

Trojans[®]

words: Lee Wilson

David Aktary has always loved a challenge, almost as much as he has loved lacrosse. Whether it was vying to start high school and college programs as a player or showing great perseverance after a career ending injury to become a coach, Aktary has loved every minute of it.

In 2008, Aktary faced two new challenges, the first of which was finishing graduate school at Duke University, where lacrosse was the furthest thing from his mind. The second challenge came after a move to the west coast for work after graduation, where Aktary would get a chance to rebuild a struggling lacrosse program.

Aktary moved out west to Los Angeles, California, which is quite a change for the Michigan-native. He moved out there for consultant work, his specialty. While there, he decided he was not done with lacrosse yet, so he sent out e-mails to all of the West Coast Lacrosse League's captains and coaches offering his interest in coaching, but his break would come from somewhere else: his girlfriend. "I was talking to my girlfriend, who goes the University of Southern California and she mentioned that they had a lacrosse team there," Aktary said in a phone interview. "I thought I should follow up and I got a call from their captains."

After talking with the Trojan captains, Aktary's excitement level continued to grow. He then had an interview of sorts in a face to face meeting with the captains and team president, where Ak-

tary had to convince them he could get the struggling Trojan program back on track. His philosophy and attitude was good enough for them and Aktary was named the new head coach over the summer.

So what did Aktary say that clinched the job for him? He delved into his coaching philosophy among other things and that alone speaks volumes.

"I LAY OUT MY EXPECTATIONS UP FRONT. I LET EVERYONE KNOW WHERE THE BAR IS AND I HOLD THEM TO IT."

--HEAD COACH DAVID AKTARY

"I characterize it as fair and balanced," said Aktary, which he also stated in his interview with the captains. "I lay out my expectations up front. I let everyone know where the bar is and I hold them to it. I don't play favorites. I just try to hold them to a steady course. We have a long way to go to be a number one or a number two seed in the [MCLA Championship] tournament but that is our goal. We have to set the bar high."

Setting the bar higher than the Trojans program has ever gotten before cer-

tainly provides insight to the work ethic of Aktary. It is also part of the reason he was able to win over the captains and team leaders to become the head coach.

"Coach Aktary provides a new, focused approach to this program," said senior midfielder Corey Janoff. "He has a lot of experience building lacrosse programs, so I feel he will be able to turn USC into a very competitive program over the next few years. He started his high school team, his college club team as well as coached at multiple levels."

Janoff is referring to Aktary's Michigan days. He did in fact start the lacrosse programs at East Lansing High School as well as the club program at Michigan State University. He later played and coached at the University of Michigan-Dearborn (UM-D). Sadly, Aktary was forced to quit playing after rupturing a disc in his back, so he turned his focus to coaching.

Aktary now finds himself at the head of a team at a crossroads and he is willing to do everything possible to make sure they go in the right direction from here. He will attempt to do so through some guidance and a lot of hard work, because it only gets harder from here. Being a Michigan native also means he is in the backyard of Michigan Wolverine's head coach and MCLA President John Paul. Paul, fresh off of his undefeated season and MCLA title, provided Aktary with guidance and advice wherever he could, something Aktary appreciated. "I still talk to JP," said Aktary. "He actually donated helmets to UM-D. He gave me guidance once I got out here and always helped me when I was in

photo: Dirk Dewachter



BACK ROW: #19 DAVID KRUMWIEDE, #3 JAMES KLINE, HUNTER MELDMAN, JOHN LUDWIG, TOMMY KAHN, #40 LUKE WHITESIDE FRONT ROW: ADDISON MARTINEZ, MACKLEN LETHIN, KYLE MCCARTY, MATT LEGGETT



Head Coach David Aktary and Defensive Coord. James Phalen talk to the team during a fall practice.

Michigan. He continues to be an occasional mentor.”

Considering the fact that Paul is the president of the league, albeit likely in his final term, he is a good mentor to have.

■ **NEW LEAGUE**

Being friends with the MCLA president is a good thing also because for those who have not heard yet, the West Coast Lacrosse League has split due to the growing amount of teams in the league. It is now the WCLL and the Southwestern Lacrosse Conference (SLC).

“The WCLL had gotten too big,” said Aktary of the cause for the split. “The split makes much more geographic sense now and makes it easier for teams to fulfill their scheduling commitments.”

In regards to the rules of the SLC the structure and bylaws are exceptionally similar to that of the WCLL with one notable and somewhat controversial difference: eligibility rules. The SLC

chose to adopt the more basic MCLA rules as opposed to the more stringent WCLL rules.

