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Louisville builds on Thursday Night Football

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Louisville's metamorphosis from an occasional bowl participant to Big East contender happened, of course, on a Thursday.

That's just the way the Cardinals wanted it, with the undivided attention of college football fans.

It was a Thursday in September 2002 when the Cardinals upset No. 4 Florida State 26-20 during a downpour in Louisville.

The stakes were higher on a Thursday in 2004 when Louisville had a 17-point lead in the third quarter against No. 3 Miami in the Orange Bowl. When the Hurricanes rallied for a 41-38 win, it was the only blemish on an 11-win season for the Cardinals.

In 2006, Louisville and West Virginia set the mark for the most-watched Thursday night game in ESPN history. In a matchup between two top-five teams, Louisville came out on top with a 44-34 win.

It was an important step for a program that has had pockets of success but now has aspirations of being a perennial conference contender.

"To me, Louisville was always that type of program," said former Cardinals quarterback Stefan LeFors, who played from 2001-04. "It was a team that was always hungry. They always wanted to go against the big dogs. We always thought we could rise to that challenge. It's the attitude of the entire team and program. The players just put it together to get over that hump"

It wasn't always that way.

Louisville was 1-10 in the first year of athletic director Tom Jurich's tenure in 1997, but has gone to nine consecutive bowl games. The momentum has continued despite coaching changes – from John L. Smith to Bobby Petrino, and now to Steve Kragthorpe.

A huge factor in the Cardinals' recent success was keeping local high school stars at home. Standouts like [Brian Brohm](#) and Michael Bush have been major contributors to the program during its rise.

In turn, Louisville has cashed in on this combination by upgrading facilities, capitalizing on new sources of advertising revenue and raising the program's profile to a national audience.

"We've really tried to ride that wave," Jurich said. "We've made a lot of commitments financially. We're very aggressive. We're very ambitious in the way we try to market it.

"The thing we needed to do right away (in 1998) was to get exposure and get this program branded, and that was something I felt was most essential."

With airwaves saturated with college football from across the country on Saturdays, Louisville has made sure its games are available not only in Kentucky, but also in states like Florida - where Louisville has signed 25 high school seniors over the last four years.

The Cardinals have appeared on television 48 times since 2001 after having only 28 games broadcast in the previous 10 years.

Part of the explanation of the surge of Louisville on the airwaves is Jurich's embrace of weeknight games. The Cardinals have appeared on non-Saturday telecasts at least three times a year since 2001.

In 2007, Louisville will play six games on either a Thursday or a Friday. That includes two Thursday games that could again decide the Big East – a trip to West Virginia on Nov. 8 and a game at home against Rutgers on Nov. 29.

"That's helped us immensely," Jurich said. "ESPN has helped us build this program. I look at them as a full partner."

ESPN, though, was happy to oblige with a program built for television. Under Smith and Petrino, Louisville routinely had one of the most high-scoring offenses in the country. Twice since 1998, the Cardinals led the nation in total offense.

As Louisville's profile began to build, the program employed Nelligan Sports Marketing in 2001 to help capitalize on the growing football program. It also wanted to re-establish the men's basketball program - which hired [Rick Pitino](#) that year - as a national power.

In addition to added revenue from television appearances, bowl games, donors and Big East membership, Louisville became the flagship program for Nelligan Sports Marketing.

Where Louisville used to handle marketing internally, Nelligan's team of professionals arranged sponsors for coaches' shows for Louisville, worked on deals for radio and television coverage for Louisville programming and sold signage at Louisville sports venues.

Before Nelligan arrived, Louisville made less than \$1 million in revenue on this kind of marketing. Now, it is expected to be around \$7.5 million.

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The majority of the increased revenues go back into the athletic department's operations budget, which includes coaches' salaries, scholarships and recruiting budget.


Rutgers, too, follows the Louisville model. Rutgers has increased its revenue from \$1 million in 2000 to more than \$4 million expected for this year.


What's in the Cards?


Where Louisville has been: Through 1997, Louisville had played in five bowl games - including a 34-7 win over Alabama in the 1991 Fiesta Bowl under coach [Howard Schnellenberger](#). After being an independent since 1975, Louisville joined Conference USA in 1996. In 1997, the Cardinals were 1-10, prompting the firing of Ron Cooper after three years.


Where Louisville is now: Louisville went 41-21 in five seasons under John L. Smith, including a landmark win over Florida State in 2002. Bobby Petrino led Louisville into its transition to the Big East in 2005 and the conference championship in 2006. Louisville has played in nine consecutive bowl games. The Cardinals have won 18 consecutive home games and have gone 34-3 over the last three seasons.

Where Louisville is going: After Petrino left for the NFL, Louisville quickly hired [Steve Kragthorpe](#). The former Tulsa coach took the Golden Hurricane to three bowl games in four years after the program was 2-21 the two previous years. U of L quarterback [Brian Brohm](#) is a Heisman Trophy contender and is expected to be a top NFL draft pick for 2008.

 [Last 3 Next 3 Gallery](#)

 **Radio:** [Rutgers' Greg Schiano](#)

 **Radio:** [BSU's Chris Petersen](#)

 **Radio:** [Louisville's Michael Bush](#)

"Two things a university looks for when they hire someone like us: it's increased revenue and increased exposure," said T.J. Nelligan, president and CEO of Nelligan Sports Marketing. "The best example of our business is the Louisville model. Rutgers is in the third inning and Louisville is in the fifth."

Thanks to the increased revenues, Louisville has the financial freedom for sorely needed facilities upgrades. In addition to new facilities for non-revenue sports, Louisville built the Howard Schnellenberger Football Complex and an indoor football practice facility. The school also plans to expand the football stadium.

So while Smith and Petrino are gone and Louisville's Heisman-caliber quarterback Brohm will be next year, Louisville feels it has the tools in place to continue its momentum.

"This thing has been built for long-term success," Jurich said.

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