

# Bruins down Women of Troy in NCAA semis

Vavic's trick play almost forces overtime, but the Bruins counter to win, 7-6.

By **ASHLEY ZELDIN**  
Daily Trojan

**LOS ALAMITOS, Calif.** — The Little Mermaid emerged from under the sea and scored. The Cardinal-clad among the crowd erupted, the Spirit Leaders chanted another So-Cal Spellout, and the Spirit of Troy played "Fight On." Senior driver Patty Cardenas had netted the equalizer and her third goal of the game as the No. 3 USC women's water polo team appeared to be fighting on, poised to push its semifinal matchup with No. 2 UCLA into overtime.

"It surprised (UCLA) a little bit but it wasn't enough," USC coach Jovan Vavic said, as the Women of Troy fell to the Bruins, 7-6, Saturday at the USA Water Polo National Training Center at the Joint Forces Training Base in Los Alamitos.

"That was an incredible play they drew up," UCLA coach Adam Krikorian said. "I don't know where Patty came from."

But USC surrendered a quick counterattack strike from Courtney Mathewson with 1:25 left, and it proved to be the felling blow. It was USC's fourth one-goal loss to UCLA this season, as the Women of Troy finished 2007 at 22-6 after defeating San Diego State in the third-place game. USC had overpowered Hartwick in the second round, 20-5, to reach the semifinal.

The ending of the USC-UCLA

match was ironically fitting. In the 2006 NCAA Championship game, Cardenas scored the tying goal with :30 left, but Mathewson scored the game-winner with .01 on the clock in last year's NCAA Championship game as the Bruins clawed their way past USC, 9-8. In fact, Mathewson scored the go-ahead counterattack goal in their last matchup on April 7.

"Our communication wasn't that good and we weren't looking around and she unfortunately got open," Cardenas said.

And just like that, USC's hopes for a shot at the NCAA Championship were Bruined.

UCLA had the early momentum, just as in their Mountain Pacific Sports Federation semifinal win over the Women of Troy, who finished third in conference. The Bruins scored 28 seconds into the game and took a 2-0 lead before consecutive goals by senior utility Erika Figge, junior driver Veronica Bartunkova, and sophomore two-meter Kami Craig gave USC the edge with 1:58 left in the first.

As always, emotions ran high throughout the game. With USC on top, 3-2, and :04 left in the first, Krikorian received a yellow card.

The Women of Troy extended their lead to 4-2 on Cardenas' first of her game-leading hat trick halfway through the second period until Kelly Rulon cut the Bruin deficit on a penalty shot past red-shirt sophomore goalie Whitney Morgan, who recorded seven saves. Her effort was matched by UCLA goalie Emily Feher.

"We were pretty calm throughout the game," Mathewson said. "We realized we were not playing our best defense as a team."

At 7:10 in the third, Bruin Kacy Kunkel and Cardenas got into a tussle, with USC fans calling for an ejection on Kunkel after an apparent fist to Cardenas' head; a double-ejection was called.

"(USC) came out hard," Krikorian said. "It was as intense and physical a game as we played all year long."

The final 1:04 was anticlimactic by comparison, with Vavic calling for USC's final timeout to set up another scoring drive, only to have the Bruins steal their chance away 14 seconds later and call a timeout to advance their position to the frontcourt. After Morgan knocked the Bruins a fresh shot clock with less than a possession left, Cardenas grabbed the steal. The Women of Troy moved quickly, looking for another miraculous equalizer with :20 to go, but Kelly Rulon snagged another steal in front of the goal in the waning seconds to secure the win.

"There isn't much to say really — you came here to win the championship, and now there's just another game left to play," Vavic said after the loss. "Our game we needed to play was today."

USC recovered, returning to its 13.5-goals-per-game form in a 13-6 win over the Aztecs, led by Craig's hat trick and a pair each from Cardenas and Figge. San Diego State got



**Heads up** | Patty Cardenas, who led USC with three goals in its NCAA loss to eventual champions UCLA, looks for Forel Davies.

to within 8-6 at the beginning of the fourth frame, but the Women of Troy responded with five straight scores.

"This was a very tough game to play because this was a game that we didn't want to be in, so it wasn't easy to motivate and get the girls up for the game," Vavic said.

Yet USC found its motivation. "Everyone turned around and real-

ized that this would be the last game we would be together and we wanted to go out and play for fun and enjoy and give our seniors a victory," senior utility Brittany Hayes said.

The Bruins advanced to the title game, defeating formerly top-ranked Stanford to secure their third consecutive women's water polo championship and UCLA's 100th title.

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