

The OFFICIAL MAGAZINE of UCLA ATHLETICS

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SPRING 2021

Sparking a

MOVEMENT

How NIA DENNIS' 90-second homage to black culture became a viral sensation.

ONE MORE RUN

With a national title very much in the picture, UCLA's Villacorta, Parker & Sheehan put the pros on hold.

NO PLACE LIKE HOME

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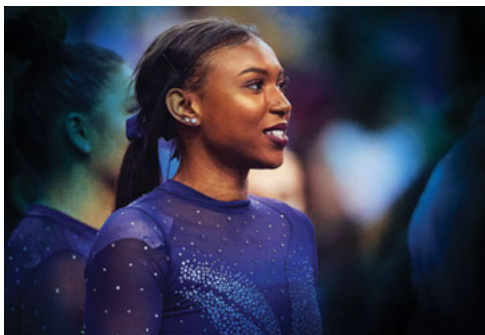
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IN FOCUS

*Members of the **UCLA MEN'S AND WOMEN'S TRACK & FIELD TEAMS** pose for the camera during their annual photo day at Drake Stadium on Jan. 31. The team kicked off its indoor season at the Arkansas Qualifier (February 5) and was back in action at the Matador Qualifier on the campus of Texas Tech University on February 19. Six UCLA indoor records were broken during the 2020 season as the team qualified a pair of relay squads and three individuals to the NCAA Indoor Championships. (Photos: Don Liebig)*

KID CAPTAIN PRESENTED BY UCLA MATTEL CHILDREN'S HOSPITAL

AGAINST ALL ODDS, 3 SIBLINGS WERE BORN WITH THE SAME RARE GENETIC DISORDER



*A trip from Ohio to UCLA for treatment – mid-pandemic – was the **LANGENHOP FAMILY'S** best hope.*

by **COURTNEY PERKES**

Olivia Langenhop, the fourth child in the world to undergo treatment offered only at UCLA for her deadly genetic disorder, gleefully waved a blue pom-pom a week after leaving the hospital.

During a special Zoom call with the Bruins football team in December, Olivia, 3, sat between the second and third patients to ever receive that same gene therapy — treatment for a rare disorder called Leukocyte adhesion deficiency-1, which hobbles the immune system.

Olivia laughed and played with the other kids, who happened to be her older sister, Ava, 5, and baby brother, Landon, 1. In a celebratory moment for the siblings, they served as honorary Kid Captains for the Dec. 12 game against USC.

Their parents, Jon and Alicia Langenhop, temporarily moved the family from Ohio during the middle of the COVID-19 pandemic to give the siblings the best chance for survival. And with Olivia's release from UCLA Mattel Children's Hospital, their treatment was complete.

"In a way it's kind of a blessing that all three of them are going through it together," Alicia, 31, said. "They're bonding so much."

A MATTER OF ODDS

In the summer of 2019, Alicia and Jon were a few months away from the birth of their third child when they found out their daughters shared a condition that prevents their white blood cells from fighting infection because of a missing protein.

Leukocyte adhesion deficiency-1, or LAD-1, occurs in about 1 in 1 million children worldwide. The recessive disorder is caused by mutations in a gene carried by both parents.

By the time Ava was 8 weeks old, she had been hospitalized twice for infections. Olivia constantly had colds, ear infections or rashes and also required hospital stays.

Meanwhile, Alicia worked as assistant director of a child care center that the girls attended.

"We always blamed it on day care," Jon, 35, said.

It was only after Ava visited a dentist who expressed concern that her gums bled so easily that the Langenhops sought genetic testing. With the diagnosis, they were told the girls, then 3 and 2, would need bone marrow transplants, which offered a success rate of about 75%.

The best hope was that the new baby would be a match for one of them. But after Landon's birth in

October, the couple found out before leaving the hospital that he too had inherited both copies of the defective gene.

The odds of any one of the Langenhop kids having LAD-1 were 25%. The chances of all three were about 1.5%.

"Lightning doesn't strike that many times. There's no way our third kid will have it," Alicia remembered thinking before receiving the results. "My jaw just hit the floor. I was in disbelief that all of the babies would have to go through the same thing."

A CALL FROM LOS ANGELES

As the Langenhops sought media publicity to find bone marrow matches, their plight caught the attention of Donald Kohn, MD, a researcher in the UCLA Eli & Edythe Broad Center of Regenerative Medicine & Stem Cell Research.

He was leading a new clinical trial for children with LAD-1 that used gene therapy in a months-long process that would eliminate the potential rejection risks of a bone marrow transplant. The treatment works by harvesting the defective blood-making stem cells, correcting the mutation in a lab, and then transplanting the properly functioning cells back into the child's body.

"The whole idea of gene therapy is the patient is their own donor so they're a perfect match," said Dr. Kohn, professor of pediatrics and of microbiology, immunology and molecular genetics.

Dr. Kohn reached out to the family's medical team in Ohio and Ava was the first of the three to enroll in the trial sponsored by Rocket Pharmaceuticals of New York.

"There was essentially no risk for this," Jon said. "This is kind of a no-brainer decision for us to at least attempt to get it done."

Dr. Kohn said all three children had severe cases that generally mean an expected life span of one year. Symptoms include delayed detachment of the umbilical cord stump after birth, bacterial and fungal infections, severe gum inflammation and slow-healing wounds. He said white blood cells are made in the bone marrow and then enter the bloodstream to fight infection. But with LAD-1, the cells can't get to the site of infections, he said, likening them to fire trucks ready to respond but unable to reach the scene.

"A simple infection that should normally be cleared up can just expand and grow and be very hard to treat," Dr. Kohn said.

TREATMENT AND THEN A PANDEMIC

In December 2019, Ava received medication that causes the stem cells to enter the blood stream where they are then collected through an IV line over about four hours. Not enough were retrieved,



however, so she underwent the procedure again in February 2020.

Her stem cells were sent to a lab where the missing gene was added using a virus that infects the normal gene into the DNA of the stem cell.

"That's the critical piece of the technology," Dr. Kohn said. "Once it's in there, it's in there permanently."

Although that process only takes three days, the lab needs about two months to test all the cells for contamination as well as ensure that enough cells took the gene and can still grow, Dr. Kohn said. Once transplanted, they will replicate to make new white blood cells with the necessary protein.

The plan was for Ava to undergo her transplant in May, but then the COVID-19 pandemic threatened to delay the process.

"We didn't want to hold off," Jon said. "We wanted to go as fast as possible. We had three kids that needed to go through this."

In late April, the family boarded a near-empty flight to Los Angeles. The company sponsoring the trial put them up in a Westwood apartment within walking distance of the hospital.

Before the transplant, Ava underwent chemotherapy at UCLA Mattel Children's Hospital to clear the bone marrow of the defective stem cells and make room for the new ones to grow and become the source of new blood production. Her own cells were then injected back into her bloodstream.

"The process of the transplant took 10 minutes, max, and it's over," Jon said.

Ava stayed in the hospital for monitoring for almost a month. Because of the pandemic, the Langenhops decided against returning home in between each child's treatment.

Landon's transplant came next and he celebrated his first birthday on Oct. 1 in the hospital. He handled the chemo the best, although he stopped eating, drinking and smiling for a time afterward.

COVID-19 also curtailed visits from family, leaving them largely on their own, with one parent staying in the hospital and the other tending the two at home. Jon continued to work remotely for a bank, logging on from the hospital.

Their UCLA care team helped fill the void. Nurses would come by to say hello even during shifts when they were assigned to other patients. Dr. Kohn invited the family over to swim at his house over the summer, earning him the role of surrogate grandfather.

"We really just felt like every single person there was invested in our story and our family," Alicia said. "They really couldn't wait to come check on the kids."

Olivia's transplant came last and she was released from the hospital Dec. 2.

"It was better than the alternative but it was still a lot to go through," Dr. Kohn said. "The parents really pulled off a heroic thing to go through this with three kids."

FANS FOR LIFE

Before the call with the football players, the girls were thrilled to dress up in the fan gear sent over by the team. Ava wore a gold UCLA T-shirt, Olivia sported a UCLA cap backward over her bald head and Landon played with a blue foam hand.

"You're fans for life, huh," Alicia told the kids.

The players took a break from practice two days before the game to give the children a virtual tour of their facility and teach them the famous Eight Clap.

Linebacker Shea Pitts asked the girls to introduce themselves and share their favorite color and sport.

Ava responded, "Gold."

"Yeah! That's what we like to hear," Pitts replied.

When Olivia said football was her favorite sport, the team applauded her.

On game day, the family watched in their apartment, pointing out to the kids the cardboard cutout images of themselves at the stadium.