USC will be in Division I North of the SLC alongside Chapman, Claremont, Loyola Marymount University, UC Santa Barbara and of course UCLA.

There is also a Division I South (Arizona State, SDSU, UNLV, University of San Diego, UC San Diego and the University of Arizona) as well as Division II North (Cal Lutheran, Pepperdine, which are considered developing members) and Division II South (Cal State Fullerton, Biola, Occidental, UC Irvine, Concordia, and Long Beach State).

One new thing that the SLC is doing is adding a developing teams Junior College (JUCO) Division for Grossmont Junior College and Marymount Junior College.

“The JUCO division is a new division that the SLC created to support the lacrosse expansion in two-year universities,” said Aktary. “JUCO teams will not be eligible for post-season play.”

As for the rest of the SLC, the league tournament will be from April 24-26 at the University of San Diego. And

coaches face with the team itself.

■ **SHIFT IN STRATEGY, LEADERSHIP**

Aktary has his work cut out for him. He inherits a Trojans program that has never been a .500 team. They have struggled to get off the ground and according to Aktary the way to address this problem is to get to the root of the problem. To the coach, that means revamping the way everything from workouts to practice, the team’s mentality and even scheduling are concerned.

“When I got here I asked how many players could identify a basic defensive slide package,” said Aktary, who then started to implement his ideas.

Aktary wants to address the team’s changes in a few different categories, the first of which is “on field.” That means a greater focus in practice on the fundamental Xs and Os of lacrosse as well as execution. As far as practice is concerned, Aktary also wants to implement a checkpoint process in practice.

The process, which will be for every player to go through monthly, consists of a timed 40-yard dash, a shot speed test and a pass accuracy test. Players must hit their previous targets on each level every month as Aktary says this process plays a role in team cuts. Coupled with the new practice approach and a level of individual talent that surprised Aktary, he says things are going very well. “Practices so far are going alright,” said Aktary. “The team is starting to develop a little bit.”

Aktary believes that by focusing on generalist capabilities and teaching a rules-based offense and defense the team will be more prepared to adapt to the opposition since for club lacrosse scouting opponents outside of your region is nearly impossible.

This will be critical to the Trojans suc-



FRESHMAN MATT LEGGETT

if anyone needs any more information on the league, Aktary is a helpful source, he is in fact the head of the Marketing Committee of the SLC. The league split is one more challenge that the team will face this season but those challenges do not ring quite as loudly as those that all new

cess under Aktary as another major change he wants to make is in the team's schedule. Aktary believes that in order to gain some notoriety and national recognition the team needs to travel more. That is why this upcoming season on their tentative schedule the Trojans have games against Florida State, University of Georgia, Texas A&M, Southern Methodist University and the University of Central Florida.

"We are branching out this year," Aktary said of the team's tentative 2009 schedule. "We have the talent to compete with those teams."

One unexpected form of welcome attention comes from a hair-style products company called American Crew. The company was looking for some guys with "fit bodies and good hair" as one representative from American Crew said.

As the players met that criteria American Crew had decided to do the photo shoot on campus and thought it would be best to find a team from there to do the shoot. Regardless of the reasons, it is just another way to get the team in the public eye.

■ RECRUITING THE TALENT

Simply stated the team will be ready to handle these out of state programs by focusing on the basics and brushing up on defensive and offensive packages and as the Trojans' coach stated his team will have a high level of talent.

"I am actually pretty pleased with the level of individual talent on this team. Fortunately for us we have a great freshman class coming in from strong high school programs. We also have a couple of transfers coming in including one from an NCAA program."

While the team may have under-performed, the one thing that Aktary acknowledges former coaches at USC did well is the recruitment of players.

"In terms of recruiting, my predecessor did a

great job of starting the pipeline for young players," said Aktary. "We just have to keep it going. The team we have now is young and energetic."

Young and energetic indeed, but no team can perform well without the leadership of a few key upper classmen. One of those players is Janoff, the afore mentioned senior midfielder. As he has already stacked his approval behind Aktary Janoff noted that high talent level is nothing new on the west coast.

"I see the program [at USC] growing and getting stronger as lacrosse on the west coast continues to pick up," said Janoff. "The talent level at USC will continue to get better each year, as well as the talent at the rest of the club lacrosse teams on the west coast. Eventually I feel the whole Pac-10 will go Division I, but that's a ways down the road."

Janoff speaks highly of their new coach and also the team's future, and he is not alone in either respect "He's very organized and gets down to business," said Carter Dunham, the junior defenseman and co-captain of his new coach. "Practices are structured and have a purpose with future goals constantly in mind. His best trait is probably his experience. He knows how to build a program."

