



UCLA and USC: A Brief Look Into Two of the Top Strength and Conditioning Programs in the NCAA



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Back in April of 2005, I travelled to Southern California to coach one of my athletes in a series of Track and Field meets, including the Mt. Sac Relays. As with many of my trips, I made an effort to arrange some informal professional development activities on the side. For this particular trip, I was interested in visiting a number of strength coaches in the area, particularly at the major universities. Through the help of a good friend of mine, Dr. Joseph Horrigan, a highly regarded soft-tissue therapist and conditioning consultant, I had the pleasure of meeting up with UCLA Strength and Conditioning Coach, E.J. "Doc" Kreis. It also made sense – while in Los Angeles – to see what was being done across town at the University of Southern California. I e-mailed the USC Strength and Conditioning coach – Chris Carlisle – a few weeks prior, and he was generous enough to grant me some time for a visit during their spring football camp.

Both the UCLA and USC athletic programs have been synonymous with success and excellence. Walking through both campuses, viewing the various athletic venues, one is surrounded by reminders of great athletes and coaches. Names such as John Wooden, Marcus Allen, Arthur Ashe, and Carson Palmer are engraved on trophies, murals, monuments and even buildings. Additionally, as you walk into the stadiums, arenas and weight rooms of these schools, you see the present day reminders of excellence and high performance through the athletes that are training hard for their next season. For a visiting strength and conditioning/sprint coach from Canada, these are all sights that have motivated me to improve myself, my training environment and, ultimately, the athletes under my guidance.

This article provides an overview of my brief, but insightful, conversations with both Doc Kreis of UCLA and Chris Carlisle of USC. In no way am I comparing the two coaches and their respective programs. I am simply providing information on programs that coincidentally have one of the biggest athletic rivalries in NCAA history. The words and prescriptions of both of these coaches have much to offer to individuals interested in pursuing a career in strength and conditioning, particularly at the college/university level. I know that these coaches' words have inspired me to become a better coach, strength and conditioning professional and person.

UCLA Bruins

**Head Strength and
Conditioning Coach:**
E.J. "Doc" Kreis



Background/Bio

E.J. "Doc" Kreis is completing his third season as UCLA's head speed-strength and conditioning coach. Doc oversees all operations in UCLA's new 15,000-square foot weight room and lends his expertise to all of the athletic teams in some shape or form – with a good portion of his time dedicated to football and men's basketball. The UCLA athletics web site proclaims, "Not only a technical expert, Doc's reputation as a motivator, communicator, and mentor to student athletes will serve us well in our continuing efforts to improve our athletic eminence." My visit with Coach Kreis absolutely confirmed this statement.

Prior to his work at UCLA, Doc spent over 10 years as an assistant athletic director and the head coach for speed-strength and conditioning at the University of Colorado. He was also the strength and conditioning coach for Georgia Southern, Vanderbilt and Middle Tennessee State. Kreis earned a bachelor's degree from Clemson University in Therapeutic Recreation, and achieved a Master's and Doctoral degree in Physical Education from Middle Tennessee State.

Doc Kreis has been inducted into the U.S.A. Strength & Conditioning Coaches Hall of Fame. He was also named one of 10 master strength and conditioning coaches by the Collegiate Strength & Conditioning Coaches Association. It is regarded as one of the highest honors a strength and conditioning coach can achieve. In addition, the Professional Football Strength and Conditioning Coaches Society has named Kreis the National Collegiate Strength Coach of the Year for both the 1991-92 and 1994-95 seasons.

Coach Kreis has also studied abroad, earning three different degrees overseas in the early 1980s. Doc has degrees from the Lenin Institute for Physical Culture in Moscow, the German Institute of Physical Culture and Sports Science in Leipzig, and the Institute of Physical Culture and Sports in Bulgaria. Through all of this, Kreis has also found time to author three books on conditioning athletes: "Strength, Conditioning and Injury Prevention For Hockey", "Speed-Strength Training for Football", and "Sports Agility."

Strength and Conditioning Program

When you meet Doc Kreis, you get the impression that you are meeting someone who is larger than life. His personality is dynamic, and his love of his profession is evident. In meeting him for the first time, he made me feel like I was one of his long lost friends. He was a very gracious host. When in the presence of someone who is as accomplished as Doc, I'm always careful to listen to what they have to say and not speak out of turn. Yet Coach Kreis made me feel as though I had much to offer him, wanting to know my opinion on different training approaches. In this way, he reminded me of Al Vermeil of the Chicago Bulls. Al and Doc give the sincere impression that they are interested in every individual they meet and what they have to offer.