PROGNOSIS FOR THE FUTURE

So far, Ava has been able to stop taking antibiotic and antifungal medication three times a day to preemptively ward off infection. Her brother and sister will follow suit.

"The amount of working cells they have should be enough to sustain a normal life," Jon said.

Dr. Kohn said the Florida patient who was the first to participate in the trial before the Langenhops siblings is perfectly fine a year and a half later. Gene therapy for so-called bubble baby disease has so far proven successful more than a decade after cells were first treated.

"We avoid using the c-word — cured — because you don't know that until they've lived their entire life without a problem, but we hope they are," Dr. Kohn said of the Langenhops. "It's magic. It's amazing."

The Langenhops flew back to Ohio in time for Christmas. Alicia said the children were thrilled to explore their house again and run into the backyard to see snow.

They'll return to UCLA for follow-up appointments every few months starting in February or March.

"We just feel like we're so lucky to have this available, to live in a time where science is at this point," Alicia said. "We couldn't be happier. We feel really lucky this is the place we were brought to."

Watch the full experience at connect.uclahealth.org.







SPLASH CITY

*Senior attacker **NICOLAS SAVELJIC** advances the ball during the Bruins' 15-9 home-opening victory over No. 5 Pepperdine at the Spieker Aquatics Center on Jan. 30. Saveljic, who hails from Kotor, Montenegro, added two goals and an assist in the victory for the No. 2 Bruins. (Photo: Don Liebig)*

2021 SCHEDULE

Ucla

Football



HAWAII 8.28



LSU 9.4



FRESNO STATE 9.18



AT ARIZONA TBD



ARIZONA STATE TBD



CALIFORNIA TBD



COLORADO TBD



OREGON TBD



AT USC TBD



AT STANFORD TBD



AT UTAH TBD



WASHINGTON TBD

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AROUND THE BLOCK

Senior All-American **MAC MAY** registers one of her match-high 20 kills in UCLA's 3-1 victory over Cal on Jan. 22 at Pauley Pavilion presented by Wescom. May is the reigning Pac-12 Player of the Year, taking home the award in 2019. (Photo: Don Liebig)

SPONSOR SPOTLIGHT

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READY PROTEIN POWDER shown here in the Troy Aikman Strength and Conditioning Center in the Wasserman Football Center.

TELL US ABOUT YOURSELF AND THE STORY OF HOW READY® NUTRITION BECAME WHAT IT IS TODAY.

Ready® Nutrition was founded in 2012 by Pat Cavanaugh, a former D1 basketball player and team captain at the University of Pittsburgh. He's always had a passion for athletics, helping young people achieve their goals, and nutrition so he decided to combine all three to build a sports nutrition company dedicated to providing effective and safe nutritional products to help athletes achieve their performance goals. Ready® has become one of the fastest growing sports nutrition companies in America with our products in over 8,000 retail locations. Over 200 college athletic programs have fueled their student-athletes with our products and we have partnerships with nine D1 college conferences. Two of the things we're most proud of is the fact that the AAU, the largest youth athletic association in the country, named us as their Official Sports Drink, and that two athletes at the very top of their sports — Aaron Donald and Giannis Antetokounmpo — were so impressed with our products, that they became investors in the company and our brand champions.

TELL US ABOUT READY® PRODUCTS AND THE BENEFITS OF THEM.

Ready® features a full line of best-in-class performance nutritional products. We follow the latest in advanced sports nutrition science to formulate cutting edge products that best fuel athletes and help them recover. All our products feature only simple, natural, gluten free ingredients with high quality or plant-based protein in a number of product categories including powders, bars and crunchy snacks. We're very proud of our Protein Water which has really taken the market by storm, and are excited by the recent launch of our Ready® Sports Drink

that is a game changer in the industry with its carbohydrate fuel coming from real food sources (instead of added sugar) and its mix of electrolytes that exactly matches what you lose in sweat.

WHAT ARE SOME OF THE CORE VALUES READY® NUTRITION LIVES BY?

Pat Cavanaugh wasn't satisfied with just successfully building a national sports nutrition brand. He was adamant in making sure there was a mentality behind the brand, a focus on the mental approach it takes to achieve your athletic goals. His Ready® Mentality is symbolized by the triangle of Attitude, Effort and Energy. Ready supplies the energy and the mentality. The athlete supplies the attitude and effort. It's an attitude that values goal achievement by doing whatever is necessary and overcoming adversity to reach your potential; to not listening to the negative 'noise' or letting that 'noise' effect your journey; and to proving the doubters wrong. In terms of effort, the Ready Brand is for athletes who take more pride in their hard work than their talent. Who Talk Less. Do More. And who work like an underdog to achieve their goals.

WHY DID READY® NUTRITION DECIDE TO STRATEGICALLY PARTNER WITH UCLA ATHLETICS?

As a brand, we were looking to partner with an athletic program whose dedication to excellence matched our commitment to providing best-in-class sports nutrition products. And obviously, if that partner happened to be in a major market, that was a huge plus. UCLA has a national reputation of excellence in many sports. To be able to take advantage of that national aura to showcase our products as they assist UCLA student-athletes and teams achieve their goals was enough to make this a very attractive partnership.



SPONSOR SPOTLIGHT

READY® NUTRITION

WHAT EXCITES READY® ABOUT PARTNERING WITH UCLA ATHLETICS?

Our excitement comes from the fact that our products will be doing their small part in helping UCLA student-athletes and teams achieve their performance and team goals. With so much focus these days on how nutrition affects athletic performance, just knowing that one of the major athletic programs in America has put its trust in the cutting-edge nutrition we can provide for its athletes, is a very exciting yet humbling experience.

DO YOU HAVE A FAVORITE MOMENT OF THE PARTNERSHIP THUS FAR?

Sure, it was awesome to see Ready® branding take over at the Rose Bowl during last year's UCLA/USC game. But our favorite moment is actually a compilation of moments where we see Bruin student-athletes enjoying our sports nutrition products, trusting that they will nutritionally assist their performances and achievement of their individual athletic and team goals.

WHAT ARE YOUR GOALS FOR YOUR PARTNERSHIP WITH UCLA ATHLETICS? WHAT WOULD YOU LIKE TO ACCOMPLISH?

Our goal with this partnership is very simple and really doesn't involve the brand. We're in this industry for the athlete. We are laser focused on using science to make sure the athlete benefits from proper sports nutrition. So, our goal is just being able to provide Bruin student-athletes with best-in-class performance products that will give them an edge in achieving their goals.

IS THERE ANY SORT OF "SPECIAL OFFER" OR SERVICE THAT YOU WOULD LIKE TO COMMUNICATE TO READERS OF BRUIN BLUE?

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HOW HAVE YOUR INTERACTIONS WITH UCLA ATHLETICS AND LEARFIELD IMG COLLEGE STAFF BEEN? HAS ANYTHING STOOD OUT TO YOU?

The collaboration has been great on both sides. Our open access to the different athletic program stakeholders, like strength and conditioning coaches and nutritionists, have assisted us in getting our products to the athletes and receiving their great feedback. And the open and regular communication between those people and our Chief Science Officer has been very helpful for both sides. Learfield IMG College has been a tremendous resource to assure the quick and impactful on-boarding/activation of Ready® as a UCLA Official partner. They have had to pivot with providing sponsorship resources given the limitations of the current pandemic, but have done a fine job of providing valuable opportunities for Ready® to gain exposure with the UCLA fan base.







by JON GOLD

SPARKING A MOVEMENT

*How Nia Dennis' 90-second homage
to black culture became a viral sensation.*

For the briefest of moments, everything is quiet. The cheers from teammates, bouncing from the floor of Pauley Pavilion and echoing back from the empty rafters, are silent. The familiar refrain of Tupac Shakur's "California Love" plays over the loudspeakers, but it might as well be on mute.

Nia Dennis breathes deep and exhales. Her shoulders collapse.

She has just displayed a stunning combination of pop culture relevance mixed with Black Excellence mixed with an athletic tumbling routine that would be the envy of many gymnasts. And she still has one more pass to go.

This is the hardest one, says her choreographer, UCLA volunteer assistant gymnastics coach BJ Das. You have no idea how exhausting that last pass is, 80 seconds after the music starts.

Dennis flashes a pose, hands fashioned into a crown above her head, and she takes a step back to the corner of the mat. A moment ago, her smile could have provided the wattage for a small town; now her face is as serious as a neurosurgeon's.

Everything is quiet for Nia Dennis in this moment.

Maybe for the last time.

