk

offense. That's not who we are, and we'll never be that way. We're going to throw the ball down the field.

Q. What is the biggest difference between UCLA now from your first stint at USC?

COACH SARKISIAN: Well, I think they've recruited really well. I want to make sure I give Rick credit here too. Because Rick brought in some really talented players, Brett Hundley, all these guys. I know Rick didn't get to see it through. Jim came in and continued upon that of recruiting good players. I think they've performed well. The quarterback play with Brett really helped them. I think the first time around their quarterback play struggled some. Probably the biggest difference is we haven't performed, quite honestly. We didn't get it done, and that was unlike us.

Especially a year ago, we didn't play the way we were capable of playing. In a lot of those other games, the years I was here before, that only happened one other time. The rest of the times we went out and performed really well in those games against UCLA, and that's what it's going to take to beat them. They're a good football team.

Q. How prepared are the backup quarterbacks?

COACH SARKISIAN: I think Max is a heck of a player, Max Browne. I don't know if it's going to look a whole lot different. Max had a great spring. He's worked his tail off to get to this point. I think it says a lot about a kid who sticks it out in this era of being the number one player in the country, going to a school, not becoming the starter. I'm going to leave. I'm going to go somewhere else. I think it says a lot about Max and his willingness to stick it out, to try to improve, to try to get better about his personality. I don't have any doubt in my mind when Max Browne goes in the game that he's not going to play great football for us.

Not that I'm looking forward to it, because I would never want that for Cody. But in a weird way I am, because I think that Max is going to do something very special and unique that is going to be like, wow, the future of SC football is really good.

Q. (No microphone) I'm curious as a head coach, how do you get your team up for (No microphone). Do you think maybe the Pac-12 should follow that route?

COACH SARKISIAN: We've never played

one.

Q. But the league in general.

COACH SARKISIAN: Right. I have a lot of thoughts on the playoff and different things, so this is probably a topic for another day. But I really think we all should adopt a scheduling policy and keep it consistent. I don't know why we all wouldn't just play each other, and at that point then there becomes a little bit more parity. I think it makes it easier on the committee if everybody has a championship game, if everybody's playing non-conference games against Power Five conferences. We're not there yet, obviously. You can look at our schedule this fall. We're not there yet.

But I think that would make things a lot cleaner for everybody involved. But we're not there yet.

Q. How do you convince your players not to overlook Arkansas State?

COACH SARKISIAN: Yeah, I know. Believe me. I've looked at the film. They've got a lot of guys that can score points quickly. Honestly, every team we play, and I know this sounds like a cliché or something, they're really a faceless opponent. It's not about them. It's not about Arkansas State. It's not about Stanford. It's not about ASU. It's about us and our ability to prepare Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday and then go out and put our best foot forward. If we do that, there might be games that we win 28-27. There might be other games we win 50-7. I don't know.

But all I care about is that we put our best foot forward. We prepare really well and put our best foot forward. That's how we approach it. It's really not about the opponent. It's not to discard or downgrade anybody. That's just literally how we talk to our kids every single day.

Q. You lost a lot of not only talent but great leaders to the NFL last year. In Agholor, and Hayes and Randall. But it seems you have guys like Cody and Max who are ready to step into that leadership role even more. Cravens even becoming more of a vocal leader. What are your thoughts? Who do you think is going to step up?

COACH SARKISIAN: Well, veterans naturally, I think we all look at as leaders. You look at Cody, you look at Max, you look at Su's, you look at Kevon Seymour. We're fortunate. We have some pretty mature young players. You look at a JuJu Smith, you look at Adoree' Jackson,

these guys are pretty natural from a leadership standpoint. Toa Lobendahn, so we're fortunate that way that we're not just counting on one or two guys to be the leaders on our team. I think we've got a locker room full of really mature players that are on the same page that are in it for a common goal.

So, yeah, there are going to be moments when I lean on an Anthony Sarao or a Max Tuerk, guys that have been in the program for a while. I'm trying to get a really good answer out of them about what we should do about what movie we're going to watch on a Friday night.

But the reality of it is I'm talking to the team. I'm trying to develop maturity in younger players as fast as I am, as I am leaning on the older veteran players with their maturity, and how do I bring the two together. We're lucky that we have the veteran players, but I'm trying to bring these young guys along as fast as I can.

Q. Do you think you're going to have a do over from 2014?

COACH SARKISIAN: I would have saved a timeout for the end of the Arizona State game. To call timeout to make sure our players were in the best position to play the last play of the game.

Q. Do you have mixed emotion?

COACH SARKISIAN: No, I have an unbelievable amount of respect for Coach Pete and those kids. I saw Travis and Deontay today. It will be a great atmosphere. It's Thursday night in the Coliseum. But the respect factor is not, again, like I said earlier, because it's UW isn't going to change the way we prepare. We're going to prepare the same way we prepare week-in and week-out.

Q. Did it feel better having to miss UW on the schedule in 2014?

COACH SARKISIAN: I didn't even, honestly think about it, quite honestly.

Q. Are we going to see Adoree' Jackson on offense this year? If so, what is your plan for using him if eligible?

COACH SARKISIAN: Who do you work for?

Q. NBC LA.

COACH SARKISIAN: Okay. So you're going to see Adoree' on offense this year. How much depends on the game, and the game plan. He's too talented not to put the ball in his hands.

I'd be foolish not to give him the ball. A lot of it is going to depend on the development of our other DBs and how much we can reduce some of his role on defense to maximize him more on offense. But he's too talented not to put the ball in his hands.

Like I said earlier, he's one of those guys when the ball's in his hands that you hold your breath. You stop a conversation. You want to see what's going to happen. We saw that in the bowl game. The guy had two touchdowns. One was a hundred yards and the other one was 80. So you try to get him the ball, but I don't want to wear him out either because we need him on defense as well.

FastScripts by ASAP Sports