■ MAKING MONEY

Finances above all else are obviously a critical part of any club team in any sport. Aktary recognizes this as well and has already started to develop plans to sharpen the system in order to increase funds for the Trojan lacrosse squad.

"Administration is huge," Aktary said in a phone interview. "We need to start a Booster Club, get higher alumni involvement and en-

gage the A.D. [of USC], sort of like the 'J.P. Model' to some degree to bring more light to the program. Although obviously it would take a while to get where J.P. has gotten with the Michigan program."

Still, through various meetings the coach and his players will attempt to persuade the Trojan athletic department. They recently started by meeting with the Recreational Sports Department in particular.

"All in all it was a good meeting," recalled Aktary. "I was able to get a feel for how USC likes to have their club programs run. They can provide some support financially and some other support which we can take advantage of."

Like any club team at any school, another big challenge is finding field space. Aktary said that he found out the hierarchy in terms of who gets to use the fields in what order.

"We are obviously not as high in that hierarchy as we would like to be," admitted Aktary.

■ COACH PHELAN

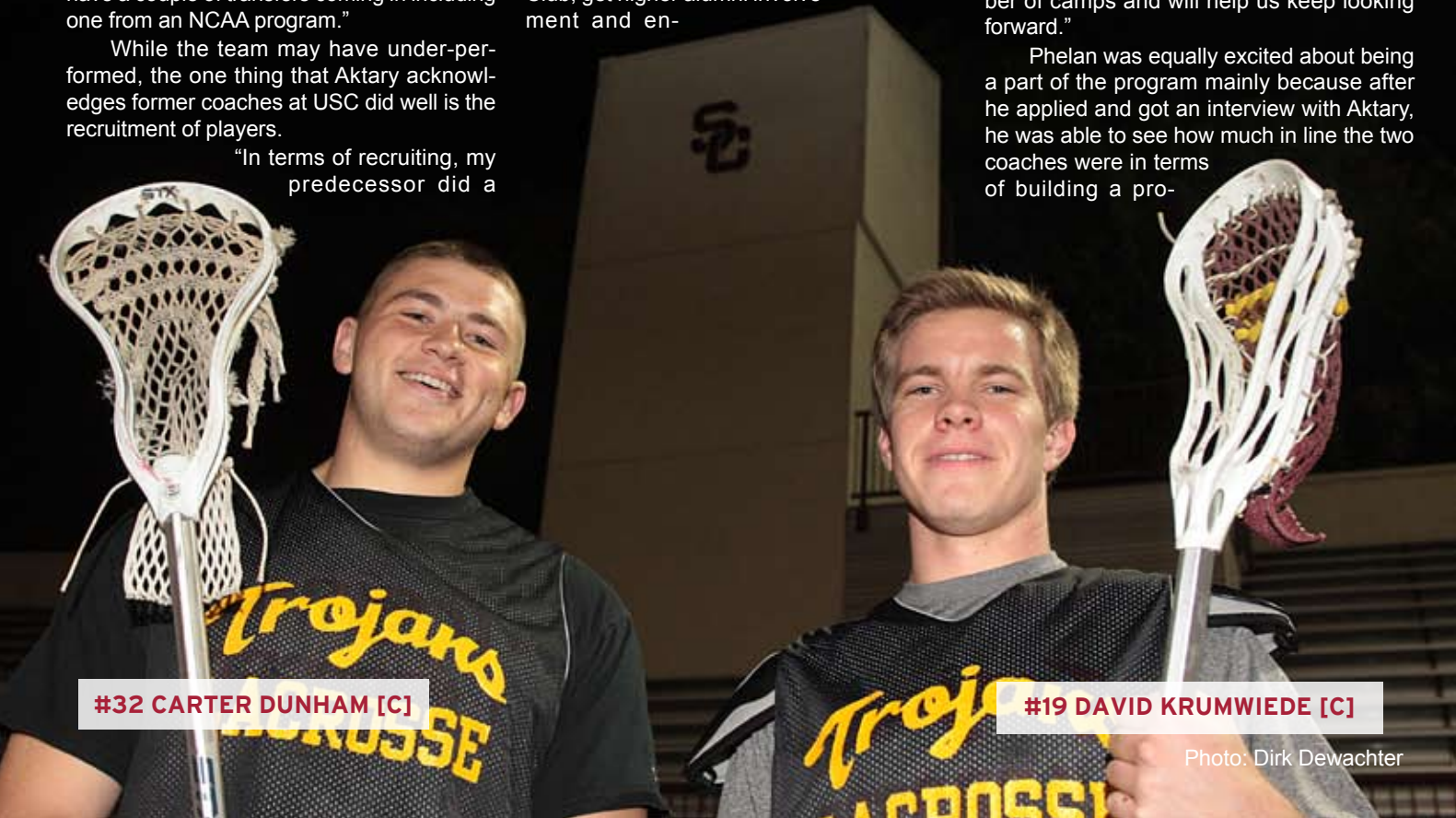
As stated before, the Trojans have a level of talent that was surprising even to Aktary. As he said he "expects to spend less time teaching individual fundamentals and more time developing synergies across the team."