◇◇◇

Before she embarks on this last pass — a front handspring, front 1-and-a-half twist into a split jump — she has no idea that this routine will send her into the stratosphere, earning praise from luminaries across the globe. Her floor routine went viral last year, but not like this. Alicia Keys shares this one on Twitter. Missy Elliott — whose music is featured in the performance — shouts her out. Michelle Obama — Michelle Obama?! — sends the following Tweet: "Now that's what I call fierce! You're a star @DennisNia!" That Tweet had almost 98,000 likes one week into February.

Once Dennis lands her final step, she knows.

She's nailed it. Things might never be the same.

Since then, it's been a non-stop whirlwind for Dennis. Interview requests have poured in from across the country. She was invited onto The Ellen Show for the second time, this time remotely.

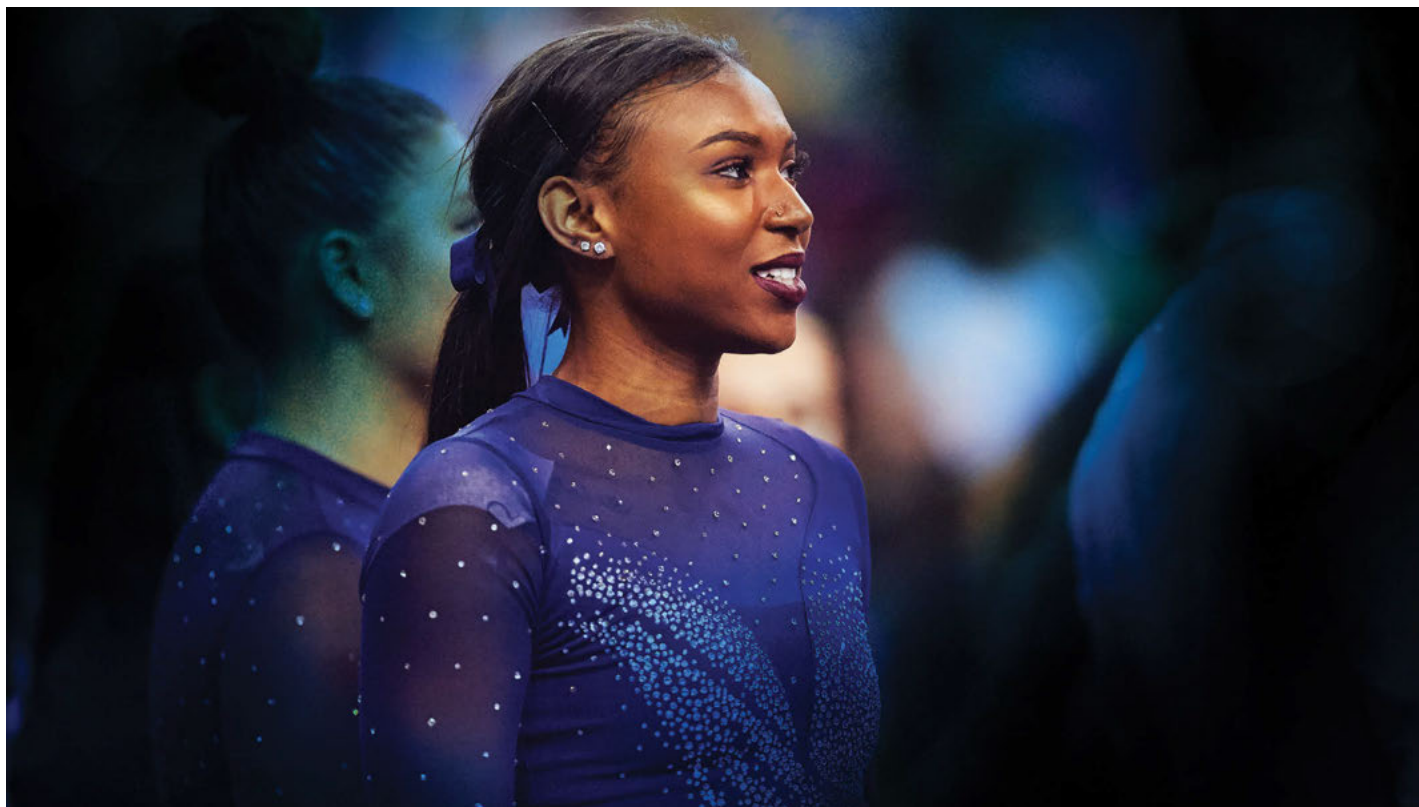
Countless online sites picked up her routine and the kudos she garnered from her new BFF, the former First Lady.

It's all a little much, really.

"It feels brand new all over again," she said. "To get this recognition and love is so

SPARKING A MOVEMENT

HOW NIA DENNIS' 90-SECOND HOMAGE TO BLACK CULTURE BECAME A VIRAL SENSATION.



NIA DENNIS, a senior who hails from Columbus, Ohio, has a simple recipe for success. “I do my best when I’m having fun,” she says. (Photo: Don Liebig)

amazing. It’s so positive. It is a little overwhelming, but it’s a little exciting waking up every day and a new celebrity knows who you are.”

This wasn’t her goal from the start. It was much bigger than this.

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She calls the routine, “The Culture,” a 90-second homage to all that it means to be Black and Proud.

She selected the music that serves as the routine’s backdrop with deliberate precision. She whittled the message down to seven artists — Kendrick Lamar and Beyoncé, Missy Elliott and Monica, Soulja Boy, Megan Thee Stallion and Tupac — with dance moves that echoed to generations past. It’s the swaggiest thing ever seen on a blue mat.

“It bubbled up from an emotional feeling and vision,” UCLA gymnastics head coach Chris Waller said. “Nia had a vision of wanting to do something that celebrated Black culture. In the beginning, it wasn’t clear what that would look like. But what it felt like? Nia knew.”

After the shocking death of George Floyd last May sparked a summer of outrage during a time of great international strife, Dennis resolved to let her movements spark a movement. She speaks through the language of gymnastics and dance. Her body is her loudspeaker. What better way to honor all her culture has gone through than through the music and motions that help define that struggle?

“Black Excellence is really just a celebration,” she said. “There are things that don’t get enough attention and light spread on it. No matter what the circumstances are in the world, we always seem to overcome. That’s

something I wanted to portray.”

Now that she had the message came the music. The original Spotify list had over 85 songs on it, and, Das said, “the fact we got it down to seven was really tough. I wouldn’t want to do a mashup like this with every routine, but each song had a purpose and an energy.”

“It started with the artists who’ve had an impact on the Black community, or really just on me,” Dennis said, and once she and Das narrowed down the music, they set out to capture the spirit of the culture.

Both Black culture and pop culture.

“A lot of the athletes have a couple signature moves, and with Nia, she always hits the ‘Whoa,’ which is a fun thing for the Den to be in,” Das said. “Those Tik-Tok moments are made for her. If she was doing a classical routine, she wouldn’t add the ‘Nae-Nae’ and the ‘Whoa,’ but because we were so clear on the vibe and the message we wanted to get across, celebrating Black Excellence and Black culture, some of those moves came out organically.”

For Dennis, it’s those little flourishes — those meme-inspired moves — that bring her joy.

“I do my best when I’m having fun,” she said. “When I’m doing my dance, I’m having the most fun, living in the moment. I feel like I’m literally having a party. And seeing (my teammates) do it with me is the biggest dance party.”

◇◇◇

The UCLA floor routines have become the stuff of legends.



Former Bruin head coach Valorie Kondos Field — or, to all, Miss Val — brought a level of pop sensibility to the gymnastics program as an assistant coach early in the 1980s. When she inherited the program herself, rather than adapt her methods to more traditional gymnastics choreography, she dragged the sport into the 21st century.

Now Westwood has become ground zero for high-concept, high-execution floor routines. A UCLA gymnast has gone viral with her routine for six consecutive seasons. At this point, it's almost expected.

"It's been going on at UCLA for a long time, but what has developed more recently is that expression through pop culture," Waller said. "If you look back at the past 30 years of UCLA Gymnastics, you're going to find 100 iconic routines that are incredibly creative and unique. But what's happened recently is we haven't been afraid to embrace pop culture within our floor routines."

And for every 'Whip' and every 'Nae-Nae' done on the floor, 20 teammates stand on the sidelines, mimicking her like doppelgangers.

At one point, Dennis faces off with Das, who mirrors her every move. Das was a gymnast herself, walking on at the University of Washington before injuries derailed her career. She ended up a gymnastics coach almost by accident. She is a dancer and choreographer by trade, having performed with Beyonce, P!nk and Usher and toured with Avril Lavigne.

