

August 25, 2013

# At Louisville, Athletic Boom Is Rooted in ESPN Partnership

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LOUISVILLE, Ky. — In February, the president of the University of Louisville, James R. Ramsey, traveled to Florida to meet with donors and alumni.

Dr. Ramsey is an economist, and he led off on the dismal side of the ledger, from the challenges facing the economy to dwindling government financing for higher education, including a sharp drop in aid from the State of Kentucky.

But about halfway through [his PowerPoint presentation](#), Dr. Ramsey declared that for all the gloom, things were not so bad at Louisville. Average test scores for incoming freshmen were way up, as was the university's graduation rate. The research budget had quintupled since 1998.

Louisville's athletic department was on a roll, too, what with a recent invitation to join the Atlantic Coast Conference, the football team's victory in the Sugar Bowl and its coach's decision not to pursue job opportunities with rival universities.

"U. of L. is on an upward trajectory," one of Dr. Ramsey's slides proclaimed. "Even [ESPN](#) is talking about us!"

What ESPN was not saying was that Louisville's rise, both academically and athletically, was in large part the product of its partnership with the sports television giant.

Over the past dozen years, to feed its unending appetite for live football, ESPN has made Louisville Cardinals midweek games a mainstay in prime time. In turn, Louisville has made exposure on ESPN the centerpiece of a campaign to rise above its commuter-school roots and become a powerhouse in college sports.

"If it wasn't for ESPN, we would be a fraction of what we are today," Tom Jurich, Louisville's longtime athletic director, said in an interview in his office on April 1 as the university savored its latest basketball success: the men's and women's teams were each on the way to the Final Four. The men went on to win the N.C.A.A. title.

"We owe them so, so much," Mr. Jurich said of ESPN. "They were willing to take a chance on us."

Louisville's ascent is a case study of how an institution of higher learning can become all but

inextricably conjoined with ESPN, an institution of higher profits. It illustrates not only ESPN's power to make kings among athletic programs, but how profoundly its presence can affect an entire university and its institutional priorities.

Some people on campus wonder if those priorities have become a bit skewed.

"We worry that the university gets too much identified with the athletics," said Tom Byers, an English professor and a self-described big fan of Louisville sports. "I would love it if we competed with professors with the same kind of financial resources. But that's not the world we live in."

What ESPN offered Louisville, beyond millions of dollars in fees for television rights, was prime-time exposure on the leading sports network, putting Cardinals football in front of national audiences of fans, donors, recruits and prospective students.

The cost to Louisville? It had to be ready to play whenever ESPN could fit the Cardinals into its schedule.

"Louisville came to us and said, 'We'll play anyone, anywhere, anytime,' " said Mark Shapiro, a former head of programming and production at ESPN. Indeed, "anytime, anywhere" became Mr. Jurich's motto in his early years as athletic director.

When he took over in 1997, the athletic department struggled on an annual budget of about \$14 million and attracted little outside attention for sports other than men's basketball. Today, the budget has swollen to about \$77 million, and it will increase significantly with the move to the A.C.C. in 2014.

The arrangement has also been a boon to ESPN. The Cardinals' prime-time games quickly became ratings winners, convincing others that playing at midweek, while unconventional, could be a blessing in the form of exposure.

"It was a programmer's dream," Mr. Shapiro said. "We already had N.F.L. on Sunday nights, N.H.L. and M.L.B. on multiple nights, Thursday night college football. We were all filled up. So I said, 'How about Tuesday nights?' They seized it, and over time their results have been spectacular."

### Football as a Foundation

When John W. Shumaker became president of Louisville in 1995, he met with the university's trustees to chart a way forward. While the university was "respectable," they agreed, it could be much more. It could be a player. And sports could be its window to the world.

Louisville was still a youngster as far as public universities went, having shed its roots as a small, private college to join the Kentucky state system in 1970. Even its academic strengths in medicine,

business and engineering were not widely known beyond a campus bordered by brownfields and railway ruins.