Despite Doc's warm exterior, it quickly becomes apparent that Doc is all business when it comes to training his athletes. When meeting different

coaches, I'm always interested in their overall approach and philosophy. The actual details of the training – the exercises, reps, etc. – bear less weight to me than the theory and structure behind the program. With Doc's program, it is clear that there is a significant emphasis on professionalism, tradition, team building, discipline, work ethic, respect and commitment. Coming from a football background, you can see how Doc takes the football approach – toughness, discipline, team focused – and applies it to the training of other team and individual sports.

In talking with Doc and watching him work with his athletes, you get the sense that he is continually striving to make his athletes stronger and tougher in every sense. It is not out of the question for Doc to deviate from the training program to address the needs of a particular athlete. In many cases, he will sense a weakness, whether physical or mental, and focus in on addressing that weakness. And, it may mean that sometimes science has to take a backseat to character building and toughness training – preparing the athlete for both the physical and psychological demands of their sport. Yet, Doc is also very careful to minimize the risk of injury for all athletes, working within carefully established guidelines.

Coach Kreis takes time to evaluate the needs of every one of his athletes and the sports that they play. A general program may be provided for each team, but you will see Doc out on the platforms with the athletes tending to their individual needs. He will be watching technique, providing pointers, acting as a motivator or all of the above. The training program may change – drastically or subtly – based on what he sees for a particular individual on any given day. Watching Doc work with an athlete is truly a demonstration of the "art of coaching."

Doc's strength and conditioning facility also exudes a sense of pride and professionalism. The room is large (15,000 square feet) and pristine. Located in the bottom floor of the Acosta Center, this facility has a minimum of 40 Olympic lifting platforms with full power racks or half racks attached to each platform. Each platform is also outfitted with:

- Adjustable bench (flat, incline, upright)
- 7' Olympic 20kg bar (men's) for Olympic lifts and pulls

- 6' Olympic – 15kg bar (women's) for Olympic lifts and pulls
- 7' Olympic – 20kg bar (men's) for squatting and pressing
- 4' cambered bar for bicep curls and tricep pullovers
- Bumper plates 5kg to 20kg alongside each platform
- Bar stands for each of the listed bars
- Easy grip metal plates for squatting and pressing movements
- Chalk stands between each platform

Between each set of platforms are pairs of fixed dumbbells (50 and 90lb sets) that have rotating handles, minimizing torque on the wrists. Additional plates can also be added to these dumbbells to increase the weight. Because the dumbbells are set right next to the platforms, it makes it easier for athletes to integrate dumbbell exercises into their workout without having to leave their platform and make their way over to the dumbbell area. In this way, Kreis is innovative in his delivery of equipment for his athletes. Doc also arranged for seven-foot cambered bars to be constructed from scratch so athletes would not need spotters for exercises such as tricep pullovers. The seven-foot bar can be mounted in the power rack to be lifted off and returned to the rack by the athlete. Doc also believes the cambered bar allows for a more advantageous hand position for pressing movements (i.e. partial supination of hand), taking stress off the shoulder and also simulating the hand position of linemen.

With Doc's weight room setup, numerous teams could be training in the facility at the same time, including the football team. It is a great arrangement that allows the athletes to complete their workouts without wasting time waiting for equipment or walking around the gym from exercise to exercise. This is important for NCAA athletes who are only permitted to perform supervised workouts for a maximum of eight hours per week in their off seasons.

One item in the weight room that captures your attention is a large display of John Wooden's "Pyramid of Success." It is situated in the middle of the room, in plain sight for all of the athletes to view as they are training toward their goals. It is another sign of Doc's commitment to continuing a tradition of excellence at UCLA. Bruin logos are found almost everywhere in the weight room. You see them on the individual plates, dumbbells, power racks and machines. The walls are covered in blue and gold and it is quite apparent

that you are in 'Bruin country' when you enter the weight room.

