

Point Loma Athletics

JACK NOR THAM— POINT LOMA'S MOUNTAIN MAN

By Jorge de la Torre



(L-R): Jack Northam, Betsy Northam and two friends on Mt. Whitney. Jack Northam ascends the mountain between five and 10 times a year.

Located within California's Sequoia National Park and looming above Death Valley is Mt. Whitney, the highest peak in the lower 48 United States. It's also the most frequently-climbed mountain in the Sierra Nevada Mountain chain, if not the country. A round-trip hike spans 22 grueling miles and sees a 6,130 foot change in elevation. The climb usually begins at the Whitney Portal trailhead at 8,365 feet and ends at the mountain's 14,494-foot summit. Then there is the hike back down.

A man named Bob Rockwell has ascended Mt. Whitney 100 times. Point Loma's assistant baseball coach, Jack Northam, is in the process of equaling that feat. However, Rockwell, a member of the mountain's search and rescue team, made his first climb while in his teens. Northam was 50.

Long before he ever set his sights on Mt. Whitney, physical fitness was an important part of Northam's life. At age 15, he took up long-distance bicycle racing. Good enough at the sport, the Marine Corps encouraged him to train for the 1968 Olympics.

"That was pretty nice," said Northam. "Instead of getting shot at, I was riding my bike all day long."

Although Northam just missed out on qualifying for an Olympic bid, racing set the foundation of his lifelong passion for physical conditioning.

"I have to be fit," said Northam, 56, who is also a roofing contractor. "It's helpful with my work and helpful on the baseball field. And I have to keep up with the 18- and 20-year-olds on the team."

By his 40s, Northam was running in half marathons. However, the life he knew came to an abrupt halt in 1991 when he ruptured a vertebra in his back. Pinched nerves led to permanent muscle atrophy on Northam's right side.

"I just deal with it," he said. "I have to be careful in my work and on the field. I don't let it slow me down though."

Not able to run or ride a bike, Northam began walking as therapy. Walking led to hiking. On camping trips, he and his wife, Betsy, events assistant for PLNU's Music department, hiked in the Lone Pine area of Mount Whitney. In 1997, the pair went part way up the mountain. The next year, accompanied with his 60-year-old brother-in-law, Jack Northam made it to the top.

"The first climb was a big challenge," said Northam. "But it's either a one-time deal or you keep going back again and again. I kept going back."

Hearing about Rockwell's 100 climbs, Northam set the

same goal. He ascends Whitney between five and 10 times a year, limited only by the number of permits he can get. His journeys were slow at first but he pushes himself to go faster. Last summer, he made the hike twice in one day.

"I completed the trip so quickly and I had a 24 hour pass," Northam said. "I thought, 'shoot, why don't I go again?' I know people who have done it twice, just not as old as me."

He spent 20 hours on Mt. Whitney that day.

One thing that is for sure, as long as he is able, Northam will continue his assault of 100 trips to the top of Mt. Whitney. With retirement not too far off, he hopes to log even more time on the mountain in the future.

And once he reaches 100?

"I hope I don't have to stop," he said. "I see people in their 80s going up. Why not me?"

COACHES WNEK AND SARVER RESIGN

Barbara Wnek has resigned as head volleyball coach. After 17 impressive seasons, Wnek is leaving to spend more time with her husband and children.

After five years at the helm, baseball coach Scott Sarver will leave to spend more time with his family and pursue business opportunities.

"I will certainly miss the interaction with my athletes and students, as well as the many friends on this campus who have supported me all of these years," said Wnek. "It has been a privilege to be at PLNU."

Wnek guided the Sea Lions volleyball team to two conference championships, three region titles and eight NAIA National Tournament appearances, including an appearance in the national championship game in 1996. In 1990 and 2000, Wnek was named the Golden State Athletic Conference (GSAC) Coach of the Year. She was the 1996 NAIA National Tournament Coach of the Year. After leading Point Loma to a 34-6 record in 2001, the American Volleyball Coaches Association named her the NAIA National Volleyball Coach of the Year.

"It was with great reservation we accepted Barb's resignation," said PLNU Athletic Director Carroll Land. "She has done a tremendous job."

