



Football

Strength Training Secrets from USC

How strength coach Chris Carlisle makes national championships a reality

BY KIM GOSS

The University of Southern California has earned 11 national championships in football and has produced seven Heisman Trophy winners and 141 All-Americans. In fact, Street & Smith ranked USC number two behind Notre Dame in its list of the "Greatest College Football Programs of All Time." And it's not just in football that USC excels: in just the past four years they have won nine national championships in six different sports. USC rules!

With all this national and local attention, it's only natural to assume that a strength coach at USC would have more than just a championship swagger. That's what you'd expect, but that's not what USC Head Strength Coach Chris Carlisle is about. This man is personable, humble and down-to-earth – and I'm happy to say he was a pleasure to interview.

The Education of a Strength Coach

As with many strength coaches, Coach Carlisle started with a football background. He played on the offensive line at North Iowa Area Community College in 1980 and then transferred to Chadron State College in Nebraska, where he earned All-Area honors and started for three years. Academically, he went on to receive a



USC Head Strength Coach Chris Carlisle

Photos courtesy USCID

master's degree in history, which suggests that just about everything he learned about strength coaching he learned through his own means.

Coach Carlisle's first strength coaching job was in 1985 at Dodge High School in Nebraska. The following year he joined the coaching staff at Blytheville High School in Nebraska, where he settled down for the next six years. In 1991 it was on to the University of Arkansas, where Carlisle served as a graduate assistant strength coach. Two years later he became the head football coach and strength coach at Subiaco Academy in Arkansas. In 1998 Carlisle made the big time as the associate head strength and conditioning coach for the University of Tennessee. That first year the Volunteers



Photos courtesy USCID

USC Head Football Coach Pete Carroll

won the national title, and Carlisle stayed there for another two years.

Although his career at this time had taken off, Carlisle found himself facing a personal tragedy. In December of 2000 he found out that he had Hodgkin's disease, a life-threatening cancer that required him to undergo radiation therapy. Despite his illness, in February of 2001 Carlisle was hired by Head Football Coach Pete Carroll as head strength coach for USC. He managed to keep secret his cancer and the treatments that required him to make frequent trips back to Tennessee. By that summer his illness had gone into remission, and he has been cancer-free ever since.

In this exclusive interview, Coach Carlisle answered all my questions with



Los Angeles Memorial Coliseum



Junior strong safety Darnell Bing has been a key to USC's pass defense.

frankness and honesty. Here are his words.

BFS: You've trained many collegiate athletes who have gone on to the NFL. Are there any common characteristics you're seeing among these athletes?

CARLISLE: I see a great work ethic. They have the attitude that they can get better and are always striving to find that

edge to make them better.

BFS: Is there a concern with these types of athletes about them developing a prima donna attitude that could affect their work ethic and the morale of the team?

CARLISLE: That could happen, but only if you give them the avenue to become a prima donna. Coach Carroll

has established an environment of hard work and the idea that there isn't an easy way to get around things. And when the younger players see the class ahead of them working their butts off and being successful, they say, "That must be the way it gets done!"

BFS: Do the coaches pretty much leave you alone, or do they have input into how you condition athletes?

CARLISLE: I enjoy great trust from the coaching staff. My first year at USC, Coach Carroll was down quite often, watching his athletes – it was his first season at USC also. Now the coaches are around to stay in touch with the athletes and let them know how important they believe their training is to competing at the highest level.

BFS: How do you work with the football coaches in regard to personalizing the workout programs for your athletes?

CARLISLE: We're in constant communication with the coaches upstairs. They give us a blueprint of what they want their kids to be, their abilities and inabilities, and we give them a program to turn their weaknesses into strengths.

BFS: What areas are new athletes coming into your program usually deficient in?

CARLISLE: I think the core is the biggest deficiency that they have. The abdominal and low-back areas are the first to go when these athletes start working at the level that we put them at. I also find that too many young coaches at the high school level are too concerned with "how much" an athlete can lift, rather than how well they perform those lifts.

BFS: Do you have a general coaching philosophy about strength training?

CARLISLE: My philosophy is simple: How to, How fast, How much! We first teach great technique, then we teach great speed, and only then do we worry about how much they can lift.

BFS: Do you find that athletes with a background of strictly powerlifting have a problem with movement?

CARLISLE: Yeah, we have to do a lot of retraining when we find athletes like that. Football is not how much you can bench. We haven't had a 500-pound bencher in four years, or for that matter a 700-pound squatter, because those numbers are not essential to becoming a better athlete. Again, the key to being a successful football player is movement – that's what the game is about.

BFS: What type of field tests do you use with your athletes?

CARLISLE: We'll duplicate what they test in the combine.

BFS: There's criticism about the 40-yard dash not being that applicable to football. What's your opinion?

CARLISLE: There are two tests that are done that have little or no bearing on being a football player, or any athlete for that matter, and that's the 40-yard-dash and the bench press. Football is not a linear sport. It's a multiple-direction sport. A power sport. An explosive sport. And a burst sport. The 40 is a straight-ahead run, and the bench press is a static movement. I have seen guys who have had great 40s and bench presses and have been great athletes, but I have also seen guys who had great 40s and great benches but couldn't play because they lacked overall athleticism. These tests give me no indication that an athlete can play the game.

BFS: You have a reputation for going out of your way to help high school coaches, allowing them to visit and call, and answering their questions by mail. Why do you take the time, being as busy as you are?

