

University of

Dons

By Nathan Lee Adamus

San Francisco

Bill Russell and K. C. Jones majored in championship studies long before their NBA success.

NCAA Champions

1955 • 1956

The University of San Francisco hired head coach John Woolpert in 1950, and he promptly recruited one of the greatest basketball players in history, Bill Russell. Under Woolpert's leadership, and with Russell's dominant play at both ends of the floor, USF took back-to-back NCAA titles in 1955 and 1956 while amassing a 60-game winning streak through 1957, still the second longest in NCAA history.

1955

Woolpert's novel system was based on strong defense and half-court play. Coupled with the leadership of players like Bill Russell, K.C. Jones and Mike Farmer, it resulted in a near-perfect regular season 23-1 record, and a spot in the NCAA Tournament.

In the first round, USF faced off against West Texas State. Bill Russell was targeted by the opposition with physical play, but was able to power through the double teams, scoring 29 points in an 89-66 win.

Utah was up next, and it was a game that would test Russell's resolve. At halftime, USF had secured a comfortable 41-20 lead, but during the break, Russell began to cough up what he believed was blood. Erring on the side of caution, Woolpert decided to keep Russell out of the second half because of the large lead. However, with Russell on the bench, Utah was able to cut the lead to only eight points. Woolpert was faced with the difficult decision of whether or not to bring the suffering Russell back in or not.

For advice, he turned to a USF alum and team doctor, Ed Duggan, on whether he thought Russell could play. Duggan determined that Russell had coughed up some tainted meat instead of blood. With the food poisoning out of his system, Russell returned to the game and made up for his absence by bringing the lead

back to a comfortable spread. USF took the game, 79-59.

The Dons faced off against Oregon State next. This would prove to be the closest game of the tournament for USF as they barely squeaked out a 57-56 win, earning a spot in the Final Four. The Dons then pulled out a decisive 62-50 win over Colorado, moving on to the finals.

USF faced defending champ La Salle in the finals. K.C. Jones shined in the game, holding La Salle's star player, Tom Gola, to just 16 points while simultaneously leading the Dons in scoring with 24 of his own. The Dons would go on to win the game 77-63, claiming a national title. After the game, coach Woolpert praised K.C. Jones's play, gushing that, "[He] played the greatest basketball game seen by anyone at any time. Jones did things they have never seen in the middle west. His blocks; his leaps to wrestle the ball away from Gola...you'd say they were impossible, but K.C. did them with the greatest game of his life."



Photo By: San Francisco/Collegiate Images/Getty Images

▲ USF's dominant center Bill Russell celebrates the Dons' 1955 NCAA championship victory on the shoulders of fans.

1956

Both Russell and Jones returned to USF in 1956 for their senior years. Expectations were high and eventually were met as the Dons went undefeated in the regular season.

The Dons earned a bid for the NCAA tournament. Yet, before it began, the team faced turmoil. The NCAA ruled that K.C. Jones was not eligible to play in the postseason. Jones, being one of the best players for the Dons, was difficult to replace.

USF went into their first game against John Wooden's UCLA Bruins with Hal Perry replacing Jones. They got off to a rocky start, missing their first eight shots, but were able to right the ship, winning the game 72-61.

Next they faced Utah, promptly defeating them 92-77. USF then moved on to face Southern Methodist University in the semi-finals. SMU put up a fight, but were ultimately overpowered by the dominant play of both Russell and Perry. The Dons claimed an 86-68 win, and moved on to the finals to play Iowa.

Iowa proved a true test for the Dons. Early in the game, the Hawkeye's star player, Carl Cain, led his team to a 15-4 lead. On the sidelines, K.C. Jones grew sickened by his team's showing. He told his teammates, "You're choking, really swallowing the olive. You lose this one, and the winning streak you're gloating about won't mean a thing."

This certainly provided a spark for his teammates, but it was the decision of coach Woolpert to make Gene Brown guard Cain the rest of the game that proved to be the game-changer. With Cain contained, Russell took over, scoring 26 points and tallying 27 rebounds. USF went on to defeat Iowa 83-71, claiming their second consecutive national title and finishing the season with a perfect 29-0 overall record. **MM**

2003 Tournament

McGaw Hall
Evanston, Illinois

Championship:
USF 83, Iowa 71

Final Four Results:
USF 86, Southern Methodist 68
Iowa 83, Temple 76

Tournament MVP:
Hal Lear (Temple)

Winning Coach:
Phil Woolpert

Season Record:
29-0

Top Players:
Bill Russell
K. C. Jones
Hal Perry

▼ Although Russell drew the majority of the headlines, K. C. Jones' exemplary play was a major reason for the Dons' success.

2003 Tournament

Municipal Auditorium
Kansas City, Missouri

Championship:
USF 77, La Salle 63

Final Four Results:
USF 62, Colorado 50
La Salle 76, Iowa 73

Tournament MVP:
Bill Russell (USF)

Winning Coach:
Phil Woolpert

Season Record:
28-1

Top Players:
Bill Russell
K. C. Jones
Hal Perry

▼ Bill Russell accepts congratulations following a West Coast Conference victory over the St. Mary's Gaels.



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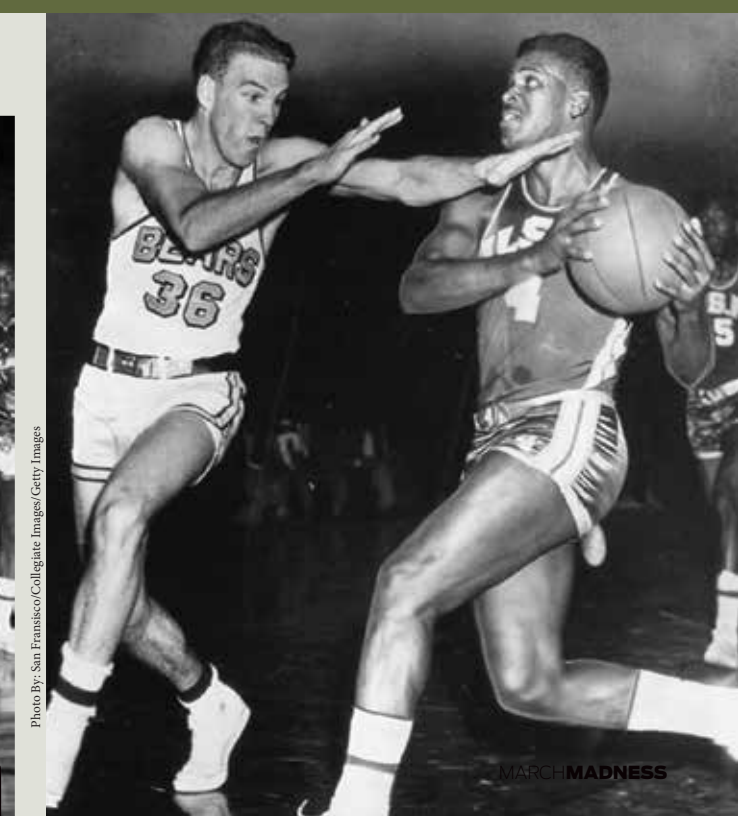


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