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ll eyes in the sports world were on Southern California last fall when USC football coach Pete Carroll named Matt Barkley starting quarterback. The story dominated headlines

for weeks. Why? Because Barkley was the first true freshman to start in the history of the storied program—the same program that has produced NFL quarterbacks Carson Palmer, Matt Leinhardt and Mark Sanchez. Carroll told the media last fall, “We have a quarterback that’s unusual. He’s so far ahead of the curve, that it’s hard to predict what he’s going to be able to do.”

From the outside looking in, it’s easy to see why Barkley is extraordinary. But when you meet him in person, it’s even easier to understand how a freshman stepped in and took the reigns of the Trojan offense. He’s so calm, cool and collected he may as well have ice water running through his veins. The Southern California native has been compared to Joe Montana, Peyton Manning and Tom Brady—and is lauded for his perfect throwing motion and a mental make-up that’s off the charts. So what does he think about all the hooplah?

“It’s pretty crazy and cool to think about,” he says. “I try to keep it all in perspective though, because I could have done a lot better last season. There’s always something to improve on, whether it’s the little things or the overall record of the team. Looking back at that first game against San Jose State, some of the crazy wins we had, and a lot of the experiences I had, it was all pretty neat.”

The story brings to mind a metaphor in the Old Testament, when the prophet Samuel anointed Jesse’s youngest son, David, to lead Israel. But Barkley hardly lets his age define him. “I always think of 1 Timothy 4:12, which simply reminds me, ‘Don’t let anyone look down on you because you’re young,’” he explains.

Barkley (6-foot-3, 220 pounds) clearly carries himself as a man much older than his 19 years. It’s that level-headed maturity and natural leadership instinct that made the transition from high school to college so seamless. But it hasn’t been without its challenges, which is why his faith in Christ

plays such an integral part of his day-to-day life, especially when it’s a life lived in the spotlight.

“You definitely can’t do it alone,” he admits. “I don’t consider it pressure, it’s more of dealing with all the attention, and what people make the USC quarterback out to be. My family has been great at keeping me grounded, and my close friends keep me accountable. Also, it helps to have a daily schedule of talking to God and getting in the Word.”

One of those friends who keeps him accountable is his cousin, Robbie Boyer, a sophomore receiver for the Trojans. “He’s my best friend and my roommate,” says Barkley. And with their history on the field together, the duo likely anticipates each others’ moves pretty easily, right? “Oh yeah,” he adds with a smile. Barkley, who threw for 2,735 yards and 15 touchdowns his first season, has certainly found his calling taking snaps from center.

EYES FORWARD

FROM STARTING A BIBLE STUDY TO BEING INVOLVED IN AN ACCOUNTABILITY GROUP, SOUTHERN CAL QUARTERBACK MATT BARKLEY HAS SHOWN MATURITY BEYOND HIS YEARS

■ BY JENNA SAMPSON



"I love everything about [quarterbacking]. It's one of those things where, when I was playing baseball I was a pitcher, when I was in soccer I played center forward, and when it came to football, I've always wanted to be the quarterback. And not for the attention. I like knowing what's going on. It has attracted me since I was a little kid and had a John Elway poster on my wall."

And for Barkley, USC is the perfect place to be. "It's close to home, which means my family can come to my games, and my dad even comes to my practices sometimes," he says. "The spirit and tradition of the school is pretty cool—the band, the students, and the support of the football program—it unifies the school. And you can't complain about the weather here in SoCal."

This past spring, he helped start a Bible study with some of his teammates, and the highlight of the semester took place when they joined up with a few other Bible studies on campus for a worship night. "We met up with some members of the band and the song girls, and my cousin and I helped lead worship. It was pretty cool because a lot of us didn't know each other before

that night." (Barkley played guitar on his church worship band all through junior high and high school).

Having a core group of believers to help encourage each other is pivotal as a college student facing the usual pressures and temptations at a secular university.

"There are so many opportunities to sway and go in a different direction than what God has planned for us," Barkley states. "I think having a close group of Christian friends that have encouraged me to do the right thing, because it's so easy to be influenced by certain things here, so staying grounded and standing up for what I believe is something I've definitely had to do. It's been encouraging to have that opportunity to stand up like that. Especially with the profile and platform I have as the USC quarterback, I try to use it for God's glory—whether it's talking to a local reporter or saying something after a game on national television, and you can't miss out on those opportunities."

And now, a season later, Barkley is still a big story, set to prove himself again at the helm for the Trojans. The offseason brought about a slew of changes, namely a new head coach in Lane Kiffin, and several other shifts in the coaching ranks.

"It's kinda crazy, and you realize there are a lot of things outside of your control," adds Barkley. "As a player you have to realize you're not in control, there are going to be a lot of things outside your power that you have to submit to. I can't control who's coaching me. But it's been great. Coach Kiffin has come in, and there have



PHOTO: JOE ROBBINS / GETTYIMAGES

been some changes in the program for the better."