When I asked Doc when and how often he would perform formal physical testing with his athletes, he replied, "Whenever I feel like it." He went on to elaborate that he has set dates for testing throughout the year, but at any point in time he may feel it necessary to test the abilities of individual athletes or whole teams. This is particularly the case if he is seeing significant gains and performances, and he wants to determine their current abilities. However, you get the feeling that Doc is always 'testing' his athletes and evaluating their performance, whether it is how much they are lifting, or how they are lifting a weight. Additionally, if you have the opportunity to see him in action, he is always 'testing' the mindset of the athletes in an ongoing effort to 'toughen' them up and prepare them for the rigours of competition.

On a final note, it was a pleasure to see that Doc has also conditioned the athletes to be very respectful of others in the gym, particularly the strength coaches, with lots of courteous "please and thank-you's" being handed out left and right. At the same time, Doc is very generous and personable with all the athletes, knowing all of their names and backgrounds. It is undoubtedly a reflection of his genuine concern for their development as athletes and individuals.

USC Trojans

Head Strength and Conditioning Coach:
Chris Carlisle

Background/Bio:

Chris Carlisle is completing his fifth year as USC's head strength and conditioning coach, having joined the Trojans in February of 2001. The Trojan football program – one of his primary areas of responsibility – has won national championships in 2003 and 2004. Coach Carlisle came to USC from the University of Tennessee Volunteers, where he was the associate head strength and conditioning coach for 3 years. The Volunteer football program won the national championship back in 1998. Needless to say, Coach Carlisle is



familiar with what it takes to be the best football program in the nation.

Chris Carlisle, like many strength and conditioning coaches, has a background in football, playing offensive line at North Iowa Area Community College back in 1980. He was a three-year starting offensive lineman at Chadron State College in Nebraska, earning All-Area honors. His coaching career started as the head coach and strength coach at Nebraska's Dodge High in 1985 and then spent six seasons (1986-91) as an offensive coach and strength coach at Blytheville High, also in Nebraska. His next assignment was as a strength and conditioning graduate assistant coach at the University of Arkansas in 1991, the school where he eventually achieved his Master's Degree in history. His football coaching resumed in 1993 at a college prep school in Arkansas – Subiaco Academy – where he was head football coach and strength coach for four seasons. He also worked a year at Trinity Valley Community College in Athens, Texas, in 1997 where he was an offensive coach and strength coach.

Although Coach Carlisle has been successful throughout his career, he is no stranger to adversity. In December of 2000, he learned he had developed Hodgkin's Disease. He began radiation therapy in Tennessee, where he was still the Volunteers' associate strength and conditioning coach. In February of 2001, USC Trojans hired him as their Head Strength and Conditioning Coach. Not wanting to become a distraction or attract any sympathy, Carlisle kept his illness a secret to everyone except Trojan head football coach Pete Carroll. All the while Chris continued treatments in Tennessee and at the USC Norris Comprehensive Cancer Center and Hospital. In the summer of 2001, doctors informed him that the cancer was in remission. He eventually informed the USC players of his ordeal at the start of Fall 2001 training camp. His determination and courage earned him one of 17 nominations for the 2003 Most Courageous Award presented by the Football Writers Association of America.

Strength and Conditioning Program

When I made the decision to visit USC while on my trip to Los Angeles, I didn't have a friend that could set up the visit like I did with UCLA. I did my research, found the e-mail address for Chris Carlisle and sent off a message – pretty much a cold-call request for a visit. Knowing that USC

was in the final week of their football spring camp, I wouldn't have been disappointed if Coach Carlisle didn't have time for me. In fact, even if I got a peek at their weight room, I would have been happy. Fortunately, though, Chris e-mailed me back promptly and let me know that I would be welcome to visit if we could squeeze in an appointment between practice sessions. I made sure I was available for any time that he suggested.

When I sat down with Chris, I wanted to learn more about his overall training philosophy. Working with a National Champion football program, it was apparent that he had to be meticulous with his planning and application of training. There was no room for haphazard training sessions that put potential NFL stars at risk for injury.

Even though our conversation was taking place in the weight room, Chris was adamant that all of their training, ultimately, must make the athlete better in their arena of competition. Big bench presses and fast 40's, while impressive to the lay person, did not make an athlete a champion. Carlisle places a large emphasis on movement skills and speed. In all components of their training, USC athletes are developed with technique and skill being of utmost importance. Next in the priority scale is speed. Strength is third in the list of training priorities. The USC Strength and Conditioning room has a list of record lifts (clean, bench and squat) on the wall, but Coach Carlisle is quick to point out that the lifts are simply general indicators, and not an end in itself. Carlisle views the weight room as simply a means to an end. Although he would like to have his athletes as strong as possible in the weight room, he is more concerned about how they practice and compete in their chosen sport.