"When I look over and see BJ doing it with me — we have that little moment — once she did it, I felt so much more comfortable," Dennis said.

"Now we share that moment. It's not just me. There's a group effort that goes into a routine."

That may have been the most exciting moment of the video of the routine — at the peak of the performance, every Bruin on the sideline is moving with Dennis.

"It was really important for us to get her (routine) down," teammate Chae Campbell said. "We really wanted it to feel like we were in it together. There were certain nuances that we took the time to learn."

It's also a pandemic, and there's not a crowd, so we have to feed off each other's energy."

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Now that she's entering her 30th minute of fame, Dennis is quick to point out that she doesn't view this platform as a responsibility, but a privilege.

"I'm just so honored," she said. "This feels like a dream come true to be acknowledged by Michelle Obama, Missy Elliott. I don't look at it as a responsibility; I look at it as a privilege, an honor. I'm a nobody, but I'm just sharing my joy and passion and trying to inspire."

In a sport in which women of color are historically underrepresented, Dennis designed her routine with the young version of herself in mind.

"Black representation is so important," she said. "It's rare to see Black gymnasts at the elite level. I wanted to be able to represent for the community, and I aspire to inspire. I wanted to inspire a lot of Black gymnasts to know they can do this sport as their most authentic selves."



NIA DENNIS says it's both a privilege and an honor to have her routine acknowledged by several prominent black women such as Michelle Obama and Missy Elliott to name a few. (Photo: Don Liebig)

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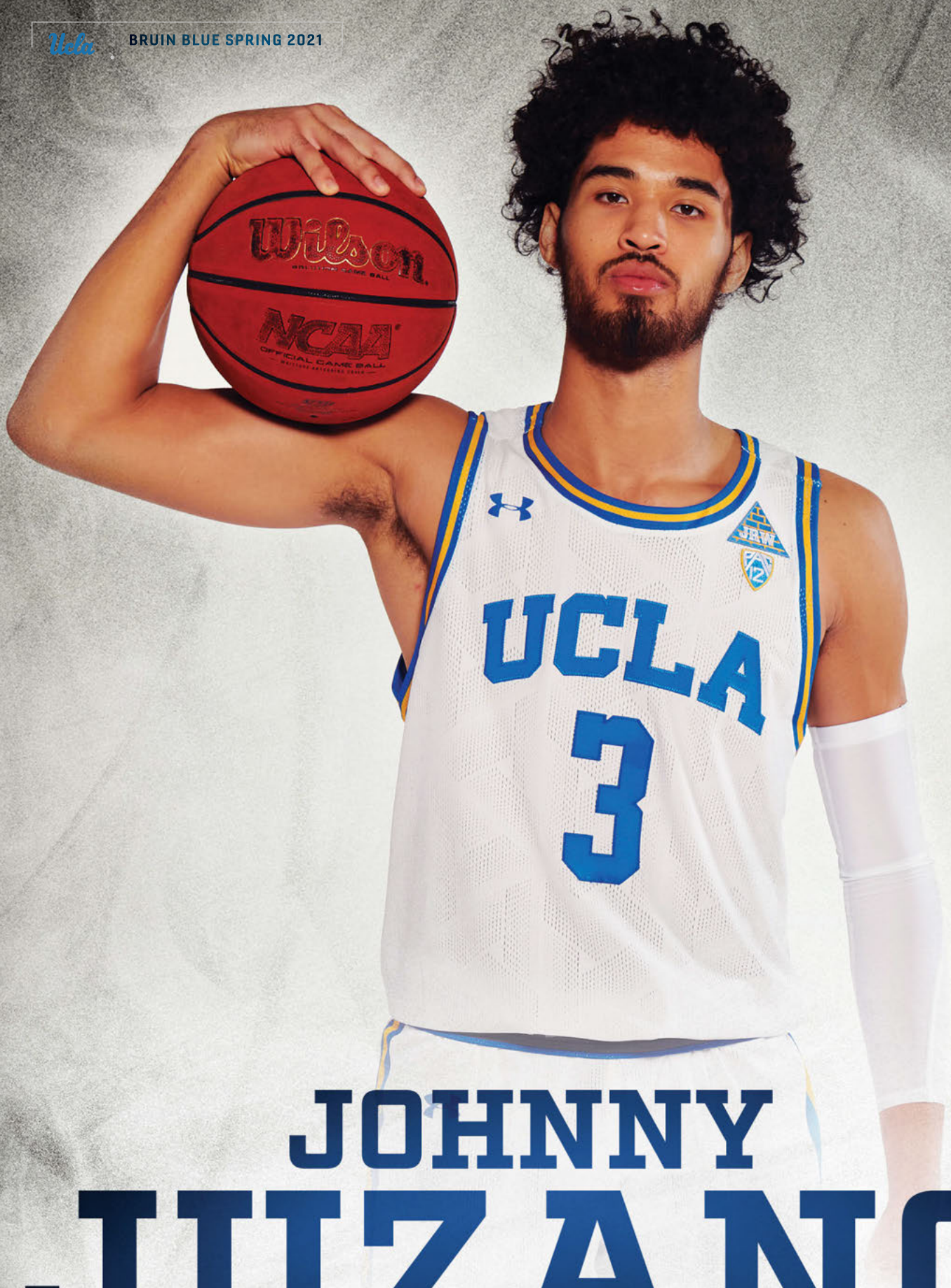
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JOHNNY JUZANG



NO PLACE LIKE HOME

3

Johnny Juzang's return to SoCal has been a blessing for the Bruins

by **JON GOLD**

The Juzang Brothers, Christian and Johnny would drive all over during those sweltering Southern California summers, looking for any chance to sharpen their basketball games.

They hailed from Tarzana, Calif., and when older brother Christian returned to the Juzang family home during summer breaks from Harvard, where he would average more than 24 minutes a game for the Crimson ballers from 2016-2020, he'd reunite with little bro Johnny, a star at Harvard-Westlake High, and they'd travel around throughout the summers to take on all comers.

Tarzana is a pretty small town with an even smaller basketball community, and they wanted to be tested, so the Juzangs took to courts all over the southland. Sherman Oaks, Studio City, Inglewood, Crenshaw — wherever they could find a game.

For young Johnny, this was routine. There were drives out to Glendale for practice when he was only seven years old. This was before his nine-and-under team won the national championship at ESPN's Wide World of Sports in Orlando.

How many hours must they have been stuck on the 405 or the 101? How many times did they pass Randy's Donuts? Or Dodger Stadium? Or the Great Western Forum?

A better question: How could someone who loves Southern California so much ever leave?

◇◇◇

Johnny Juzang felt a little stagnant.

He was 17 years old and a high school junior, coming off a season in which he'd averaged 23 points, 8.5 rebounds and 3.4 for the ultra-successful Harvard-Westlake basketball

program. From a young age he'd only ever dreamt of becoming a professional basketball player, and at that point — as it is now — every decision was made with that goal in mind. His high school head coach, Dave Rebibo, says he's one of the most mature players he's ever coached.

Juzang knew he could return to the Wolverines for his senior season, strut around like the big man on campus, own the school, really. He knew he could put up 25 points a game against kids whose basketball futures include mostly pick-up games at the Y. He knew he could coast, if he wanted to.

"I felt ready for the next challenge and for something that would provide me with adversity," he said. "It wasn't like I was in a rush to speed up the process. I wasn't cheating my goals. I wanted to feel like I was developing as much as I can."

When Juzang decided to reclassify from the Class of 2020 to the Class of 2019, he says the decision came down to one thing: "The decision weighed down to enjoying the high school experience — the comfortable decision — or challenging myself and putting myself in an uncomfortable position."

He chose to be uncomfortable. And he chose to leave.



JOHNNY JUZANG took part in a mini camp with the USA Men's Junior National Team in Colorado Springs, Colo. in 2018. (Photo: Isaiah J. Downing, USA TODAY Sports)

NO PLACE LIKE HOME

JOHNNY JUZANG'S RETURN TO SOCAL HAS BEEN A BLESSING FOR THE BRUINS



*In just his first season in Westwood, **JOHNNY JUZANG** has been one of the top offensive threats for Mick Cronin and the Bruins this season. (Photo: Robert Hanashiro, USA TODAY Sports)*



Juzang signed with Kentucky on May 10, 2019. He makes it clear: He didn't reclassify so he could play for the Wildcats. There were a number of programs recruiting him at the time, including UCLA, which had just hired Mick Cronin when Juzang re-classified.

Seeking a challenge, that's exactly what Juzang got. He was pitted against future pros in every practice, including three from the 2020 NBA Draft alone, two in the first round. He was tested, alright. Some days he played two minutes. Some he played 30-plus.