To help lead the team Aktary made his first assistant coach hiring: James Phelan.

Phelan, according to Aktary, will mainly deal with the defense as well as help out with recruiting.

"He has extensive experience he will be drawing from," Aktary said of his new partner in crime. "He has been involved in a number of camps and will help us keep looking forward."

Phelan was equally excited about being a part of the program mainly because after he applied and got an interview with Aktary, he was able to see how much in line the two coaches were in terms of building a pro-



#32 CARTER DUNHAM [C]

#19 DAVID KRUMWIEDE [C]



#34 KASE LAVAL

gram.

"Basically I just applied and got the interview," recounted Phelan in a phone interview. "(Aktary) liked what I said and I liked what he said...we talked about the direction we wanted to take the program and what we wanted to do as far as structuring the program. We want to make it a legitimate program."

Aside from the immediate chemistry between the two coaches, Phelan recognized

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--JAMES PHELAN

some other positives about being involved with USC, like the academic reputation. He later added too that "there are a lot of people involved with some big athletic programs here and I'd love to be one of those people."

Lacrosse has always been natural for Phelan as he is a Long Island, NY native, which is as he put it a "hotbed for the sport." Phelan played in college for Mars Hill in North Carolina, a reputable Division-II NCAA program.

After that Phelan briefly coached in Pennsylvania before he decided to head to California.

"I just decided to head out west and see what opportunities were out there," said Phelan of the cross-country move. "I mean I knew there are a ton of athletes out here."

Phelan now finds himself at the head of the defense for the new-attitude USC Trojans squad and is ready to tackle the issues that he and Aktary will face while they try to build up the program. As Aktary said broadly when speaking about the team, he wants to take a more basic approach to coaching. Phelan is in line with that.

"My goal is to make this defense one that is feared by other teams," said Phelan. "We are taking more of an elementary route to this because we are taking this team in a new direction."

Phelan broadened his ideas about the defense and how he wants to approach the transition to the new staff.

"I try to tailor my defenses to the athletes that I have," said Phelan. "For now we are just going to try and teach the basics and then as time goes we can focus on more sophisticated defenses later. It will be better if we just treat it like they don't already know the basics even if they do already just to cover our own butts and then we can work towards the sophisticated stuff."

His message is already starting to resonate with some of the players as Phelan just picked up a major endorsement in the form of co-captain Dunham.

"He is really cool," said the junior defenseman. "We haven't been doing much in depth defensive schemes or anything because we have a bunch of new guys and we

just want to put in a solid foundation for fall ball. He has good footwork and agility drills for defenseman. He's been around and excited to be a part of a new program from what I can tell."

Phelan, according to Dunham, adds a coaching dimension to the team that the players have not yet been exposed to.

"I'm excited to have an actual defensive coach for once," said Dunham. "I feel like we haven't had that for a while and we'll get a lot more attention in practice. So hopefully our 'd' will hold up in those close games and we will play a lot more pressure defense this year."

■ TEAM GOALS

As far as the team's attitude about the upcoming season, Janoff and Dunham noted that the team is poised to get better ASAP. "Personally, I want to be a good leader and be able to motivate this team," said Janoff. "I want [USC] to get above .500, and all of us to have a fun time this season. Last year we had some disgruntled players and it wasn't fun for everybody...I want us to win more than we lose and stay competitive in all our games so everyone enjoys the season."

Janoff thinks that having a coach with the same goals that the team has should aid the cause to keep the peace amongst the team.

"His life goals seem to align with those of the guys on our team," said Janoff. "That will enable us to move forward on the same page with the same mindset."

Dunham is equally optimistic about the team's new direction but was a little more vague in terms of what he expects from the

#19 David Krumwiede assists #40 Luke Whiteside with poke check drill.
photo: Dirk Dewachter



that some players are not as committed to the team simply because it is a club team and they perhaps do not feel the level of dedication the coach's want, which is dangerous to any team to say the least.

