

'DOC' DESERVES A ROUND OF APPLAUSE • BY DAN MCDONALD

(Dan McDonald is a sportswriter for The Advertiser, Lafayette's daily newspaper. He was sports information director for UL Lafayette from 1982-1999. This commentary was published May 1, 2007.)

Everyone involved in the UL athletic program owes school president Ray Authement a huge debt of gratitude.

So do most of the teams in the Sun Belt Conference. Without him, it's very possible that a lot of current league members might still be floating around looking for a home. At the very least, they'd be mired in a conference that's not on the level that the Sun Belt currently enjoys.

Authement was part of the delegation from the old American South Conference that made trips to places like South Alabama and Western Kentucky nearly two decades ago. It was his task to persuade those and other schools – schools left behind when original Sun Belt members UAB, Charlotte, South Florida and others bolted for Conference USA – to join with the American South programs.

It took some convincing. But now, the Sun Belt is playing Division I-A football, is part of the NCAA's management hierarchy and the BCS, and is established as a league respected nationally in several sports.

Authement should be proud of his role in league history. But, like his many other accomplishments in almost 34 years as UL's top man, they're rarely celebrated. He's not the type to brag about what he's done, preferring instead to play up the accolades of the university as a whole.

Accolades which, by the way, would be far less if he hadn't shepherded the school through some tough times. It will be tough to find another such shepherd, with Authement surprising nearly everyone on Friday with a retirement announcement.

"He's the role model president in Louisiana," said interim athletic director David Walker, a part of the university administration for many years before his recent involvement with athletics. "He's kept us financially stable, put us on track in the right technology fields, and grown this university into a very well-respected research institution.

"At the same time, he's taken care of all the auxiliary areas, including athletics."

Throughout his career, Authement has taken more than his share of heat



On Jan. 27, 1994, the Ragin' Cajun basketball team defeated Arkansas. President Ray Authement is flanked by his wife, Barbara, left, and eldest daughter, Kathy Prouet.

from Ragin' Cajun fans for what many perceived as a lack of support – mostly financial – for the athletic program. Those critics, though, didn't know the whole story.

They didn't know of his work behind the scenes to help the school's sports programs or how he squeezed every cent possible in the direction of Reinhardt Drive.

They didn't see him out on the field at football practice, or quietly in attendance at too many athletic events to count. It's not many presidents that would spend lunch hours at their school's athletic complex, touching bases and keeping tabs on the goings-on.

"I know he's the reason I'm here," said UL football coach Rickey Bustle. "Since I've been here, he's been a great influence for me, and I appreciate everything he's done for us. I'm excited for him and I'm proud for him."

Authement actually pre-dates Bustle in football, playing single-wing tailback at Terrebonne High in the 1940's. He also played baseball and basketball, although he says he wasn't very good at the latter, and his love for athletics never waned after that.

He knows more student-athletes than most, and he revels in their successes on the field and in their later lives. No one ever took Cajun losses harder. And no one enjoyed the wins more.

He's probably his own worst critic. Like most of us, he probably feels he hasn't done enough. That's why he's already said that one of his final tasks with the school will be to raise funds to solidify the athletic program's financial future.

The department appreciates the help, Doc, but the people in athletics know you've already done a lot more than your share. And for those who disagree, to quote a former New Orleans Saints coach – You don't know ... and you never will. ■

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