Chris Carlisle even bluntly stated that he knows that other NCAA schools have bigger lifts than his athletes. This fact was no cause for concern in his mind. As an example, he referred to the 2004 Bowl game against the Oklahoma Sooners and how the media pointed out the size and supposed strength advantage that the Sooners had over USC. However, once the kick-off was made, it was apparent that the speed and power of the Trojans was something that the Sooners had not yet encountered in the 2004 season. The Sooners were quickly taken out of their rhythm and comfort zone as the Trojans beat them to the play in every aspect of the game. Strength cannot

make a difference if you are not afforded the time to use that strength.

Within the weight room, Carlisle focuses on a combination of good technique and speed of movement. If an athlete does not have good technique, he or she will not be able to attain the full benefits of the prescribed exercises. Optimized technique also minimizes the possibility of injury. For Olympic lifts, bar speed is of utmost importance. Improvements in bar speed results in improved power – power that will be useful in the field of play. Coach Carlisle made the point that some of his football athletes may not have exceptional 40 yard dash times, but on the playing field, they have the power and speed necessary to make the required play. Some of this is due to good coaching on the part of the football staff, but also due to the emphasis on game-related speed and power.

When discussing his coaching philosophy, Coach Carlisle had a great line. Although he would work his athletes hard, pushing them to their limit, he was always sure to “give them apple pie” at the end of the workout. He followed up this line with a great analogy. He had always considered his mother to be a great cook. But when he really thought about it, he realized that she wasn’t as great a cook as he thought she was. He elaborated by telling me, “My mom would make chili with spaghetti noodles, and other unconventional combinations. A great cook wouldn’t do that. But you know what, I always left the dinner table with a great feeling because she would always give us apple pie with ice cream, or some other great dessert.” So what does Coach Carlisle do with his athletes. He gives them ‘Apple Pie’ at the end of the workouts. He explained that although the workouts are tough, regimented and sometimes long, he allows the athletes to finish up with bodybuilding lifts like arm curls. It’s an exercise that makes the athletes feel good about themselves, but doesn’t create residual fatigue that will negatively impact the next day’s workout.

He also pointed out that the ‘Apple Pie’ lifts are what seem to elicit compliments from third parties like the other coaches. When the coaches see the big biceps, they are apt to say, “Way to go. Looks like you’re working hard in the weight room.” When the girlfriend sees the big biceps, they are typically impressed saying their ‘oooohhs and aaahhs’. That’s the apple pie.

While waiting for Coach Carlisle in the weight room, I couldn’t help but notice a list on his office white board. For program priorities, he had his first three items listed as “Facility Upgrade.” While the USC weight room wasn’t as outwardly impressive as the UCLA facility, it appeared to be well equipped, with all of the necessary platforms, power racks, benches, boxes, machines and other items.

When we left the weight room and made our way out to the practice field for the final inter-squad scrimmage of spring camp, I couldn’t help but realize that being a good strength and conditioning coach is more about understanding your role in the big picture. Many coaches are looking for “dream” workouts and idealistic programs that just won’t work for real-world athletes. Chris Carlisle sees himself as primarily a “facilitator” for the USC coaches, working to prepare the athletes for the ‘field of play.’ While other, less scrupulous strength and conditioning coaches may take credit for USC’s success, Coach Carlisle is constantly working hard behind the scenes in an effort to make the Trojan team coaches and players a success. However, I’m sure that with all of the success Chris Carlisle has had, a new facility upgrade is not far off. As Coach Carlisle and the rest of the Trojan faithful would say, “Fight On!”

Concluding Remarks

If you are ever fortunate enough to meet them, Doc Kreis and Chris Carlisle are some of the nicest people you will ever come across. Their enthusiasm, determination and professionalism have inspired me to become a better coach and individual. It seems fitting that these two accomplished professionals are pitted against each other in one of the most famous rivalries in all of college sport. Given their experience and devotion to their programs, I’m certain that they will continue to “one-up” each other on a continuous basis, pushing the level of excellence in Los Angeles to an all time high. I’m just glad that I had a chance to interact with them, and hope to learn more from them in the future.