"It is different from an NCAA program," said Phelan. "In the NCAA you are almost forced to be there but with a club team you choose to be there and join up."

Aktary says that this problem is not specific to USC but MCLA teams all over the country, and one that demands the staff's fullest attention.

"Some players feel that since it's 'only club' and they're paying to participate, that they can skip practice or not go out for Fall Ball - which has direct and dire consequences in the Spring," said Aktary. "These are attitudes that will change with time as existing players learn that the leadership of the team (coaches and captains) consider lacrosse to be a year-round commitment. Those that take it seriously will benefit, excel, and as a result, play; those that don't will have to get in line or leave the program."

Aktary believes that if the Trojans have a mindset like this that it will have a trickle-down effect on all of the incoming and young players.

"Once the entire team has gotten that message, future incoming freshmen will be assimilated into a culture of hard work and success and will therefore perpetuate that ethic," said the articulate head coach. "The

team. Still, in the end, the goal is the same: get better.

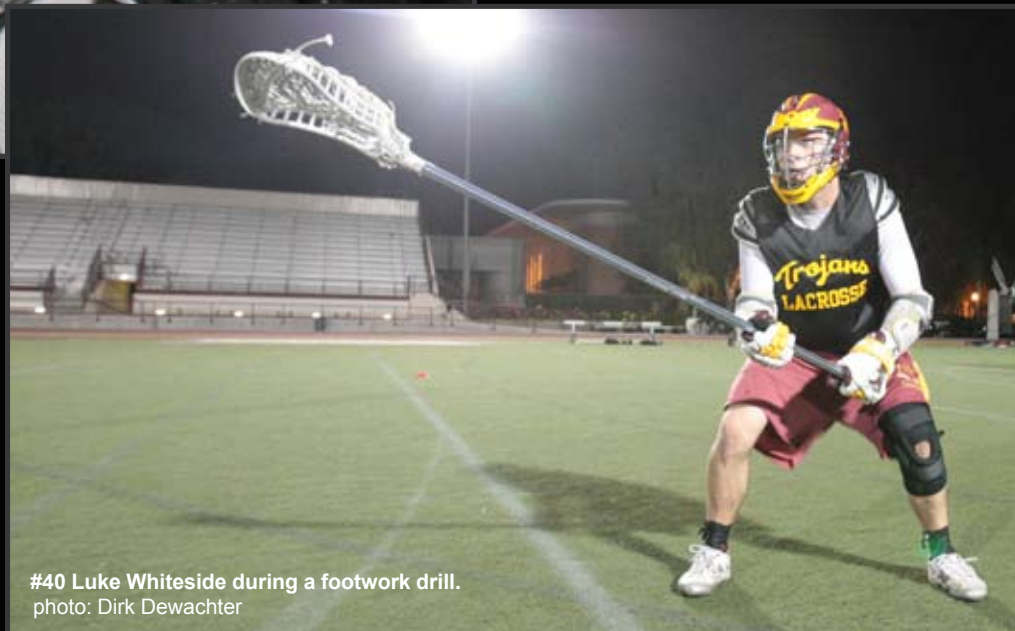
"Team goals have not been solidified this year," stated Dunham. "We want to come together and rebuild with our new coach. Aktary has big plans for the program and so do we. We want to be competitive for a change and make the move to the SLC. That means fundraising, winning games, and expanding the program towards a virtual varsity."

In terms of a more short term goal, Dunham offered "[This year] we want to come out in the top three of the conference so we can go to the tournament."

All of the team goals are a moot point though if Aktary and Phelan struggle to get the team's support in their message, which is what Phelan thinks is the most important factor in the team's formation into a playoff team.

"We are going to need dedication from all parts and the players buying into what we are saying," said Phelan. "They need to take (the team) where we want to take it and believe in us."

That is certainly the goal for any new coaching staff and Aktary offered a way to



#40 Luke Whiteside during a footwork drill.
photo: Dirk Dewachter

achieve it.

"With consistency and patience," said Aktary. "It took a long time for the existing culture to take shape, so it will take a long time for us to reform it. We will succeed in doing so by setting challenging but realistic goals, maintaining accountability, and reforming attitudes of some individuals."

That discussion brought up a topic with both coaches that is recognized to be a serious challenge with any club team. It seems

turn-around process will be a long one, but we have started it and many on the team are already buying into it... we just have to be consistent and patient. It will happen."

Turning the Trojans program around will be no easy task, but for a guy who has started new programs, was tutored under John Paul, has a large talent pool of players and earned a Master's Degree from Duke University, it is a manageable task. 🙌