On the sports side, the men's basketball program was running on the fumes of its two national championships won in the 1980s under the Hall of Fame coach Denny Crum. The athletic department, which had recently joined the new Conference USA, was vastly underfinanced, its teams housed in outdated facilities. Some teams were saddled with penalties because of N.C.A.A. infractions.

Mr. Shumaker's grand plan, in a nutshell, looked like this: If the athletic program took hold, Louisville could move to a bigger, better conference with a better television deal, putting the whole university — academics and athletics — on a wider national stage.

The key to the whole thing was football. In the economics of big-time college athletics, football is the alpha and the omega — generally by far the most profitable sport, because of the size of the crowds, the sponsorships and the lucrative television agreements. Perhaps two dozen elite universities make enough money from football, and to a lesser degree basketball, to subsidize their entire athletic departments. What Louisville had to do first, Mr. Shumaker decided, was replace the “not very attractive” and decidedly second-tier Cardinal Stadium, which opened in 1957, just after the graduation of Johnny Unitas, Louisville's greatest football star.

By the time Mr. Jurich arrived from Colorado State in late 1997, Louisville was in the final stages of building a \$63 million, 42,000-seat, state-of-the-art stadium, with naming rights sold to the Papa John's pizza chain, a prominent Louisville-based business. Mr. Jurich's task was to put together a better, more watchable football team to go with it. The 1997 team had gone 1-10, finishing last in Conference USA. The university had only five postseason bowl appearances in its history.

Mr. Jurich quickly hired a new coach — John L. Smith, known for his high-scoring, pass-happy offense. “First to 49 points wins,” Mr. Smith liked to joke.

It was fast-break football, made for television. And it was just what ESPN was waiting for.

In the early 2000s, the network, ever expansive, was looking to broaden its college football offerings beyond the traditional Saturday and the increasingly, if grudgingly, accepted Thursday. Most big-name, major-conference universities, though, were not interested in hosting midweek games, given the extensive setup and the disruption to classes and campus life.

What ESPN needed for a new Tuesday night franchise were teams that craved exposure but knew they would not get it on Saturday afternoons flooded with more than 100 games. Conference USA jumped. Before the 2001 season, it signed an eight-year ESPN agreement, reportedly worth about \$80 million, that included at least 10 televised games each year, including games on Tuesdays and Wednesdays.

Universities were not required to participate, and some bristled at the scheduling as sacrilege that took away from the “purity” of the game.

But Louisville, with its national ambitions and with little campus life to disrupt — only about 2,000 of nearly 15,000 undergraduates lived in dormitories — was more than happy to play at midweek.

On Oct. 16, 2001, Southern Mississippi visited Papa John’s Cardinal Stadium for what was billed as the first regular-season college football game on a Tuesday night. Louisville won, 24-14.

“I think that tonight, with two of our marquee teams playing on national television, it gave our conference very significant national exposure and gave Southern Miss and Louisville great national exposure,” Mike Slive, the Conference USA commissioner at the time, told The Clarion-Ledger, in Jackson, Miss. Mr. Slive is now the commissioner of the Southeastern Conference.

That game was one of five regular-season contests that Louisville played on ESPN or ESPN2 in 2001. The next year, the Cardinals appeared six times during the season, including a Tuesday game, three Thursday games and a Saturday game starting at 9:30 p.m. “They loved putting John L. Smith on,” Mr. Jurich said of the coach, who led the Cardinals to a 41-21 overall record and bowl games in each of his five seasons.

There were inherent challenges in running a football program that rarely played on Saturday. To keep the Cardinals tuned up, Mr. Smith, a believer in regimen, essentially banished the regular calendar and created his own. No matter when his team played, he decreed that the next day would be Sunday, with signs in the locker rooms to reinforce the point.

“It was really crazy, but it was fun and exciting,” Mr. Smith said. “From where we started to where we left, it was well worth it.”

