

Authement Set the Bar

Cajuns compete at top level of NCAA collegiate competition

IF THERE WERE AN MVP AWARD FOR Ragin' Cajun athletics, President Ray Authement would be the top candidate this year.

Here's why:

- In September, he accepted the largest single sponsorship in the history of UL Lafayette's athletic program – a 10-year

pledge totalling \$2 million in cash and in-kind-services from Cox Communication.

- Also in September, the \$4 million Leon Moncla Indoor Practice Facility opened near Cajun Field. UL Lafayette is only the second university in Louisiana to provide its student-athletes with a weatherproof place to prepare for games.



UL Lafayette President Ray Authement is shown in the Leon Moncla Indoor Practice Facility, which opened this fall. It will be used by Ragin' Cajun football, baseball, basketball and softball teams.

• This summer, Authement helped initiate a funding plan that, when approved by the state Board of Regents, raised the amount of state monies public universities can earmark for athletics. The net result: UL Lafayette's budget for athletics increased \$1.4 million for this fiscal year.

Oh, what a difference 34 years can make.

When Authement was promoted from vice president to acting president of USL (now UL Lafayette) in 1973, he faced the unenviable task of defending the university against the NCAA's charges of 125 basketball recruiting violations. The school ultimately received the NCAA's Death Penalty, which shut down the men's basketball program for two years and put other Ragin' Cajun sports on hold.

Also in 1973, the Ragin' Cajun football team had the worst season in USL's history. Ten games. Ten losses.

Authement was undaunted. The NCAA created three divisions for collegiate competition in 1973 – Divisions I, II and III. In 1974, he chose to join the top tier. "We wanted to send a clear message, that UL Lafayette intended to compete at the highest level of athletics, just as it does in academics," he recalled in an interview for the Spring 2002 issue of *La Louisiane*. "We haven't looked back."

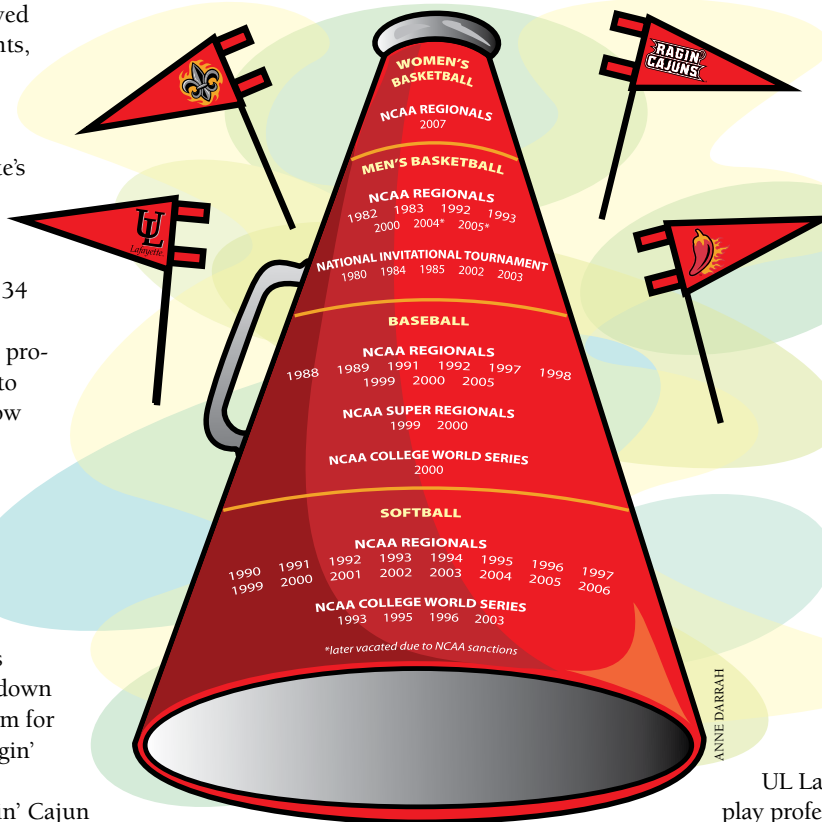
And when the NCAA subdivided its collegiate divisions for football in 1978, Authement again chose the most competitive level, Division 1-A.

Former UL Lafayette Athletic Director Nelson Schexnayder said Authement's decision reinforced the university's ambitious goals. "UL Lafayette, Tulane and LSU were the ones who made the decision to be in 1-A from the start. No one else (in Louisiana.) Some other universities have joined since. So, he made a wonderful decision."

A look at Ragin' Cajuns' success during Authement's tenure confirms that assessment.

Take baseball, for example. In late September, Rivals.com released its pre-fall rankings. The Ragin' Cajuns are in its Top

POSTSEASON APPEARANCES BY TEAM, 1974-PRESENT



25 teams in the nation. Last season, UL Lafayette had a 45-17 season and won the Sun Belt Conference regular-season title. The Cajuns made it to the SBC Tournament and to the final round of the NCAA Tournament's College Station Regional.

In 2000, the Ragin' Cajuns took their first trip to the College World Series and placed third.

The Ragin' Cajun softball team is consistently one of the best in the country. It went to the Women's College World Series in 1993, 1995, 1996 and 2003. It has had 35 All-Americans, including co-head coach Stefni Whitton Lotief.

UL Lafayette's men's basketball team has competed in the NCAA Tournament seven times and in the National Invitational Tournament five times.

