

DAILY PILOT

From The Sports Desk

UCLA party in the O.C.

By Steve Virgen

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It's not too often you hear an NCAA Division I football coach doo-doo-doo the intro to "Jesse's Girl" during a phone interview.

Maybe I caught UCLA's Rick Neuheisel on a good day, but he was all giddy talking about Orange County and the upcoming O.C. Dinner Celebration for UCLA Athletics. For the second straight year, Neuheisel is coming to Newport Beach for the special event at Barry Saywitz's luxurious home, this time on June 4.

Last year, Neuheisel played the guitar with the OC-based Flashback Heart Attack, a band that covers 80s hits. Neuheisel was the star, strumming during the Rick Springfield song. He had just told the people in attendance how excited he was for the season.

Neuheisel provided a light moment, going retro with the 80s cover band. But the past isn't usually funny for Neuheisel and the Bruins. Well, not if you're a UCLA fan. In 2010, the Bruins went 4-8 for the second time in three years. Now Neuheisel is well aware of the importance of the 2011 season. Winning will not only keep him at UCLA, but would also attract more players to his program.

"Orange County is a very important piece to the puzzle when it comes to recruiting," Neuheisel said. "There are a number of great schools and great coaches in that area. You have to be on the top of your game. Every step you take is huge ... I think, if we can get guys on our campus and see what we are building then they are going to want to be a part of it. We just have to be successful on the field. And we have to be what we say we are going to be, which is a championship contender."

Neuheisel isn't the only headliner for the special dinner. UCLA men's basketball coach Ben Howland is also coming. The two high-profile coaches will be joined by some big names from UCLA: Jamaal Wilkes, Rafer Johnson, Tyus Edney and Cade McNown among others. The night

is to benefit the Wooden Athletic Fund, which generates financial support to assist all sports at UCLA. Information on the event can be found at <https://giving.ucla.edu/OCevent> or by calling (310) 206-3302. John Wooden, the legendary basketball coach, died June 4 last year.

I told Neuheisel that I didn't mean to offend him, but this year's event seems bigger and better because Howland is coming.

"I don't mind the fact that we happen to have a great basketball program," Neuheisel responded. "What I'm hoping is that we can have the football program get back to the way it was like that, high in the ranks."

Both Neuheisel and Howland realize support from Orange County will only help. This season, the Bruins' basketball team will play some games at the Honda Center.

But gaining support from the O.C. might appear to be tough. There seems to be more USC fans in Orange County. Of course, many of them are not as loud because of the stiff sanctions dealt on the football team. There's also the recent news that the NCAA upheld the sanctions of a two-year bowl ban and a 30-scholarship reduction over three years.

"That's their field to plow," Neuheisel said of the sanctions.

"What do you think of the NCAA's decision to uphold?" I asked.

"I didn't have anything to do with that decision," he said. "I have enough to do here."

Next week, his job will be to wake up some UCLA fans in Orange County. Sinjin Smith, the volleyball great who starred at UCLA, agreed that there appears to be more USC fans than UCLA supporters in the O.C.

But Smith, who's also coming to Newport Beach next week, believes an event like this can make a difference.

"I always see USC flags out there everywhere in Orange County," said Smith, who won national titles at UCLA in 1976 and '79. "But at these events you realize that there are a lot of UCLA fans in Orange County. You know they are not waving their flags as much, but events like these give them the confidence to show their spirit. I'll expect to see more flags and more spirit for UCLA in the O.C."

Smith enjoyed attending the special dinner last year, so he wanted to come again, he said. He likes to golf when he can and there will be a round played earlier in the day with all the famous UCLA alumni.

Smith doesn't usually pass up golfing with those from UCLA. It was just last week when he played with legendary men's volleyball coach Al Scates. It was then that Smith made a pitch.

When Scates told the L.A. Times earlier this month that he will retire after the 2012 season, I assumed that UC Irvine Coach John Speraw would take over. But I could be wrong.

Smith said he wants to become the next men's volleyball coach for the Bruins. When they were golfing, Smith told Scates that he wanted to be his assistant this season.

"I hope to help [Scates] out next year and I'm going to throw my hat in the ring for taking over for him too," said Smith, a hall of famer considered one of the greatest beach volleyball players of all time. "I'll be speaking to [UCLA Athletic Director] Dan Guerrero, hopefully in the next few days. He may see it in the paper before then. I don't have an interest in coaching at any other university, the only one would be UCLA. After what he's built for 50 years, there's no better place to be. After playing there and then coming back and winning one as one of his assistants [in 1981], right now it just makes sense with him retiring. Like I said I throw my hat in the ring."

I still believe Guerrero will go after Speraw next year. However, it looks like Smith will be in the picture too.

But that's a year away. It's time for Smith to celebrate and party in Newport Beach next week.