

USC coach Mark Trakh revives a once-dominant program

Ashley Zeldin | February 10, 2005

Los Angeles, CA -- Twelve years ago, Mark Trakh taught English and coached boys' basketball at Brea Olinda High School in Brea, Calif.

Last year, he was Pepperdine University's seasoned and record-setting women's basketball coach.

Now, Trakh has made the transition to USC to coach the Women of Troy.

"I've gone from being a head high school coach to head coach at a mid-major, to head coach at I think one of the top institutions in the country, so it's a thrill," Trakh said.

"It's very exciting and it's very humbling."

"I kind of looked around and said, 'Man, how'd I get here? This is awesome!'"

In his short time coaching the Women of Troy, he's led them to a 16-6 overall record, 10-3 in the Pacific-10 Conference.

"I think we're doing OK now, and the season's not even over yet," Trakh said.

The team's current record is its best 22 games into the season since the team's 16-6 record in 1997.

And he calls the team's progress "OK"?

Trakh is used to success.

In his 12 years at Pepperdine, Trakh accumulated a 199-123 (.618) overall record and led the Waves to six 20-win seasons and six postseason appearances, all the while boasting a 100 percent graduation rate.

"We'd like to succeed not only on the basketball court but also in the classroom," he said.

"I think that's real important."

Trakh's concern for the athletes is what makes their relationship work.

"At Pepperdine we had a family atmosphere, and we want to continue that here," Trakh said.

"We have an open-door policy where players can come in and talk to us, but at the same time we have high expectations for our players and they know it"

"They know what we expect from them."

His players agree.

Senior center Kim Gipson said previously, the player-coach trust relationship "wasn't put on the table."

Trakh's openness, she said, has helped the team meld.

"In addition to being a team, it's trusting the coaches and what they're here to do," she said.

"Coach Trakh allows more open communication - it's a player-friendly program - whereas in the past, it wasn't always quite that way."

"The team, this year, really bought into the system."

Jamie Hagiya, sophomore point guard, said that the concern for the athletes' well-being on and off the court has been a boost to the team's morale.

"It just feels different when you walk into the gym," she said. "The first time we all went up there, the whole environment was real positive. It puts an extra bounce in your step."

And making the jump to coaching at USC has definitely put a bounce in Trakh's step.

Although Trakh was hired last April, he said it didn't sink in until the first quarter of his first USC football game.

"On the big Jumbotron, I saw the promotion for the Notre Dame game and I sat there and went, 'Oh my goodness, there's no going back now,'" Trakh exclaimed.

"I'm coaching a sport at USC!' That's where it kind of hit me. I'm extremely lucky I'm even coaching here."

Trakh's ascent to Division-I basketball began in 1978 when he took an assistant coaching position at Western High School in Anaheim, Calif., while working as a sports stringer for the Orange County Register.

After graduating from Long Beach State in 1981 with a bachelor's degree in journalism and earning his teaching credential, he took the head coaching post at Brea Olinda.

Sometimes after a loss, Trakh says he wishes he were a journalist and wonders about what might have been.

"Especially after you lose those tough games, and you've got that feeling in the pit of your stomach, that heaviness. When you get that feeling, you go, 'Man, I should've really been a writer!'" Trakh said.

"It's a dream job because you can't win or lose, you just enjoy the game."

Then again, coaching at USC is no small feat.

He said that when deciding between USC and Pepperdine, the opportunity to coach at the highest level was a contributing factor to his decision.

"When you make a decision between Pepperdine and USC, at Pepperdine I could be there 20 years from now and retire," Trakh said.

"At USC, I might be teaching English at Brea High School five years from now, so there's that little bit of fear in there."

"Teaching is a noble profession, but I'd much rather be coaching basketball here."

So in the meantime, Trakh lives USC basketball.

"I do nothing except coach basketball, that's basically it. That's the only thing that I can do halfway decently.

"It's totally consuming, there's really nothing else."

"It's just basketball, basketball and more basketball."

His pure dedication just might be what USC needs to rebuild the program to its glory of the Lisa Leslie and Cheryl Miller days.

"My main objective is to get USC basketball back to where it's supposed to be."

(C) 2004 Daily Trojan via U-WIRE