Sarver, hired as associate head coach in 1992, took over in 2000. In four prior seasons, his teams have compiled an impressive 108-89-3 mark, earning playoff berths three times. Point Loma has won at least 30 games the last two years, the only GSAC team to accomplish that feat. In 2003, his squad produced a 33-20 overall mark and placed fourth in the GSAC with a 16-12 record. PLNU won three post-season contests before falling by a single run in the NAIA Region II Championship Game.

"We have appreciated the positive contributions of Scott to the baseball program," said Land. "With his help we became more competitive and experienced some exciting times in the pursuit of championship play."



Team Highlights

BASEBALL

At press the baseball team was in a battle with Biola, for the GSAC championship.

PLNU was holding a 37-11 (19-7) record and was ranked no. 5 in the nation in NAIA—and top in its region. The team was trailing Biola (33-9-1, 19-6) by a half game, with two to play. Twice in one week earlier in the season PLNU recorded wins over NCAA Division I opponents, topping Navy, 6-3, and Air Force 13-5. In March Mike Ekstrom, a junior from Gresham, Ore., was selected as the GSAC Region II and NAIA National Pitcher of the Week.

SOFTBALL

The Sea Lions softball team is co-GSAC champions with California Baptist, the third straight season PLNU has won or shared the title. This victory under Head Coach Dave Williams is an especially gratifying comeback for the Sea Lions who struggled early on, slipping out of NAIA national rankings to the bottom of the conference standings. Kelly Kalish was named GSAC pitcher of the year, and joined four other Sea Lions named to the 2004 All-GSAC team: third



Sea Lions at Petco

The PLNU baseball team faced cross-town University of California San Diego in the first-ever day game at the city's new Petco Park on March 12. Both teams were playing as part of the four-day Aztec Invitational that inaugurated the Padres' the newly constructed downtown ballpark. Even with most of the campus enjoying Spring Break, students, faculty and staff alike trekked to Petco to see their team in action.

Although UCSD edged the Sea Lions, 2-1, in the contest the thrill of playing in a big-league park is something the players will never forget. "We wish we could have gotten the win," said PLNU left fielder Mike Acuna. "But we really appreciated the chance to play here. It really means a lot to the seniors. Most of us probably won't play after this year so it's great to play at a place like this at least once."

baseman Ruth Atkins, first baseman Amy Nanson, outfielder Alexis Powell and outfielder Paige Powell.

TRACK AND FIELD

PLNU women finished second, and men third at the GSAC 2004 Championships at Fresno Pacific University, April 23-24. Head Coach Jerry Arvin was named women's coach of the year. Both squads have multiple players who have qualified for the NAIA Nationals in Louisville, Ky., May 27-29.

TENNIS

Both the Point Loma men's and women's tennis teams played in the middle of the conference pack this year. At press time, the men had a 13-12 overall record while the women were 13-10. The NAIA rating committee takes into account that the Sea Lions compete in the always-tough GSAC, ranking the men 12th and the women eighth. Head coach is Rich Hills.

GOLF

Under Coach Ben Foster, the PLNU golf team shot a collective three-round 892, good for third place at the postseason NAIA Region II Championships in Lompoc, Calif., April 26-27, behind the Master's College and California State University San Marcos. Joe Prince was the Sea Lions top finisher with 219.

WOMEN'S BASKETBALL

Guard Jessica Mercado helped guide the Sea Lions to a 23-13 record and a second-straight appearance at the NAIA National Tournament. (Defending champs, Southern Nazarene University, knocked the Sea Lions out in the second round, 73-56.) Mercado, who changed the PLNU record books in nine categories, was named as a selection for a second team NAIA All-American as well as to the All-GSAC team. Teammate Alli Greenaway was also tapped for the All-GSAC team and qualified as an NAIA All-American Scholar Athlete. Head Coach is Bill Westphal.

MEN'S BASKETBALL

Point Loma ended the 2003-04 season under Head Coach Art Wilmore with a 15-18 overall record, losing to Azusa Pacific during the GSAC Semifinals. Senior guard Andrew Lasker was selected as a NAIA second-team All-American, his second appearance on the All-American list. Nick Nicholson earned All-GSAC and NAIA All-American Scholar Athlete honors, and in a February game, tallied a school-record 10 three-pointers.



Barb Wnek



Scott Sarver