Ultimately, he chose to leave Lexington after one season and put his name in the transfer portal on March 27, 2020. Less than two later, he landed at UCLA.

So perhaps the important question isn't why Johnny Juzang left Southern California.

Perhaps the important question is this: Why did he come back?



That first time around, Mick Cronin barely got three sentences out of his mouth before Juzang decided to re-classify. At the time, the Bruins' roster was full. But Cronin made an immediate impression on the Juzang family.

The feeling was mutual, and when Cronin learned that Juzang would be transferring, he told the UCLA compliance office to ping him the minute Juzang entered the transfer portal, and thus was eligible to be contacted.

Recruiting in the age of a pandemic is no normal task, but Cronin made sure to check in often. Sometimes a simple wave would do; the two families – the Cronins and the Juzangs – live just three miles apart in the Tarzana area.

"When the pandemic first started, I was taking long walks with friends just to get the hell out of the house," Cronin said. "I'm a member at El Caballero Country Club next to his house and I remember texting him saying, 'I'm waving at ya.' We were talking every other day."

Juzang liked what he heard, and he liked the idea of staying close to home.

Some players leave home because they know they may be susceptible to local temptations. Some flee poor family situations. Some just want a change of scenery.

Juzang had none of that. He simply had an opportunity to play for one of the best programs in the history of sports, not just college basketball. Who could blame him?

Now he's transferred to yet another one of the blue-bloods of college basketball, believed to be the first player to play for both Kentucky and UCLA, and he returned close to home in the middle of a pandemic.

Who could blame him?



Had Juzang chosen to play out his high school career and entered UCLA this season as a true freshman, his coaches don't think he'd be in the position he is in today.

That position: Third-leading scorer on a (as of press time) 13-4 Bruins basketball team.

"The college experience was not new for him," UCLA assistant coach Michael Lewis said. "Practices were not new, the demands, the level of play. It's not something he had to adjust to. It was a very smooth transition. Part of what made it smoother was he was coming back home."

Ask Juzang, though, and you learn how little that had to do with it.

He would've followed Mick Cronin to Timbuktu.

And Cronin would've led him. After all, Harvard-Westlake was Cronin's



Johnny Juzang's older brother, **CHRISTIAN JUZANG**, played at Harvard from 2016-20. (Photo: Brad Rempel, USA TODAY Sports)

first stop on the recruiting trail once he was hired as the Bruins' head coach.

"Meeting so quickly after he got the job, that made a big impression," Juzang said. "That was big on the second time around. I wanted to play for UCLA, and I felt like (Cronin) wanted to coach me, which was really important for me. I want to be coached, and I want a coach who wants to coach me."

He's found that in Cronin. The hard-nosed UCLA head coach is honest when describing Juzang's biggest areas for improvement.

"I look at this as his freshman year because of his age," Cronin said. "Last year was almost a sit-out year. So he's doing great. The guy is averaging double figures as a freshman, is the way I look at it. Shot selection can improve, I want him to get fouled way more and to be more of a scorer than a shooter. I think Johnny's a better passer than people know. And being physical and defending. But he's really improved lately as a rebounder. Embracing the physicality of the game is going to be paramount to him achieving his goals as a player."

If he learns one thing from Cronin, it will be that.

And Cronin can learn something from him, too. The former head coach at Cincinnati can only remember accepting two four-year transfers in all his time there.

"From the minute that we first began working out, it really felt seamless," Lewis said. "He naturally fit here at UCLA. He's about the same things our team is about. He's coachable. That's the one thing. He came in with a very open mind, and he has a real desire to improve. He understands what his strengths and his deficiencies are. We're going to push him to be the player he says he wants to be."

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by JON GOLD

ONE MORE RUN

With a national title very much in the picture, UCLA's Villacorta, Parker and Sheehan put the pros on hold.

They could've began their professional careers right now. They may have leapt at the chance to finally live out their dreams, although for some, they've already achieved it. They might have felt like they'd accomplish all they wanted to in women's collegiate soccer, even if the ultimate prize eluded them.

But what brought Viviana Villacorta, Lucy Parker and Delanie Sheehan back to Westwood for one more season is simple: They all wanted one more run at a national title.

When the 2020 women's soccer season was pushed from the fall to the 2021 spring calendar, college soccer's top outgoing players were presented with an unprecedented quandary. The date of January's National Women's Soccer League Draft was not going to move. So they could either miss out on their final go-round of college soccer and report to their respective teams immediately, or participate in the abbreviated spring season and then head to the big leagues.

Much to the delight of UCLA fans, the Bruins are back. All three chose to put the pros on the shelf.

Villacorta, a U.S. Youth National Team standout out of Lawndale, Calif., is a two-time All-Pac-12 midfielder. She was drafted ninth overall by the Orlando Pride. In 2019, she ranked fourth on the team in scoring with 14 points and was one of just four players to start all 24 matches. Parker, a defender out of Cambridge, England who played her first two seasons of college soccer at LSU, and earned All-America honors in 2018, was chosen 16th by Kansas City NWSL. Like Villacorta, she too started every match in 2019, and both players are on the preseason watch list of the MAC Hermann Trophy, an award given annually to the top player in the nation. Sheehan, from Brentwood, Calif. near the Bay Area, has been a regular starter since her sophomore season and has played a variety of positions on the field. She earned All-Pac-12 honors in 2018 and was selected 33rd in the draft by Sky Blue FC.

Villacorta, Parker and Sheehan know this won't be an ordinary year. They'll play home matches in front of ghost-town crowds at Wallis Annenberg Stadium. Fans aren't allowed, at least for now. They won't be able to celebrate wins at campus parties, or even join as a team for a post-game meal. They'll have to undergo regular testing while living in relative isolation.

ONE MORE RUN

UCLA'S VILLACORTA, PARKER AND SHEEHAN PUT THE PROS ON HOLD



LUCY PARKER, a defender out of Cambridge, England, was drafted 16th overall by Kansas City NWSL. (Photo: Scott Chandler)

And it's all worth it for one more run.

"They were all individual decisions, but we all kind of have the same goal: to win a national championship. We felt like we had one more chance to do that," said Parker, joined on a Zoom conference by Sheehan and Villacorta.

"We worked so hard to prepare for fall, and I didn't want to leave knowing I didn't have that

chance to fight," Villacorta added.

"We've been close so many times as a team, been to two Final Fours and an Elite 8. We just wanted one more go at it," Sheehan chimed in.

For all three, the memory of their last match lingers. For all three, it was a driving factor in their decision.

It's been more than a calendar year since that

day, Dec. 6, 2019, which saw the Bruins' season end with 4-0 loss to mighty Stanford and its star forward, Catarina Macario, who, trophy in hand, decided in early January to forgo her senior season after signing with French powerhouse Lyon, the most successful team in Division 1 Feminine.

Had UCLA won that day — and gone on to defeat North Carolina, which fell in penalty kicks to the Cardinal after a scoreless regulation and overtime — perhaps Villacorta, Palmer and Sheehan would've left, instead.

But now?

"They want to see it through," Bruins head coach Amanda Cromwell said. "They want to have the opportunity to go for a championship. I'm not surprised they're all staying. ... It says a lot about their love for the team and program, what they want to do as a group, to leave their mark. It is super inspiring."

Inspiring, yes, but it's not as if it got much fanfare. The players said that when the coaches acknowledged their returns to the team, there was no celebration, no ticker-tape parade. Villacorta said, "It might have been addressed, but it was then like, get back to work."

"We know the team is a lot more important than just us three," Parker said. "It was kind of like, let's just get on with it. It wasn't that big of deal."

All three stars back in tow, Cromwell and the Bruins set their site at the renewed task at hand.

For Cromwell and the Bruins, right now they're just happy to have something to which they can look forward. One of the first teams to get back on campus last June after the initial COVID-19 shutdown, Villacorta said the Bruins were "devastated" when the fall season was originally cancelled, then postponed until the spring.

"Once the season was postponed, it was almost a relief," Cromwell said. "It gave us some clarity and something to focus on. We have a bunch of freshmen, and it gave them time to get acclimated to our team. But one thing we impressed upon them, what do you want for this year? And (the three returning seniors) really have taken the reins of this team."

Cromwell is leery of the end goal becoming all-consuming. She doesn't want her players to focus on a championship while still in February.

"We always have goals — win the Pac-12, a national championship — and UCLA is a place where we should be competing for that every year," Cromwell said. "But you have to take it on



a day-to-day basis. If you focus on the end goal, the process gets lost.”

Cromwell reminds them: This is not going to be an ordinary year.