CARLISLE: At heart I'm a high school coach. Of my 20 years, about 12 of those were at the high school level – that's who I am. And ten years ago I was the guy who was calling and asking the dumb



Sophomore wide receiver Dwayne Jarrett has been a favorite target of quarterback and 2004 Heisman Trophy Winner Matt Leinart.

questions – I'm the king of dumb questions. So when high school coaches take the time to call me or to come up and visit, I'm going to go out of my way to help them. Our doors are wide open – we've never turned anybody away from coming to watch us train and ask all the questions they want.

BFS: Are you still asking questions?

CARLISLE: Yes, I still go out today and

seek out experts, such as Jimmy Radcliffe up at the University of Oregon. If you get so caught up with being right and thinking you're on the cutting edge, then you're in trouble because the day you think you've got it figured out is the day that you're in trouble.

BFS: Can you give us an example?

CARLISLE: When I was coming out of college I thought I was the smartest

coach in the world. I had it all figured out – I had been a player, and when I graduated from college I went right into a head coaching job because I knew so much. But in my first game when it was third and 24, and I didn't have that on my call sheet, I said to myself, "Gee, I don't know what I'm doing!" And so for the last 19 years I've been working to find out how to do this thing right. But the problem is that the more I've learned, the more I find out I don't know because every answer spawns five new questions.

BFS: Is there any general advice you give the high school coaches who come to visit you?

CARLISLE: I tell them that I do what I understand, which is why I don't use bands or do strongman training. I just don't understand these training methods enough to apply them to my athletes. If a coach doesn't understand something we're doing, they should keep asking questions until they understand it – and they shouldn't apply it until they understand it.

BFS: What type of academic background should a strength coach pursue?

CARLISLE: I don't think that academics is all that important to being a good coach – hey, I got a master's degree in history! And I've seen a lot of kinesiology



Junior LenDale White has been one of USC's premier tailbacks and will be heading to the NFL this year.

people who could not coach an athlete to move. They knew all the muscles, ligaments and joints and everything, but they couldn't coach an athlete to move correctly or motivate a large group of athletes to train hard. Having said that,

one of the keys to being a successful coach is to surround yourself with great coaches, and I attribute much of my success to being able to surround myself with some very smart people.

BFS: Here's a loaded question: What do you think of the BFS program?

CARLISLE: I was lucky enough to see Coach Shepard in Nebraska when I was coaching in Dodge, Nebraska, back in 1985, and BFS Coach Jim Brown from Poplar Bluff came and helped me when I was at Blytheville. I think the BFS program is organized in such a way that it is instructive and constructive for the high school situation. If you want to add bells and whistles, that's when you go to the colleges and pick up parts of their program. But I think that as far as a high school program goes, BFS is tremendous. In fact, if you look at your program and you look at my program, there are a lot of commonalities – we even do the dot system that was developed by BFS.

BFS: When working with an athlete such as Reggie Bush, are you more conservative with your training because of the risk of injury?

CARLISLE: I look at athletes as clay. When you're working with clay, you can improve that clay and make it into a fin-

I think the BFS program is organized in such a way that it is instructive and constructive for the high school situation.

—COACH CARLISLE

ished piece. An athlete in the NFL is a finished product, and pretty much all you want to do with an athlete at that level is keep him healthy. And this is why I do not want to go on to become a strength coach for the NFL.

BFS: Do you have any lifting standards for your athletes?

CARLISLE: We keep our numbers at 3-4-5. If I get a guy who is power cleaning 300, benching in the 400s and squatting in the 500s – that’s enough. I don’t need a 500-pound bench or a 700-pound squat because it takes so long to achieve those numbers and the chances for injuries skyrocket with those weights.

BFS: How much muscle has Reggie Bush put on under your program?

CARLISLE: He went from 180-185 pounds as a freshman to 205 when he came into his junior season. So over three years we’ve been able to put a solid 20 pounds of muscle on him.

BFS: What are his best lifts?

CARLISLE: He can power clean 330, bench 425 and squat 550.

BFS: What do you think of the 40-yard-dash times you hear about in high school? Do you take them with a grain of salt?

CARLISLE: Sure. A lot of young men who are 4.3 in high school are 4.5 when they run their first 40 here. But again, we’re not really tied into the 40-yard-dash time – we want to see the kids move.



2005 Heisman Trophy Winner Reggie Bush runs a 4.28 in the 40 and power cleans 330 pounds!

BFS: What was Bush’s 40 time as a freshman?

CARLISLE: He came in here as a 4.3 guy, and this year even with the extra 20 pounds ran a 4.28 electronic. But Reggie is not just a linear guy – his speed is such that he can stop and go in a couple of steps.

BFS: We hear about problems with college athletes, such as the type of trouble that Marcus Vick has gotten himself into. What are you doing special at USC

to avoid this from happening?

CARLISLE: It’s tough because these are college kids, and at USC we have the same problems as everyone else. If you go through the police blotters of any major college town, you’re going to see college kids getting in trouble. The only thing is, people know who Marcus Vick is. It’s not that he’s the only college kid in that whole university who has done something wrong; it’s just that those other kids don’t get their names in the news. Our approach is to try to educate the kids that the team comes first and to not do anything to embarrass the team, the school, yourself or your family.

BFS: What advice would you give someone who wants to become a Division I strength coach like yourself?

CARLISLE: Don’t do it! If you enjoy 12 to 14 hours a day, 12 months of the year and living in

obscurity, then I think it’s a great profession for you. You’re never in an off-season, which is why my golf game is gone. I wasn’t a bad golfer when I was coaching on the field, but when I got into the weightroom my time was gone. And I think for the amount of hours you spend in this profession, if you’re looking at this from a financial standpoint, this is the wrong place to be. Being a strength coach is something you’ve got to love to do. **BFS**

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