



Bing

## Neuheisel forms bond out of tragedy

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**By Chris Foster**  
*of Angeles Times*

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"Life is not fair."

Former quarterback John Hessler, in a slow, monotone voice honed in years of speech therapy, says that is the most i Neuheisel, who was his position coach at the University of Colorado.

The last seven years have reinforced the philosophy, from the moment in 2003 when Hessler's car was forced into the and-run accident that left him in a coma for 33 days.

Family, former teammates and coaches hovered at the hospital hoping for the best. Neuheisel, now UCLA's head coach, relentless in his optimism.

"Just being in the room with him and holding his hand," Neuheisel recalled, "you could feel he was inside ready to con

The men will reunite this week in what has become an annual fall visit. Neuheisel has flown Hessler in for a football ga

This year, that game is Saturday, when UCLA plays Oregon State at the Rose Bowl. Hessler is coming out from his Nor time for his son's birthday Thursday.

Life may not be fair, as Neuheisel told Hessler when he lost a quarterback competition to Koy Detmer in 1996, but it d

"He always told me that when things don't go your way, it's how you handle the adversity that shows what kind of pla about that a lot over the years.

"What I'm dealing with is hard. How can I tell you in two words when it would take a million to explain?

"... I'm here."

### The reunion

Neuheisel was a Baltimore Ravens assistant when he first brought Hessler out for a game. The Ravens played the Phil Colorado quarterbacks renewed acquaintances before the game.

The night before, Hessler and Neuheisel were roommates at the Ravens' hotel.

"We talked about our times at Colorado that night," Neuheisel said. "I wanted to talk about family and the future.... Ev forward to."

The yearly weekend visits now fall into the "look forward to" category.

"The past month, all John can talk about is going out to L.A. to see Rick Neuheisel," said Sarah Bindel, who has been i

His son's birthday is an added perk. Devin Hessler lives with his mother and stepfather in Ontario.

When Hessler, his son and Bindel went to UCLA's game against Oregon last season, "Devin's face lit up when we got t me?" " Bindel recalled. "John felt great that he could do something for Devin."

Neuheisel helps as well, providing Devin with a scholarship to UCLA's youth camp.

"John was always involved with Devin," Bindel said. "He'd take him fishing and Devin would go watch John play softba came the horrible accident."

### The accident,

Hessler's football player career was over, but his life was on track in 2003. He taught seventh grade social studies and High.

Then, on Oct. 19 that year, the driver of a Chevrolet Blazer ran Hessler's car into the median. The driver never stoppe breathing.

A passerby got into the mangled car and lifted Hessler's head to open an airway, but Hessler had sustained severe hea

The driver of the Blazer was never found.

Hessler's injuries were so serious that it was just last year, after years of rehabilitation, that he passed a competency I for his personal affairs.

Though he can walk — slowly and methodically — Hessler plays wheelchair basketball, and he is a volunteer football c

"John has done a good job at making peace," said Bindel, who met Hessler while working as a physical therapist. Still, still come out, that [the driver of the Blazer] left him for dead."

Along the way, Neuheisel has been a constant source of encouragement.

"Rick calls to check on him and keeps encouraging," Bindel said. "He really tries to make sure things in John's world ar

### The coach

Anyone who watched Colorado's game against Michigan in 1997 would have a hard time believing that years later Neuheisel was Hessler, coming off the field after a mistake. And there was Neuheisel, screaming at him for all a national t

"I was absolutely publicly ripped for that by [ABC announcer] Keith Jackson, and that's OK," Neuheisel said, chuckling. Hessler understood. "Rick could get under my skin," he said. "Most of the time, I deserved it. It was love."

He recalled that when Neuheisel was a Colorado assistant, "he covered for me when I was late for a Friday walk-throu. Neuheisel refers to Hessler as "Alfred E. Neuman" for his looks but also credits him as being "one of the best quarterb. That was Neuheisel's first season as head coach, and Hessler took over as quarterback after Detmer was injured.

The coach recalls that when he sent the backup into the Texas A&M game, Hessler forgot the play before he got to th. Neuheisel calmly asked him to name his favorite play.

"He told me and I said, 'Run that,' " Neuheisel said.

Colorado won the game and later upset No. 10 Oklahoma as Hessler passed for five touchdowns. The Buffaloes went. "John always had that ability to come in and win the day," Neuheisel said.

### The weekends

Neuheisel had just been let go as Washington's head coach in 2003 when he received a call from Colorado sports infor. There had been a car accident, and Hessler was in bad shape.

"I had to go see John," Neuheisel said. "I'm sure John didn't even know I was there. But I had to see him and his fam. Said Plati: "Rick has been involved from the get-go. Rick would never admit, but I'm sure he has helped out financially. Neuheisel is also reluctant to talk about the weekends he shares with his former player. He allows this much: "All I wa there were people out there who cared about him. That there is a lot to live for."

Even when life is unfair.

"Some days I wonder, 'Why am I so normal?' " Hessler said. "I shouldn't be doing so well after all this. I don't know w them."

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