“The best soccer team isn’t necessarily going to win a national title this year,” she said. “It’s the one that manages COVID and manages rosters, stays healthy, is the most versatile. It’s really about playing the best you can in this circumstance, and staying ultra-resilient. Really being selfless.”

And what could be more selfless than postponing professional soccer for one more chance at a national title?

“As a team, we talk about how this team is not only going to be the team that plays the best soccer, but the team that can manage all these factors,” Sheehan said, “But knowing we worked as hard as we can and that everyone was bought in — in my mind that’s a success. Then we can walk away knowing each of us gave our best.”

*Above: **VIVIANA VILLACORTA**, a two-time All-Pac-12 midfielder, was drafted ninth overall by the Orlando Pride. (Photo: Percy Anderson)*

*Right: **DELANIE SHEEHAN**, an All-Pac-12 performer in 2018, was selected 33rd in the draft by Sky Blue FC. (Photo: Percy Anderson)*





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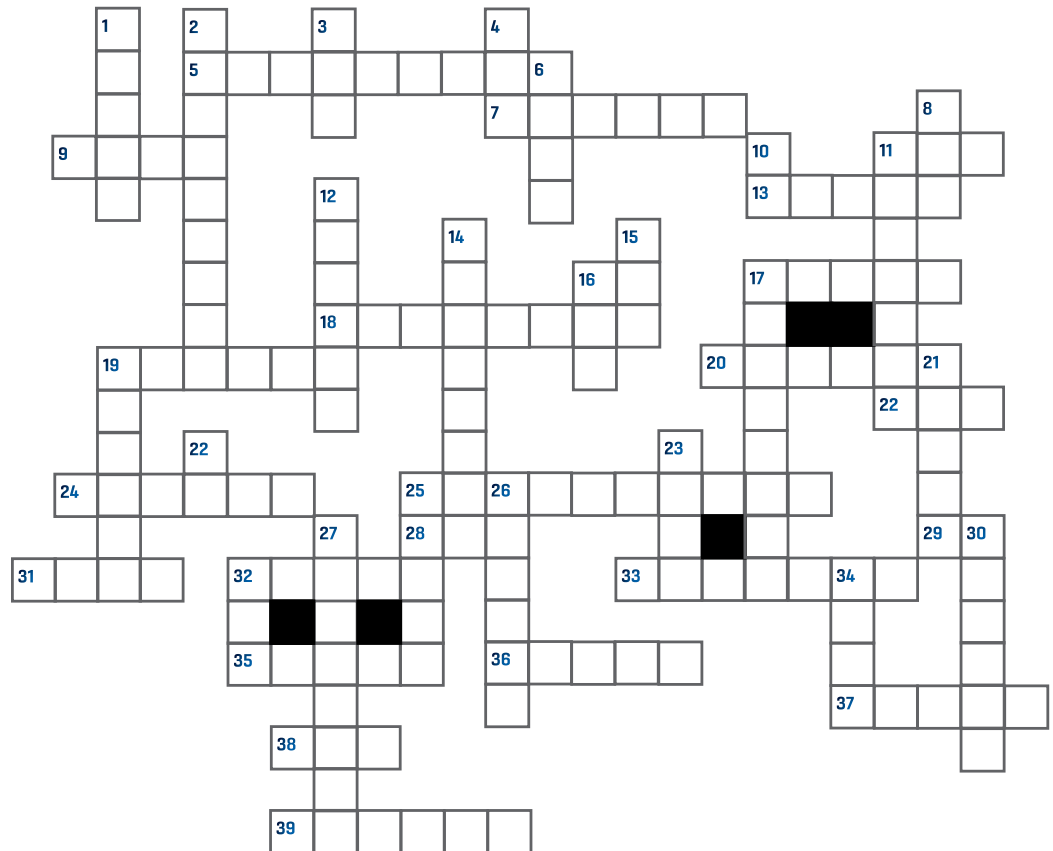


10 DOWN

World Record Holder

FLORENCE

GRIFFITH JOYNER

ANSWER KEY ON
PAGE 39.

ACROSS

5. Soccer's Wallis _____ Stadium
7. Joe and Josephine Bruin serve as these for UCLA (singular)
9. New apparel provider for most Bruin teams starting in summer of 2021
11. _____ -12 Conference
13. Mo _____ Center (UCLA basketball practice facility)
16. Martin Jarmond's title for short
17. Shot _____. (Hint: timer used in hoops and water polo)
18. Russell Westbrook and Jrue Holiday have been these in the NBA
19. Cincinnati to Los Angeles hoops coach
20. Home to UCLA's volleyball, basketball and gymnastics teams
22. "Take off that _____ shirt" chant
24. Avenue that runs along the southwest side of campus
25. "Pyramid of Success" architect and basketball icon
28. Cori Close's e-mail address ends with this
29. Initials of Bill Walton's hometown
31. Governing body of college athletics
32. _____ Bear (campus statue that goes into "hibernation" during SC week)
33. Football's Gary Beban owns one of these
35. Arizona Diamondbacks manager and UCLA alum Lovullo
36. Track & field legend and humanitarian Johnson
37. Former UCLA and Team USA soccer coach Jillian _____
38. Number of NCAA titles won by 25 across
39. _____ Brand. Subsidiary of 9 across that will soon outfit UCLA's football and basketball teams

DOWN

1. Beach volleyball legend and UCLA coach Metzger
2. UCLA sport which shares the same coach for men and women
3. Football coach from 1949-57 Sanders. (Hint: Same answer as 22 across)
4. New York Yankee Gerrit Cole has a strong one of these
6. Former baseball coach Adams
8. UCLA AD who recently retired after 18 years (see 27 down)
10. Nickname Flo ____ (pictured)
11. Softball's Rachel Garcia, the nation's top player, plays this position
12. Name on jersey of UCLA hoops star featured in this issue
14. Home of the UCLA Bruins
15. Dorian Thompson-Robinson threw for 12 of these in 2020
16. UCLA basketball players David Singleton and Charisma Osborne take most of their shots behind this
17. Former UCLA running back Joshua Kelley's NFL team
19. Women's hoops standout Jordin _____. (Hint: It's also a country that's home to gymnast Peng Peng Lee)
21. 19 across has been in Westwood for two of these
22. All-time winningest volleyball coach with 19 NCAA titles Scates
23. Basketball star who won a title in Cleveland with LeBron James in 2016
25. _____ Johnson Jordan. Beach volleyball associate head coach and daughter of 36 across.
26. Student-athletes after practice
27. UCLA AD who recently retired after 18 years (see 8 down)
30. Viral gymnastics sensation Nia _____
32. Appears as "AB" in a baseball or softball box score. "At _____."
34. Legendary UCLA tennis star and civil rights activist

SIX QUESTIONS

with Women's Tennis Player

ELYSIA BOLTON

1

NOT BEING FROM THE WEST COAST, WHAT ATTRACTED YOU TO UCLA?

Obviously UCLA is amazing academically so that was a huge factor for me. Also, I love outdoor tennis. Some of the schools I was looking at have to play indoors for a period of the season because it gets too cold. The outdoor aspect was very attractive. Also having the USTA facility in Carson, Calif. was big. One of my coaches started working there so that was big because I get to still work with him. And I got along with Stella (Sampras Webster) and Rance (Brown) so well that I just thought it would be a good fit for me. I love big cities. I was born in Sydney and have lived in Chicago for most of my life and now I'm in New York. I just knew LA would be a great fit for me.

2

DESCRIBE YOUR STYLE OF PLAY. WHAT MAKES IT SO HARD FOR YOUR OPPONENTS TO PLAY AGAINST YOU?

I think that I have a pretty big serve so I try and use that, along with my forehand, as much as possible. I'm more of an aggressive, all-court player so I'm looking to move forward a lot and dictate play when I can. I like to keep people moving so if I'm on, it can be difficult for my opponent to keep up with the ball. I'd say I have pretty decent volleys too so I'm looking to come to the net as well.

3

UCLA'S JENNIFER BRADY IS HAVING GREAT SUCCESS ON THE PRO TOUR RIGHT NOW. HOW MUCH DOES THAT INSPIRE YOU?

I look up to her so much. When I was looking at UCLA I saw the success that a bunch of the girls were having after leaving UCLA and Jenny was one of them. It's awesome to see her playing so great right now and it gives me a bunch of confidence. Sometimes Rance will tell me that I remind him of Jenny a lot. Let me tell you, if I could be Jenny in a few years that would be awesome. I would not complain.

4

WHAT DOES A SUCCESSFUL PROFESSIONAL CAREER LOOK LIKE IN YOUR EYES?