True, alumni grumbled about having to go to the campus on weeknights. “Some of the fans and the press were critical and thought we were violating all the norms,” recalled Mr. Shumaker, who left the university in 2002.

But while the new calendar unsettled some hometown fans, it also won new ones across the country.

“We became America’s team at midweek,” Mr. Jurich said.

That familiarity also created a far wider, and deeper, pool of recruits. “All of a sudden we were able to recruit the Deion Branches and Elvis Dumervils and those types of guys,” Mr. Smith said, referring to two players he coached at Louisville who went on to the N.F.L.

In 1999, Stefan LeFors, a high school quarterback in Louisiana, saw the Cardinals play a wild overtime game against Army on ESPN and decided to send a tape of himself to the Louisville

coaches.

“That was my only reason Louisville was on my list,” said Mr. LeFors, who ended up as the starting quarterback under a new coach, Bobby Petrino, who was hired after Mr. Smith left for Michigan State after the 2002 season.

Under Mr. Petrino, the new weeknight tradition continued, and so did the team’s ascent. On Nov. 2, 2006, Louisville fans, wearing black in solidarity, packed Papa John’s Cardinal Stadium for what was then the biggest football game in modern Cardinals history: a Thursday prime-time clash with West Virginia. The Cardinals were undefeated and ranked No. 5 nationally; the Mountaineers were No. 3. Louisville won, 44-34.

A week later, the Cardinals traveled to Rutgers for another Thursday night game. They lost in the closing moments, but by season’s end, the reversal was complete: in less than a decade, Louisville had gone from near-winless obscurity to a 12-1 season, including a conference championship and an Orange Bowl victory.

Without question, ESPN’s investment had paid off. The back-to-back November games still rank among the top 20 in total viewers for a college football game on ESPN. No longer did the network have to entreat schools to play on weeknights.

“As we cleared more homes, bigger conferences saw more dollars and better exposure,” said Loren Matthews, a former ESPN executive who died in March. He added: “Schools would say: ‘We’ll play on any night. Do you want us to start at 9, or do you want us to start at 6?’ ”

### Better Conferences, Bigger Venues

Central to Louisville’s transformation plan was the belief that success on the field and brand recognition on television would make the university a highly sought prize in the wave of realignment sweeping college athletic conferences. The Big East, a “better” conference, eventually came calling, and in 2005, Louisville moved up. Last year, with the Big East crumbling, Louisville moved up yet again, to an even better conference, the A.C.C.

Better mostly meant richer. Last year in the Big East, Louisville received about \$4 million from television rights. The move to the A.C.C., which becomes effective next summer, is likely to quadruple that, with roughly \$16 million from the conference’s agreement with ESPN.

Television revenue is only part of it, though. The re-engineered football team and a reinvigorated basketball program under Rick Pitino, who arrived in 2001, have allowed Louisville to press local corporations and other private donors for larger sums to support the athletic department and help finance what university promotional materials describe as a \$256 million “athletic building boom.” (Those 2012 promotional materials also catalog Louisville’s achievements during seven years in the

Big East, including 53 conference championships, 122 all-Americans, 10 Olympians and a College World Series.)

“Anytime a donor base is feeling good, you’ve got to capitalize on that excitement,” said Mark Jurich, the athletic department’s chief fund-raiser, a former Louisville baseball player and the athletic director’s son.

Louisville has capitalized to the extent that swaths of campus can seem a bit like a corporate-branded sports theme park.

First came Papa John’s Cardinal Stadium, built on the site of the old South Louisville Rail Yard and renovated in 2010 at a cost of \$72 million, with 13,000 new seats and rows of lucrative suites. For its workouts, the football team has the Trager Indoor Center (Republic Bank). The baseball team plays at Jim Patterson Stadium (local entrepreneur and philanthropist). There are the Musselman Golf Center, the G. Garvin Brown III Rowing Center and the Ralph Wright Natatorium.