Without question, the pinnacle of Ragin' Cajun football success was the 29-22 defeat of the Texas A&M Aggies at Cajun Field on Sept. 14, 1996. The Cajuns earned that victory in front of the largest crowd in UL Lafayette's history, 38,783. It was the first time that a Ragin' Cajun football team had defeated a nationally ranked team.

Jake Delhomme of Breaux Bridge, La., was captain of USL's team that year. He went on to become quarterback of the Carolina Panthers and led that team to the Super Bowl in 2003. He's one of a long list of top drawer

UL Lafayette players who went on to play professional football, such as Brandon Stokley, Charles Tillman, Orlando Thomas, and Brian Mitchell.

Authement's support of Ragin' Cajun student-athletes started long before he became president in 1974. "USL athletes returning from road trips have become accustomed to finding Dr. Authement there to greet them. As vice president of Southwestern, he recognizes the place of athletics within the university framework as a rallying point for students, alumni and interested citizens of the community," the late Mario Mamalakis, USL's director of publications, wrote in a press release in the early '70s. Sports fans



Garland Williams and Dr. Ray Authement, then-vice president of USL, confer during a game in Blackham Coliseum.

COURTESY OF UL ARCHIVES

1974-79

- 74** USL joins NCAA Division I for all sports
- 76** Cajun track complex built
- 77** NCAA reinstates USL's good standing
- 78** USL classified as Division I-A for football
Wrestling dropped as an intercollegiate sport
Roll On campaign raises more than \$200,000
- 79** M.L. "Tigue" Moore Field built

1980-89



- 82** Trampoline team disbands
- 85** Final men's basketball game in Blackham Coliseum
- 86** Cajundome opens
- 88** **Hollis Conway** earns silver medal in Olympics

1990-99

- 92** Hollis Conway wins bronze medal in Olympics
- 93** Softball team plays in collegiate World Series for first time in school history
- 94** **Softball team** ranks No. 2 in nation, the highest ranking of any sport in USL history
- 96** USL defeats No. 25 Texas A&M – first defeat of nationally ranked team – before largest crowd in school's history, 38,783
Ragin' Cajuns® becomes nationally registered trademark
- 99** Culotta Tennis Center built
Ragin' Cajuns® athletic logo introduced



ATHLETICNETWORK.NET

2000-Present

- 00** Baseball team plays in Collegiate World Series for the first time in school history, ties for third place
- 00** Women's soccer program added
- 01** Cayenne chosen as new spirit leader
- 06** UL Lafayette student-athletes have highest graduation rate of any NCAA Division 1 school in Louisiana
Soccer/track complex opens
- 07** Women's basketball team competes in first NCAA Division 1 regional tournament in UL Lafayette women's program's history
Leon Moncla Indoor Practice Facility opens
Cox Communication's \$2 million pledge is largest single sponsorship in Athletic Department's history
Lourdes Park added at M.L. "Tigue" Moore Field

who have spotted Authement at Ragin' Cajun basketball games in the Cajundome might have noticed him routinely leave his seat when a few minutes were left on the time clock. He would walk to the side of the court, where he would offer a handshake or pat on the back to players as they headed to the locker room – win or lose.

"He likes to know the athletes by name, likes to talk with them, wants to know how they are doing in school," Schexnayder said. Many stay in touch with the university president after they leave UL Lafayette.

For the record, about 49 percent of Ragin' Cajun student-athletes had a 3.0 or better grade point average for the Spring 2007 semester.

First-time freshmen student-athletes are required to attend sessions that offer time management tips, study techniques and information about campus resources. Danny Cottonham, director of UL Lafayette's Student-Athlete Academic Center, stresses that the goal is graduation.

"After our student athletes finish their athletic careers, we want them all to have the academic experience to not only finish their degree, but to make a

meaningful contribution to society with what they have learned," he said.

UL Lafayette's athletics program got a boost in 1999, when a new athletic logo – featuring a pepper on fire – was unveiled. Ragin' Cajuns® was already one of the most popular nicknames in collegiate sports. Adding the pepper spiced up the university's brand and helped boost sales of UL Lafayette merchandise.

Over the past decade, public support of Ragin' Cajun athletics has increased, too. In the past five years, for instance:

- more than \$1 million has been generated for building improvements and unrestricted funds;
- about \$250,000 has been raised for football recruiting;
- about \$400,000 of recurring revenue has been generated by naming opportunities, such as signs; and
- about \$1 million in "in kind" gifts or discounted services has been donated or provided to improve athletic facilities.

That money has been crucial in light of restrictions on how much state funding can be allocated for a university's athletics program.

For fiscal year 2006-07, UL Lafayette's athletics budget was about \$7.8 million. About \$3.1 million of that total was state revenue. The Board of Regents' decision earlier this year to allow universities to put more state funds into their athletics programs took UL Lafayette's athletics budget to a little more than \$9 million.

"This is a significant step in helping to put our athletic program on an even field with other Division I programs. These changes will give us the ability to provide the resources our programs need to be competitive," said David Walker, who was named the university's athletic director in July. He had served as interim director since Schexnayder resigned in 2005.

"I am still amazed at what Dr. Authement and Nelson Schexnayder were able to accomplish with the restrictions placed on them by the old policy. As I have become familiar with other athletic programs around the country, I have come to appreciate how very fortunate we are to have a president, a supporter and a fan like Dr. Authement," Walker said. ■