When I started tennis at age two my number one goal was to be the top player in the world. I want to win Grand Slams and I want to be the best. That's my goal. It has always been and probably always will be.

5

CAN THIS TEAM WIN IT ALL?

This team has so much potential, we just need more matches. We definitely have the talent to win, it's just about peaking at the right time. Right now is not when we want to be our best, it's at the end. We had a setback at the National Indoors but it's really just about getting more matches so when it gets to May, we are all match tough. I think we have a very good chance at coming home with a title.

6

WHAT ARE SOME OF THE THINGS YOU ENJOY OUTSIDE OF TENNIS?

I love cooking, skiing, and not to sound really nerdy but I love puzzles and reading. When quarantine started I did seven puzzles in two months. Like the 1,500-2,000 piece ones.



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JOHN BRANCA

UCLA ATHLETICS, ROCK & ROLL, AND BRANCA FAMILY FIELD

by EMILY LERNER

Somebody better find a six-pack of Dos Equis, because it's quite possible that we have found the most interesting man in the world.

John Branca is an entertainment lawyer and manager by trade, and a sportsman by design. While in high school, John would watch the Bruins play basketball on TV. Coached by John Wooden, those were the games of Lew Alcindor, Mike Warren, Lucius Allen, Lynn Shackelford, and Sidney Wicks, where just about every year brought UCLA a national championship. If told at that time that he would one day have a close relationship to UCLA basketball, he would have been as surprised as anyone.

Growing up, John split his time between Los Angeles and Mount Vernon, New York. His mother was an actress, singer, and dancer, while his father was an undefeated pitcher in his senior year of high school, being named the New York State Player of the Year and leading his team to the New York State Championship. His father later served as the New York State Athletic Commissioner, so it is only fitting that John has strong ties to both the entertainment industry and the sports world; it's practically part of his DNA.

John started out as a musician at a young age, fronting a band who opened for The Doors, that signed a record deal when he was just in high school. He majored in music at Los Angeles City College but began to second-guess his choice of major.

"I started as a music major at LA City College and I looked around at the other students in the music department and saw how good they were," said John. "I realized then that I needed to be doing something else, and started thinking about a career that I would be good at."

John transferred to Occidental College, and was then accepted into UCLA School of Law. After graduating from law school, he started working at a downtown corporate firm where he worked as an estate planner. While there, something quite innocuous occurred that completely changed his life and sent him on his true career path.

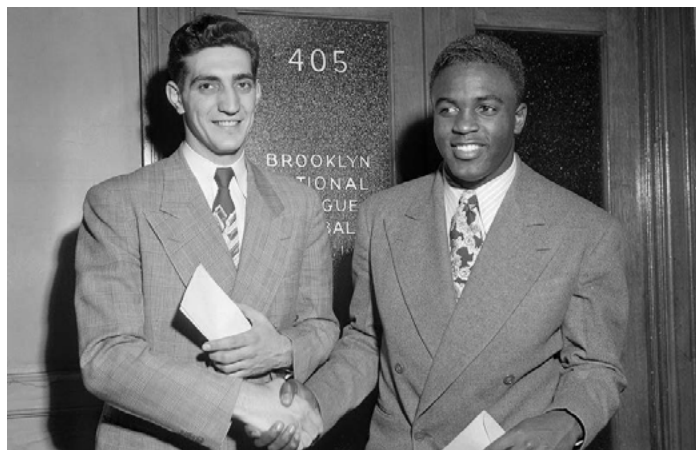
"While I was doing estate planning I read an article in Time Magazine," said John. "The article was about Elton John, whose lawyer was quoted about the work he did. You can say a light bulb went off; it made me realize that this kind of work was possible and that was what I should be doing."

This "kind of work" encompassed representing musicians and negotiating contracts for them, and this epiphany sent John on a trajectory that even he couldn't have fathomed. He began working at one of the top music law firms and from there turned one of his earliest life passions into a lucrative career. But he didn't exactly start off small.

"My first clients I worked with as a young lawyer were Bob Dylan, Neil Diamond, and George Harrison," said John. "But my first client that I signed was The Beach Boys. Then Michael Jackson. Then the Rolling Stones."

John, now a longtime partner at the entertainment law firm Ziffren Brittenham, has a clientele list that reads like a history lesson in rock and roll, with a sprinkling of sports figures and comedians added in for good measure. His milieu is contract negotiations and advising and managing clients, so he has had the opportunity to represent figures outside of the music business such as Mike Tyson, Richard Pryor and Eddie Murphy. But the vast majority of his work is with the music industry.

"I've represented over 30 members of the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame," said John. "I think that's a record for a lawyer."



John Branca's uncle, **RALPH BRANCA**, (above left) played with Jackie Robinson on the Brooklyn Dodgers.

Not only is that a record, but in January 2019, John was named by Marquis Who's Who as the #1 Music Attorney in the World. In the WORLD. So obviously, he has done some pretty extraordinary things in the music and entertainment world. Hired by client and later good friend Michael Jackson, John assisted in the purchase of one of the largest music publishing catalogs in the world, and was instrumental in the distribution of "Thriller," the greatest music video of all time, and only music video housed in the Smithsonian. After Jackson's death, John became co-executor of his estate. Other acts he has represented are The Beach Boys, The Doors, The Rolling Stones, Berry Gordy, Dr. Dre, Don Henley, Carlos Santana, Nirvana, Aerosmith, The Bee Gees, Enrique Iglesias, Earth, Wind & Fire, the Elvis Presley Estate, and many others.

But neither John nor his family were strangers to fame. His uncle was the late Ralph Branca, a three-time All Star pitcher for the Brooklyn Dodgers who befriended a rookie Jackie Robinson when he signed with the team in 1947, being the first to break the color barrier in Major League Baseball. Ralph, prominently featured in the movie "42," was a close friend of Jackie's, standing next to him when others refused, and always insinuating himself if it looked like there would be a fight involving Jackie.

"My uncle was the one who basically went over to Jackie when he came into the [Dodger] locker room on his first day," said John. "They were lifelong friends; he was a pall bearer at Jackie's funeral, and was beloved by Jackie's widow Rachel Robinson and the Robinson family. So there's a connection for me with UCLA, my uncle, and Jackie Robinson."

Having this positive and renowned connection to UCLA Athletics, John was the second — the first being then-head coach Jim Harrick — to endow a men's basketball scholarship, establishing "The John Branca Family Endowed Men's Basketball Scholarship" in 1990, when UCLA Athletics' scholarship program was in its infancy. In fact, John was a member of the UCLA Athletics Campaign Committee (1987-1992) that was the impetus in starting the athletics endowment program, as well as being a member of the Pauley Pavilion Renovation Campaign Committee from 2010-2012.

John's love for UCLA has given way to a host of contributions to UCLA Athletics, among other entities on campus. His first Wooden Athletic Fund membership gift was made in 1989, and he has given steadily every year since to



where he is now a member of the John R. Wooden Benefactors, UCLA Athletics' premiere support group. When the Pauley Pavilion Renovation Project was underway, John was one of the first to contribute a sizable gift for a historical John Wooden display on Pauley's east concourse, aptly named "Wooden Way." Over the years he has given generously to Hoopsters, UCLA Athletics' fund that directly benefits the UCLA Men's Basketball program, as well as to the UCLA Baseball program.

But John's most recent gift is one that is very dear to his heart, and incorporates many of the things in which he strongly believes. This \$1 million gift will make improvements to Jackie Robinson Stadium, home to UCLA Baseball, by building a much-needed practice infield that will be added to the stadium.

"UCLA has a grass infield at Jackie Robinson Stadium," said John. "Our team plays on a lot of AstroTurf fields in the Pac-12, so [UCLA Head Baseball] Coach Savage needed an infield where they will be able to practice on AstroTurf."

To honor his Uncle Ralph, the practice infield will be known as "Branca Family Field," and will go a long way in adding player development space.

"John has been so gracious with his dedication to UCLA and our baseball program," said UCLA Baseball Head Coach John Savage. "I know Jackie Robinson and what he stood for means a great deal to John and his family. The entire program is very excited with the addition of the new infield, which will continue to help our players develop. It will be a great addition to the Gifford Sports Complex at Jackie Robinson Stadium. We are so appreciative to John and the Branca Family."

To make this a reality, a comprehensive campaign was launched, and John was joined by several donors in funding the infield renovation project. Making it even sweeter, many of those who contributed, among others, are former UCLA and MLB baseball players (see accompanying story.)

This gift for Jackie Robinson Stadium seamlessly stitches together John's passions. He loves UCLA for reasons other than the Athletics' Department's number of championships, or for the top-notch law degree he obtained there.