The men’s and women’s basketball teams play at the \$238 million KFC Yum Center in downtown Louisville. The arena, which is owned by the state and the city, opened in 2010 and would rank among the largest N.B.A. venues.

The building continues: next year, the men’s and women’s soccer teams will move into a \$16.2 million stadium and training complex. A major donor to the complex is Dr. Mark Lynn, the owner of a chain of optometry practices whose four children attended the university.

“When I see the University of Louisville on ESPN and getting the name recognition, it makes you proud,” said Dr. Lynn, who has committed \$5 million to the project. “It is not just good to see and fun to watch. You feel very proud you are a part of that university.”

Athletic acclaim, of course, was never supposed to be an end in itself at Louisville. The idea was to jump-start a transformation of the university as a whole. These days, the 30-second advertising spots shown during ESPN telecasts of Cardinals games announce the university’s academic advances to the world: the students who perform better, graduate more often and more readily choose to live on campus. The 36 total Fulbright scholarships in 2010, 2011 and 2012 — more, university officials point out, than the total at Dartmouth or M.I.T. The swelling research budget and the fivefold increase, since 1998, in the number of endowed professorships and chairs. All of this helped by the donations that have increasingly poured in, about \$1 billion since 2004.

In the annals of ESPN and college sports, Louisville’s story is clearly the story of a winner.

Still, the national debate about the role of college athletics is hardly silent here. There are those who are ambivalent, who love their Cardinals but are disquieted by the growing

professionalization, the way sports can seem to suffuse the place.

Partly, it is an optics problem — all the new buildings in an era of relentlessly declining state subsidies and rising costs. (To be fair, that new construction is financed by donations, and the athletic department, a separate nonprofit entity, brings in enough revenue to largely pay for itself, aside from a few million dollars from students and the university. Lately, the department has also sent money back to the university — \$350,000 annually, plus a one-time \$2 million donation to finance a pay raise for the faculty and staff, whose salaries had been frozen.)

“Like many academics, I’m a little uneasy about the big business of college athletics,” said Mr. Byers, the English professor.

Mr. Byers has been here for 33 years. He remembers carrying his young son outside to celebrate after the men’s basketball team won the N.C.A.A. championship in 1986. He says the people in the athletic department, particularly Mr. Jurich, are among the best at what they do and seem to care deeply about the student-athletes.

Still, he said: “It is a little frustrating that when that side seems to be thriving, we on the other side are so dependent on the state and are dealing with cutbacks. I’d love it if the academics side could go to the athletics side, just once, and shake them and get some of that money.”

Others on campus point out that the construction boom has left some campus buildings behind. Last October, mold spores were found in one of the dorms, Miller Hall.

“You’ve got all this construction money going to athletics,” said Rae Hodge, a recent editor of the student newspaper, The Louisville Cardinal. “But the mold condition was so bad students had to move out.”

Joseph Steffen, a biology professor for 30 years and the chairman of the faculty senate, said there had been a “bifurcated response” among his colleagues.

Some, he said, “clearly see this as detracting from the academic side.” Others, he said, understand that athletic success, televised nationally on ESPN, “gets our name in the news, gets us into places where perhaps others don’t go, and gets us recognition from nonathlete students who might want to come here.”

He added: “You see the student groups and student activity and the band. All of that gets a little extra revved up when they know they are going to have that national exposure.”

Ten years ago, when Louisville was just beginning to see the fruits of its partnership with ESPN, Mr. Jurich arranged to have a 60-foot-long banner put up next to a row of abandoned soybean silos facing Interstate 65, welcoming visitors to “The Ville, the Best College Sports Town in America.”

To a lot of people, even a lot of people in Louisville, it was magical thinking. With the University of Kentucky down the road in Lexington, Louisville was not even the best sports town in the state.

Today, it looks more like a prophecy fulfilled.

Said Mr. Jurich, "I don't think anyone could have looked at the crystal ball and said that would have happened."