The offseason also gave Barkley and the rest of the team a chance to make some changes, aiming to bring the national championship back to Southern California. "Our team has had an attitude shift over the offseason, which is for the better, and character is something we've been working on together. Having four losses is unacceptable, so we're eager to improve our record and win that championship."

When USC kicks off the 2010 season in Hawaii on September 2, be sure to look for No. 7. The Trojans' future is looking golden.



PHOTO: JEFF JACOBSON / GETTYIMAGES

Matt's favorite things...

- Proverbs 3:5-6: "I'll sometimes add that to signatures to remind me of what I'm doing."
- The apostle Paul: "Not just for what he wrote but for what he went through."
- Peyton Manning and Tom Brady: "They're good examples for us younger quarterbacks to study so much film and work harder than anyone- and you can see that it pays off in the way they play."
- Passion Worship: "I'm really into worship music right now."
- Bands: Need to Breathe, Sanctus Real, Audio Adrenaline
- Food: Chick-fil-a
- Hobbies: Guitar

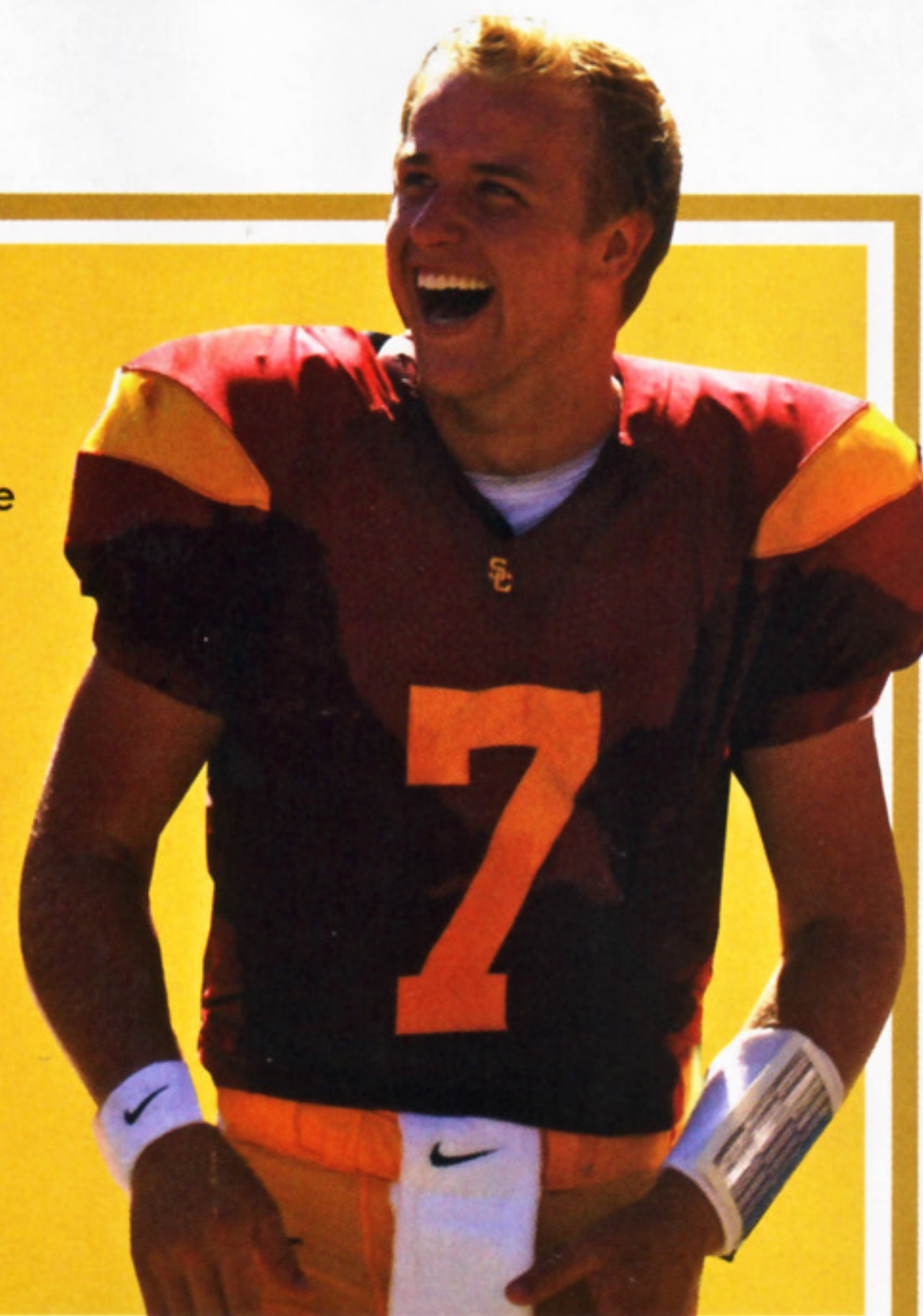


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