"This gift for the stadium is important for me on a lot of levels," said John. "It's to celebrate who Jackie Robinson was; it honors him and my Uncle Ralph and their relationship. It is also based on my commitment to UCLA Athletics and the legacy of UCLA Athletics."

"The tradition of UCLA isn't just about academic and athletic excellence. [UCLA] also stands for social issues, like opposing racism and bigotry. The fact that Kenny Washington and Jackie Robinson were playing on UCLA teams in the 1930's while most schools didn't have integrated teams until 1970 — that's just unbelievable. Some of our alumni from UCLA — Rafer Johnson, Arthur Ashe, Ralph Bunche, Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, Bill Walton, Jackie Robinson — these are people who stood for something beyond athletics and who changed things in our society. These are the things that really attract me to UCLA Athletics. It's not something that many other schools can boast."

Although John's time is spent at work, and on being a member of the Board of Trustees of the Jackie Robinson Foundation, the Board of Advisors for the UCLA Herb Alpert School of Music, and the Board of Advisors for the Ziffren Institute at the UCLA Law School, family remains of utmost importance to him. Recently married to Jenna Branca, John is fiercely proud of his three children. His daughter Jessica, 32, is at a video start-up company, while his two sons, John and Dylan, are in high school and already following in their father's footsteps of achievement. John, a senior at Sierra Canyon High School, transferred there specifically so he could design a technology and e-sports center that is now used not only for computer gaming, but for the school newspaper and as a study area. Prior to that, John was building his own computers at home, to ensure those used for gaming would be as fast as possible. He put together a

team to compete in the e-sports league, and competed in the high school league himself, coming in #5 in the country and #1 on the west coast. John's youngest son Dylan, at 16 years old, is a 6'4" talented baseball pitcher and fan much like his great-uncle Ralph.

To bring awareness to a new generation of baseball enthusiasts like his son Dylan, John helped form a youth baseball group several years ago called Club 42, a nonprofit that supports diversity in sports and assists with academic tuition awards and fixing inner-city fields in underserved communities.

"Club 42 is a tribute to Jackie and also to the relationship my uncle had with him," said John. "It is named after Jackie Robinson's number 42, and the point of the club is to encourage African Americans to be involved in baseball while paying tribute to Jackie and everything he accomplished."

"Part of the reason I felt driven to do the practice infield project was that there were only two college men on the Dodgers' 1947 team," said John. "Ralph spent time studying at NYU and of course Jackie went to UCLA. It just felt like Branca Family Field and Jackie Robinson Stadium were meant to be."

Baseball, basketball, his uncle Ralph, Jackie Robinson, and UCLA Athletics are all connected for John in a way no one else can claim. Similarly, his contribution to Jackie Robinson Stadium will bring myriad benefits to UCLA Baseball, enabling them to compete for championships, and allowing UCLA to be forever grateful to John for his generosity and foresight.



JOHN BRANCA, with his wife Jenna.

BRANCA FAMILY FIELD AT JACKIE ROBINSON STADIUM

FORMER BRUIN BASEBALL STANDOUTS STEP UP TO THE PLATE
FOR JACKIE ROBINSON STADIUM IMPROVEMENTS

by EMILY LERNER





What happens when you assemble an uber-talented team consisting of former UCLA Baseball first baseman Eric Karros, second baseman Chase Utley, third baseman Troy Glaus, shortstop Brandon Crawford, and pitcher Gerrit Cole?

You pretty much get a home run. More specifically, you get the go-ahead to begin a renovation project for the iconic college baseball stadium, Jackie Robinson Stadium.

In early February 2021, UCLA Athletics announced plans to make improvements to Jackie Robinson Stadium, home field of UCLA Baseball. The major renovation will be the building of a practice infield, which, thanks to a generous donation from the John Branca family, will hereafter be called “Branca Family Field.”

Named for former Dodger pitcher and three-time All Star Ralph Branca, it is fitting that the stadium that bears the name of the player who broke the color barrier in segregated Major League Baseball in 1947 — Jackie Robinson — would contain a practice field named for the teammate who befriended him — Ralph Branca — during Jackie’s years with the Los Angeles Dodgers. (see accompanying article.)

A \$1 million gift from Ralph’s nephew and UCLA Law School graduate John Branca spurred on a comprehensive \$3.8 million renovation campaign. Integral to the renovation project was a gift from UCLA Athletics philanthropist Rhodine Gifford, whose late husband Jack played baseball for UCLA in the early 1960’s. Rhodine’s \$1 million gift was not the Gifford family’s first foray into upgrading the stadium. The Jack and Rhodine Gifford Hitting Facility, erected in 2009, was made possible by the generosity of the Gifford family and has been an important addition to the Gifford Sports Complex at Jackie Robinson Stadium.

Just as Rome wasn’t built in a day by just two Romans, the Jackie Robinson Stadium renovation project could not have been realized without the generosity of others. This is where former Bruin baseball student-athletes shined brightly.

As it turned out, donations to the project came in the form of an all-star infield formed from a combination of five different Bruin teams over a 25-year spread. The five former UCLA Baseball student-athletes boast collegiate accolades and honors too numerous to list. Besides being Bruin baseball standouts, all five not only made it to the major leagues but collectively earned 15 All-Star spots, won four World Series championships, including one World Series MVP, one National League Rookie of the Year honor, and one all-time home run leader. Together, Eric Karros, Troy Glaus, Chase Utley, Brandon Crawford, and Gerrit Cole contributed \$1.5 million to ensure the new vision for Jackie Robinson Stadium.

“This vision became a reality with former players of our program that go back 25 years,” said UCLA Baseball Head Coach John Savage. “This commitment shows how influential this University and baseball program have been in the development for Eric, Chase, Brandon, Troy and Gerrit. Our current and future Bruin players will benefit greatly from this facility and our sincere thanks go to the former great Bruins and their spouses.”

Support from Bruin alumni demonstrates the bond and sense of team commitment created while being a student-athlete at UCLA.

“My wife Jalyne (UCLA ’09) and I always loved our time at UCLA, so for years we had been wanting to give back, but wanted to do it in a lasting and meaningful way,” said former Bruin shortstop and two-time World Series Champion Brandon Crawford. “When I heard about this project, we knew this was how we could pay it forward. We’re happy that the other alumni involved and we were able to help make this vision become a reality.”

Alumni support, particularly former student-athlete support, shows what it means to be a Bruin, and that the strong ties don’t end once they leave UCLA.

“When [Coach Savage] presented the opportunity to get involved in the project, it was a no brainer,” said former Bruin first baseman and all-time LA Dodger home run leader Eric Karros. “To be part of the group of former players who stepped up to get this to the finish line, I couldn’t be more excited to see the new practice facility ... and most importantly, to be a part of the future of UCLA baseball!”

Jackie Robinson Stadium is located on the grounds of the West Los Angeles Veterans Affairs. In addition to the construction of the practice infield and bullpen, other upgrades to the renowned stadium will include new field lighting and modifications to the existing parking lot and site utilities. These improvements will not only boost UCLA’s efforts to recruit the top baseball student-athletes and coaches, but will enrich the lives of veterans and their families by creating the ability to use the practice field for recreational activities that include not only baseball but soccer, jogging, yoga, softball, and other pursuits.

The generosity and foresight of all who contributed to this new vision for Jackie Robinson Stadium will result in a boon to UCLA Athletics, UCLA Baseball, and all fans who come to the stadium drawn by the promise of a fun day watching great Bruin baseball.

*Left: **BRANCA FAMILY FIELD** rendering showing the new infield located just to the south of the Jack and Rhodine Gifford Hitting Facility.*

BRUIN PUZZLER ANSWER KEY — PG. 33

ACROSS:	17-CLOCK	28-EDU	37-ELLIS	4-ARM	15-TDS	25-JENNY
5-ANNENBERG	18-ALLSTARS	29-SD	38-TEN	6-GARY	16-ARC	26-HUNGRY
7-MASCOT	19-CRONIN	31-NCAA	39. JORDAN	8-DAN	17-CHARGERS	27-GUERRERO
9-NIKE	20-PAULEY	32-BRUIN	DOWN:	10-FLOJO	19-CANADA	30-DENNIS
11-PAC	22-RED	33-HEISMAN	1-STEIN	11-PITCHER	21-YEARS	32-BAT
13-OSTIN	24-GAYLEY	35-TOREY	2-WATERPOLO	12-JUZANG	22-AL	34-ASHE
16-AD	25-JOHWOODEN	36-RAFER	3-RED	14-WESTWOOD	23-LOVE	

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